

Cllr Peter John and Eleanor Kelly  
Leader of the Council and Chief Executive  
Southwark Council

24 April 2020

Dear Peter and Eleanor,

### **Working Together in Response to COVID-19**

Southwark Council Liberal Democrat group would like to put on record our heartfelt thanks for everything you and all Southwark Council staff are doing to help our borough through the COVID-19 pandemic. We particularly appreciate the Council's work to establish the Community Hub, funding for community groups and local businesses and assistance for those experiencing hardship right now. The Council's efforts are keeping residents safe and saving lives. We would like to pay particular tribute to the Council staff that have lost their lives to COVID-19. This is by far the most challenging period Southwark has faced in many decades. Our recovery will be difficult and require us all to come together and contribute. Never before has our borough's motto been so relevant. We must be "United to Serve".

We believe that now is not the time for party politics. As local councillors we represent tens of thousands of Southwark residents. We have been listening to and working closely with local stakeholders in our communities to help get them the support they need right now and in the coming weeks and months. Equally our role as the opposition group is to act in a critical friend role to ensure that all angles in the support of Southwark residents, organisations and businesses are covered both in the immediate and longer term.

We believe now is the time for Southwark Council to take the central role in coordinating the COVID-19 response. We have attached an appendix which lists a number of recommendations and suggestions we believe it would be helpful for the Council to implement during the pandemic. We also believe the whole council needs to come together now to start planning how we will respond to the medium and long term challenges Southwark faces. We request that a cross-party working group is established to help plan for a post-COVID-19 borough. We have attached a second appendix which sets out some of the issues and questions this group should address.

In the interests of transparency and given these are our formal requests to the council, we are sending this as an open letter. We hope that it will be received in the positive and constructive spirit in which it is intended and that our suggestions can be considered and implemented as soon as possible. We welcome the opportunity to expand on any of our suggestions and look forward to working with you and colleagues to get through this testing period.

Yours sincerely,

Cllr Anood Al-Samerai, Cllr Humaira Ali, Cllr Victor Chamberlain, Cllr William Hougbo, Cllr Nick Johnson, Cllr Maria Linforth-Hall, Cllr Eliza Mann, Cllr Hamish McCallum, Cllr Adele Morris, Cllr Graham Neale, Cllr David Noakes, Cllr Damian O'Brien, Cllr Jane Salmon, Cllr Dan Whitehead

## **Appendix One: Southwark Liberal Democrat recommendations**

### **Overall role of the Council**

*Southwark Council should take the central role in coordinating the response across the whole borough and ensuring that access to support is made consistent.*

1. Southwark Council should provide overall coordination to ensure that aid duplication is avoided between the NHS, Southwark Council Community Hub operations, charities, religious institutions and mutual aid groups as well as formally recognising the role of the thousands of volunteers supporting the effort in these unprecedented times.
2. The Council should formally and publically recognise mutual aid groups. Processes between council hub operations and groups should be formalised.
3. A named officer should be dedicated to each ward to help coordinate the response to COVID-19 in that area.
4. The Council should expand its coronavirus webpages to include a section which maps local service provisions and help by ward, area and postcode.
5. The Council should continue to ensure that clear and regular communications with all residents are maintained and the Council continue to be transparent about decision making. The council should continue to respond to Freedom of Information requests.

### **Financial support available for residents**

*Many Southwark residents are facing unprecedented financial challenges. Many have been made redundant as a result of the pandemic and will be more reliant on support than ever before. The financial impacts of COVID-19 will be felt in Southwark for many years to come. We welcome the support the Council has already made available for council tenants and residents but believe further support may be required. We also believe that no resident's credit rating should be affected by asking for financial assistance and that the council should ensure residents are aware of the financial support available, with a particular focus on hard to reach groups.*

1. Southwark Council should extend the council tax reduction scheme of 100% of council tax to all low income households during the financial year 2020/21.
2. Southwark Council should offer all Southwark council tenants who request it a 'holiday' from paying rent in the current financial year with the arrears incurred to be paid off slowly over a mutually agreed time frame (e.g. 2-3 years). This payment holiday would exclude any part of the rent which is paid for by Housing Benefit or Universal Credit.
3. Southwark Council should write to housing associations and registered social landlords (including the Corporation of London) in Southwark to request a similar payment holiday and repayment plan to be offered to tenants in housing association properties.

4. Southwark Council should bolster the support available from the council for tenants who are renting privately, and should publicly call on private landlords to offer their tenants payment holidays similar to the schemes outlined above.
5. Southwark Council should write to all residents to inform them of these new arrangements and any other financial support which is available to support them in this difficult time. The Council should ensure this information is localised (where appropriate) and produced in a range of accessible formats and languages.

### Homelessness

*We welcome the council's emergency response to support rough sleepers during the pandemic. Given the human, social and economic cost of rough sleeping, it is essential that those who have been housed during the pandemic are supported to avoid a return to living on the streets once the lockdown has ended.*

6. Southwark Council should commit to ensuring that all those being temporarily housed during the pandemic are not forced to return to the streets after the pandemic. We believe this could provide an opportunity to explore a rapid expansion of the 'Housing First' policy.

### Environment

*The lockdown has shown how vital it is to keep parks and open spaces accessible and open to the public (particularly for people in flats, overcrowded accommodation and with difficult family lives). We also believe we should take advantage of the environmental benefits and 'window' the lockdown has offered e.g. better air quality, reduced traffic and interest and awareness in the importance of the environment.*

7. Southwark Council should ensure that the public can continue to access all parks and open spaces (both public and private) that can be practically kept open during the lockdown period. Southwark Council should work with colleagues from across local Government and local environmental organisations (e.g. Bankside Open Spaces Trust) to see what best practice exists to facilitate this, by, for example, using Southwark Council staff or volunteers to facilitate one-way systems.
8. Southwark Council (with Transport for London) should take steps to help pedestrians, runners and cyclists to keep two metres apart on most roads. This is an opportunity to trial the priority of these groups on roads, by, for example, ensuring non-major roads are prioritised for pedestrians (and cyclists) and introducing temporary traffic calming/access measures on residential streets. Ward councillors should be consulted on how to do this sympathetically. We also support the recommendations from Southwark Cyclists in response to COVID-19.
9. Households are creating far more waste at the moment as people are at home far more so the council should consider additional waste and recycling collections where possible

and required. Additional communal bins should also be sited in particular hotspots and ward councillors should be involved in identifying where these are located.

10. Southwark's Climate Strategy should actively consider how to embrace the environmental opportunities the lockdown has provided. The strategy should consider how it can appropriately engage and consult with local residents and communities both during and after lockdown to ensure these are identified and built upon.
11. Southwark Council should continue to maintain and promote essential services to residents such as bulk waste collections and noise complaints team during the lockdown period and ensure that the noise team continues to attend outdoor sites, where possible, to witness noise nuisance where this can be achieved safely.

### Children and Families

*We are concerned that there are children and young people who are not currently attending school or nursery who may be vulnerable or at risk due to poverty, domestic violence, gangs or other issues. These children and young people may not fit the Government's formal definition of 'vulnerable' so parents may not be aware that their children could still be attending school. In some cases, schools which are open clearly have capacity to take more children and young people in this less formal category of 'vulnerable'. This is an issue which needs immediate action, but these children may also need further additional support in the medium and long term.*

12. Southwark Council should examine how many children and young people are currently attending school and which schools have capacity to accommodate more children and young people. The Council should proactively identify all 'vulnerable' children and ensure that they are attending school and nursery during the summer term. Southwark Council needs to provide additional support for children and young people who have been excluded or who are at risk of exclusion.
13. The Council should work with schools to ensure that all children and young people attending Southwark schools during the lockdown period receive a free school meal, regardless of their normal eligibility.
14. Southwark Council should work with local schools and voluntary organisations to ensure all children and young people from low income families, whether they are attending school or nursery or not, receive at least one free meal a day, including at weekends and holidays.
15. Once the Government has allowed schools to reopen, Southwark Council should look at what support it can offer in terms of afterschool, weekend and holiday clubs to assist children to catch up on missed schooling. This support could be funding for schools, providing space in council buildings or helping to coordinate DBS checked volunteers to offer appropriate provision.

## Domestic Violence

*We are concerned that the lockdown is leading to an increase of domestic violence and those victims and survivors of domestic violence will be acutely impacted. For too many people their home is not a place of safety, and many Southwark residents will be isolated in the same home as their abuser.*

16. Southwark Council should provide clear information in one place which lists all the places that residents can go to for support with issues of domestic violence. As well as being clearly marked on the Southwark website, Southwark Council should conduct an active and prominent campaign to publicise it. This should include leaflets to all households, posters in supermarkets and other places that possible victims will attend (examples of support should include Solace and local charities e.g. Su Mano Amiga as well as police and other helplines). Information must also be provided in different languages to support our diverse communities.
17. The Council should also examine what additional support it can offer to victims and survivors of domestic violence during the lockdown period, including support for children and minority groups exposed to it, as staying at home may not be a safe option for these families.

## Health and wellbeing

*We welcome the improving council webpages, however we believe that Southwark Council should continue to promote mental health services and support available to residents during the lockdown through a variety of channels.*

18. The Council should include information about mental health support services in a letter to residents and should run a dedicated campaign to promote mental wellbeing.
19. Mental wellbeing should be more explicitly mentioned in the policy and assessment for the community fund grant, so that groups supporting mental health have a better chance of securing funding for initiatives which support mental wellbeing in the community.

## Supporting diverse communities

*We recognise that the COVID-19 situation is continuing to evolve rapidly and effects everyone in our borough. Southwark has some of the highest number of reported cases in London and a correspondingly high number of fatalities. The Council has a leadership role to play in supporting people with their grief at a time when traditional funerals and memorials are restricted. We believe BAME residents are being disproportionately affected by the pandemic and are concerned at the possibility that those with English as a second language are not being adequately engaged with by the current messaging around social distancing and staying at home.*

20. Southwark Council should establish an online memorial to Southwark residents who have lost their lives to COVID-19. This would provide a space for family and friends to remember their loved ones and share their stories with others at a time when the usual

community spaces for both grieving and celebrating the lives and contributions of those who have gone are not available.

21. Once the lockdown has ended, Southwark Council should organise a non-denominational memorial service to remember the victims of COVID-19 and celebrate all of those who have contributed to the community response such as NHS staff, social care workers and volunteers.
22. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee should set up a commission to examine the impact of Coronavirus (and the response to it) on our diverse BAME communities at the appropriate time(s). We suggest that this cross-party panel should include co-opted local experts and representatives of key stakeholder groups so they can investigate the impact of COVID-19 on Southwark residents, uncover lessons learned and make recommendations about changes to services going forward.

### Care homes

*National coverage of the spread of the coronavirus, and analysis of those most at risk of serious complications or of dying, shows that residents in care home settings and older residents are some of the most vulnerable to Covid-19.”*

23. The relevant Cabinet Members and/or strategic directors should write to all councillors updating members about the number of Covid-19 cases in Southwark’s care homes and sheltered housing units, outlining what measures the council has either taken directly (or what reassurances they have sought in the case of private care homes) to keep older and other vulnerable residents safe.
24. The council should also be supporting all care workers and volunteers working in care homes or with vulnerable people in the community to ensure they have access to appropriate Personal Protective Equipment.

### Supporting the local economy

*Southwark’s small and medium businesses (SMEs), voluntary organisations and community groups face significant challenges to survive the pandemic particularly from the loss of business whilst overheads continue. Ensuring we have a thriving local economy and third sector which include smaller and independent businesses will be central to Southwark’s long term vitality, viability and recovery.*

25. Southwark Council should examine how it can review its procurement procedures to promote and prioritise local businesses (particularly SMEs) for example using local contractors to bring empty homes back into use.
26. Southwark Council should work with the borough’s largest commercial landlords to examine how they can reduce rent burdens for SMEs during the lockdown.

27. The Council should allow voluntary organisations and community groups to appropriately repurpose funding they have received for specific projects if they can no longer deliver those projects because of the pandemic.

## Appendix Two

Southwark Council Liberal Democrat group recognise that COVID-19 will have deep economic, health and social impacts and challenge Southwark Council in ways it hasn't been for a very long time, particularly as resources will be more stretched. It is vitally important that we start to consider the medium and long term ramifications of these impacts. For example, we are likely to see significantly more demand on mental health services which will not be helped by the chronic underinvestment in these services by central Government.

We request that a cross-party working group is established immediately to work with officers and other local bodies on the Borough's recovery response in the medium and long term.

The group should consider (amongst other issues):

### Southwark Council

- What planning is already ongoing for Post-Coronavirus?
- Which Cabinet Member is coordinating this?
- How will ward members be able to input/scrutinise this work?
- What role can council staff play in suggesting new and innovative approaches?
- How will spending on COVID-19 will be audited for its effectiveness?
- Can we use the shift to online meetings to encourage greater participation in the democratic process?
- How will Southwark Council planning policy have to evolve e.g. around working from home / home deliveries etc.?
- How will we thank council staff and other frontline workers for their service during the pandemic?
- Will Council staff working from home become the norm and what implications would this have on resources?
- Does the post-COVID-19 climate present any income generation opportunities?
- What is the health of council finances and what concessions may need to be made in order to equalise the support provided during the crisis period?

### Health and wellbeing

- How we ensure residents in need of support with food/supplies will continue to receive it after the pandemic is over?
- How will Southwark Council support/facilitate/control the supply of PPE to the public and COVID-19 testing if they become a Government recommendation?
- How Southwark Council can ensure we have strong, robust and cooperative relationships with NHS providers in the borough?
- What Southwark Council can do to address the need for more mental health support?
- How we can help residents to maximise their health and fitness through the borough's gym and swimming facilities?

### Stronger communities

- How can Southwark council bring more homes back into use to tackle overcrowding across the borough?
- How the contribution of Mutual Aid Groups, community organisations and individuals will be recognised and celebrated and their role embedded in the future?
- What will Southwark Council do to help bring communities together afterwards?

### Financial support

- What financial support is available to residents as we recover from COVID-19?

### Children

- If the lockdown continues in the longer term, what support can Southwark Council offer schools to ensure all pupils can homework, studies and exams? For example, ensuring all pupils have adequate access to suitable technology.
- How will Southwark Council support schools and parents to help children catch up on lost schooling and adapt to a return to the classroom?
- How has childcare provision and safeguarding been effected by Coronavirus and what support Southwark Council can offer to providers and parents?

### Supporting the local economy

- How will Southwark Council be helping small and independent businesses to reopen in the borough?
- Whether Southwark Council can adopt a new model of sustainable development which would promote the local economy and the environment e.g. Amsterdam “Doughnut model” or the ‘Preston Model’?