

## **Written response to questions submitted in accordance with council procedure rule 33**

### **A. Question from Councillor Simon Howell to the Leader of the Council, Councillor Emily Smith**

In March, this Council launched a COVID-19 Grant Scheme aimed at supporting community initiatives in our respective areas to respond to the pandemic. Three months on, I believe that there is no visibility as to how much has been spent and what remains of this funding. Can the Leader provide an update on the status of this scheme and whether community groups can still apply for any funds still available?

### **Written response**

On 25 March 2020, we launched an Emergency Councillor Grant Scheme that gave each councillor £2,000 to award to community groups delivering community initiatives in their ward to respond to the Coronavirus pandemic, particularly those supporting vulnerable residents.

For audit purposes, we provided councillors with a spreadsheet for capturing and recording all the requests they receive and the awards they chose to make.

Councillors will be aware that officers have recently requested updates on their individual emergency councillor grant budgets, and to offer their support in connecting them with groups that still need funding towards their work supporting vulnerable residents.

As we ease out of lockdown, and in anticipation of the national shielding programme coming to an end on 1 August 2020 and the potential for a second response spike or wave of positive cases, it is our intention to keep the scheme open until the end of September 2020. By then, we'll hopefully have more certainty nationally that we're in the recovery phase of the pandemic and officers can put a further call out for grant budget returns. It is at that point we're likely to recover any unspent funds if a second wave has not materialised and is considered unlikely.

### **B. Question from Councillor Nathan Boyd to the Leader of the Council, Councillor Emily Smith**

On 27 May 2020 the Leader wrote a letter to the Prime Minister Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP regarding the behaviour of one of his advisors, Dominic Cummings. Considering the reluctance of the administration to even support the proposal of writing a letter on a planning matter, which directly affected this council previously, can the leader please explain why it was appropriate to write, on behalf of the council, with no motion being put before council beforehand?

### **Written response**

The actions taken by this individual had the potential to undermine the vital public health message that our staff and partners were actively working so very hard to promote to our communities to keep residents safe and protect the NHS. If evidence was ever needed that this individual operates entirely within the political sphere, I would draw your attention to the fact that he subsequently then gave a televised account of his actions from the Rose Garden of 10 Downing Street, the home of the Prime Minister. It was the Government, both directly and via the LRF that asked Local Authorities to act to promote and highlight the importance of the national messages around COVID19. I would draw your attention to the wording of the Durham Constabulary “.....have concluded that there might have been a minor breach of the Regulations that would have warranted police intervention. Durham Constabulary view this as minor because there was no apparent breach of social distancing.”

As Leader of the Council, I am able to act on such matters of an urgent nature impacting on the work of this council without a motion from full Council.

### **C. Question from Councillor Elaine Ware to Councillor Helen Pighills Cabinet Member for Community Services**

In July 2019 the Leader reported that a Health & Well-being Strategy was being developed. What progress has been made in preparing this strategy?

### **Written response**

The council plays a key role with partners on the Health Improvement Board for Oxfordshire which supports the delivery of health and wellbeing across Oxfordshire. Following discussions with these partners, the development of the strategy has been re-focused on an active communities strategy to align with the areas of responsibility that the council has, and in light of the decision to undertake a review of the council's leisure team. This is particularly pertinent given the Covid-19 pandemic, and the resulting changes to leisure and associated financial modelling, which will impact on the council's ability to deliver and run large scale leisure facilities in the future. The brief for the strategy required to be revised in light of the pandemic and it is hoped that a consultant will be appointed within the next month to progress the development of the strategy, including consultation with our communities as to what forms of activity they would like to access to support their health and wellbeing.

### **D. Question from Councillor Hayleigh Gascoigne to Councillor Emily Smith, Leader of the Council**

We were all horrified to hear in the world media about what happened to George Floyd at the hands of the Minnesota Police Department, and all the other similar

events that have been highlighted, involving wrongful killing of black people at the hands of the very people who are meant to protect them. This has spurred a huge movement across the UK to address racism. In our own district, a number of groups have formed such as Black Lives Matter Didcot, and Black Lives Matter Abingdon and they are fiercely committed to tackling racism. One of their demands is “Accountability in Council Policy & Decision Making”.

What are we doing as a district council to tackle racism within our own operations and within our communities? How can we strive for better representation of ‘the Black voice’?

### **Written response**

The council’s corporate equalities policy sets out our statement of commitment to the principles enshrined in the Equalities Act 2010, and as Leader of the Council I recently re-stated our commitment in an open letter, published on the council’s website. The council have a dedicated equalities officer and carry out equality impact assessments (EIAs) on all new policies, strategies and significant changes to services. The policy and insight team continuously review data from the range of sources available, to help us better understand the demographics of the communities we serve and inform service delivery, policy and decision making. We also include equality and diversity clauses in all major contracts, relevant contract specifications and tender documents.

As an employer, we have an equal opportunities in employment policy which incorporates equal pay and dignity at work, and a number of other policies that ensure fair and equal treatment of staff who share a protected characteristic. Mandatory training is provided for all staff on equalities and diversity, and the council publicly reports annually on equalities indicators.

The South and Vale Community Safety Partnership (CSP) reviews the prevalence of hate crime and hate incidents in the two districts on a quarterly basis, with the view to agreeing remedial action if a significant issue is identified. The CSP helped set up 12 hate crime reporting centres in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse in 2018/19, in partnership with Citizens Advice, Wantage IAC, both district councils, Soha and Sovereign. If people do not feel able to report hate crime/incidents to the police, this service provides them with an alternative where they can speak in confidence to a specially trained member of staff. Staff will talk to the individual about the incident and can offer to report it to the police on their behalf. They will also refer them to Victims First, a service dedicated to ensuring that victims or witnesses receive the support they need to cope with and recover from their experience. The team also promotes the annual hate crime awareness week to staff and local communities; in 2019, the team encouraged people to report hate crime as part of the launch of the ‘Safe Places’ scheme in Didcot, Wallingford, Wantage and Faringdon. The scheme, co-ordinated by the community safety team, helps vulnerable people feel confident and safe whilst out in the community. If someone feels they are being abused or harassed, they have a safe place to go. Window stickers are displayed in public places (shops, libraries, community centres) to identify themselves as Safe Places.

However, there is always more we can do to tackle racism and strive for better representation of our communities, and as you will see in our draft corporate plan which is imminently due to go out for public consultation, we have made a clear commitment to doing so within our proposed themes and programmes.