

Cllr Millard: Hello and welcome to Talk Richmond. A podcast brought to you by Richmond Council and hosted by me Councillor Jim Millard. In this week's episode, I'll be reflecting on how the borough has responded to the outbreak of the coronavirus. We'll hear from the leader of Richmond Council, Councillor Gareth Roberts and the Director of Richmond Council for voluntary services, Katheryn Williamson. So, welcome Gareth.

Cllr Roberts: Hello Jim, how are you?

Cllr Millard: I'm very well, how are you?

Cllr Roberts: yeah not bad, not bad, fairing up

Cllr Millard: Good good, thank you for coming and joining me today. The outbreak of coronavirus has of course for all of us brought with extraordinary change and uncertainty and a lot of us will have seen the government's daily briefings. But of course, local councils have been playing a huge role in responding to the crisis, keeping essential services running. So really Gareth, how has the borough coped with the outbreak of coronavirus?

Cllr Roberts: Well, at the risk of sounding like a town hall Trump, I think we've done well, not everything's been perfect, of course. Nothing ever is. But what's happened as a result of the pandemic is people have seen just what it is that a well run Council can do for them, particularly here in Richmond, and they've seen that a well run council will touch practically every part of their lives. Whether it's bin collections, schools, libraries, emergency funding for those who need support, health care, adult social care. All of those things are the bread and butter issues for a council.

Cllr Millard: So what sort of things were the key elements in the initial response?

Cllr Roberts: Well, what we had to do, first and foremost was make sure that the most vulnerable in Richmond were taken care of, so we moved very quickly to set up the community hub, which was effectively the council's front door for services. So anybody that was shielding, elderly, isolating, living alone, they could get hold of the

council, find out what services are available to them and also ask for help if it was needed. So if people wanted to be the people within their local community who went out and helped those who needed help most, they went through the Community Hub and we work very closely with the Richmond Council for Voluntary Services. And I know you're going to be talking to Kathryn later. But we work very closely with them, and with the Age UK Richmond to ensure that the help was given to those people who you were, you know, desperately crying out for help. I mean at the moment, it does seem as though the full force of lockdown is something of a distant memory, but I'm sure that you remember the queues stretching outside supermarkets, the panic buying, the just general level of we don't know what's going on, and it was the council's role to step in and offer some form of centering, some form of rational about how we can cope and how we can move through the whole of the pandemic and make sure that there is going to be, you know, for want a better term, light at the end of that particular tunnel.

Nobody can prepare you for the scale of what is coming in a situation like this. I mean, we had individuals within the borough who started creating face Shields. There was one company that I'm aware of that usually makes stage props and they recondition or repurposed their machinery in order to make the face shield. We had local schools doing exactly the same using the DT equipment rooms.

Cllr Millard: Yes it was wonderful. We will probably touch on this with Kathryn Williamson as well.

Cllr Millard: Hi Kathryn, thanks for coming on the podcast

Kathryn: Thank you, Cllr Millard. It's lovely to be here,

Cllr Millard: Great, well just to kick off, could you tell us a little bit about Richmond Council for Voluntary Services? I think for short I'm going to call it RCVS from now if that's alright.

Kathryn: Yes, that's absolutely fine. Yes, RCVS is a charity that supports other charities in Richmond. We have over 750 volunteer and community groups in the

Borough. And we aim to support them in a variety of ways, so helping them have their voice heard, representing them, also helping them with capacity building so finding finance, making sure they run properly. And of course importantly helping them recruit and manage volunteers, who are the lifeblood of the local voluntary sector.

Cllr Millard: What was your initial reaction and what were concerns for the voluntary sector as the pandemic developed?

Kathryn: Well, I suppose really as a support Organization for the sector, we were keen to see how we could help organisations do what they needed to do to adapt to the changing situation and things did develop very quickly. Things we started noticing was that from about the middle of March people started being interested in helping to support the local community in various ways. There were organisations that were really quick at adapting what they were doing. Say for example stopping their usual day-to-day activities, taking people out in the community. And immediately changed to more of an emergency response situation. So I'm thinking about organisations like Age UK Richmond who run a partnership of organisations which together are called the Community Independent Living Service or CILs for short, and they work with a wide range of groups in the, in the Borough which help people with disabilities, older people, they include groups like RUILs, Richmond Aid, the neighbourhood care groups. We've got eight of those in the Borough and they all help to support people in various ways, uhm, so they, along with, uh, the Council and other organisations like Crossroads sort of, came together to start thinking right how can we help people?

Cllr Millard: That sounds amazing is that I mean, that sounds like a lot of voluntary groups and. You know, I've been really heartened hearing about the voluntary response.

Kathryn: Absolutely, yes, from the 13th of March till the end of May. We had 3,100 people from Richmond register to volunteer. It's absolutely fantastic number, to put that into some context, normally on our database we have about 2000 people at any

one time who were looking for roles. That wasn't always as straightforward as it might sound, because, uh, in a way they were almost too many people for the amount of roles available to start with, which is a very fortunate position to be in. One organization, one of the neighborhood care groups they recruited, I think it was 200 people through us and they have taken on 150 of those to be regular volunteers, which is fantastic.

Cllr Millard: Amazing and can volunteers still sign up now?

Kathryn: Yes, yes they can. We are still taking people on. I mean obviously there are quite a few people on our list, but we're always happy to receive new people join our list, if there are people looking they can go to our website which is www.richmond cvs.org.uk and follow the links to the volunteer service and register there.

Cllr Millard: Obviously volunteers were coming forwards in huge numbers, it's amazing to hear about. I mean, have you seen an increase in community spirit?

Kathryn: Oh, absolutely, definitely, I think it has been amazing. Obviously, I think those 3100 volunteers show something, the number of people who want to help, and that's in addition to all the other people who are doing something in their local community. I mean through our Twitter feed and on Facebook and things, we hear of lots of examples of people doing things in their community to help others. People are going around using their talents to entertain people, singing on doorsteps, things like that. We even heard about one thing, that one of my colleagues told me recently, was that Park Lane Stables have been taking round one of their ponies to sort of show people through the window, so just to cheer people up, just these little things that are going on. and I think another example is...

Cllr Millard: Kept the grass short as well!

Kathryn: That's one thing, yes, but there's definitely, I think, a lot of people who are wanting to help. I think it's also useful as well when younger people start getting involved. The Tag Youth Club, which works with disabled children, some of their members who are taking part in our London wide youth leaders program, were

making up activity packs for families that are connected with Achieving for Children's short break scheme and I think these activity packs were put together by these young people and they included sort of word searches and jokes that they've made up as well as other things people could do. And they were distributed out and the feedback apparently from the families was tremendous, with one Mum saying it was the first time she got her child away from a screen in two months.

And I think it's important to bear in mind there a lot of families that are actually going to be sort of badly affected by the Covid-19 situation, both now and in the coming weeks. There's been increase in use of things like food banks and some of those voluntary organisations I've mentioned I know are doing deliveries to families, I know Crossroads are doing quite a few deliveries to families, food drops and things because families can't afford to get the food in other ways. And there are also some projects going on I believe or being started to try and ensure those children that don't have easy access to online facilities to be able to do school work ecetera are going to be able to get some support to help that to happen. I think that that's one of the things that we have to remember with Richmond, which is an extremely fortunate borough in lots of ways, and it's obviously seen as a very wealthy, happy borough. Which is it is in many ways. But there are some people in the borough who don't have such good opportunity, and I think what we want to ensure is the covid-19 doesn't increase inequalities in the borough, but that it tries to reduce them.

Cllr Millard: Absolutely, and I have to say in my role as the Tenants' Champion I've been very aware that there are going to be people who are facing serious deprivation as a result and you know Richmond is seen, quite rightly, as a fairly wealthy borough. But we do have significant numbers of people who don't earn very much money, who live in social housing, and need that support. And I've been very keen to talk to our Housing Associations to make sure that they have the ability to put really supportive plans in place, to be flexible and understanding when people might need to move onto Universal Credit or have other financial challenges. And if anyone is listening who is in that situation, do talk to your Housing Association. They will want to support you, and your Councillors and your Tenants' Champion are absolutely here to make sure that happens.

Cllr Millard: So Cllr Roberts, you've mentioned some of the great work that's been done by the Council but during unprecedented times it's inevitable things won't always go according to plan. So, what did go wrong?

Cllr Roberts: Well the one thing which I think looking back is something which we we couldn't have for seen to be honest, but we had and continue to have an issue with the waste and recycling collections. And this is as a result of something of a perfect storm, the pandemic lockdown started, we changed the contractor.

Cllr Millard: And that was a planned change, right?

Cllr Roberts: It was a planned change, it was. The new contract was awarded months ago and it just so happens that the timing of the handover of the contract from supplier to supplier coincided with the COVID-19 lockdown.

And of course everyone is at home, and when everybody is at home and all the shops are closed, not only are is all of the waste which is being generated, which would normally be spread out amongst workplaces, schools, in the street, cafes, bars, clubs all of that, all gets concentrated at home because everybody is staying at home. So we saw something like about a 45% increase in the amount of waste and recycling which was being put out on the weekly basis. Now we usually see that increase at around Christmas and it's once a year and it's manageable, but it's been Christmas once a week every week for the last three months and as a result some people's bin services haven't been as good as they should be. We're not resting on our laurels by any means. But we are doing our best in very, very challenging circumstances.

Cllr Millard: So I think most people get that, but at the same time, if your bins haven't been collected, you rapidly start to sort of lose that perspective and it's about getting that sorted because that becomes quite serious for your household, so.

Cllr Roberts: Yeah, it's pretty much the one universal service that everybody in the borough uses. Many people use the libraries, not everybody. Many people will have kids to go to the schools, not everybody, but everybody has waste. Everybody has

bins and everything's recycling and and you, you notice it the minute it goes wrong. And quite rightly people get annoyed about it. So what we did I mean, we got more staff in, we got, we increase the number of shifts that they were working. They didn't just do Monday to Friday, there out on Saturdays out on Sundays. I mean, it's a huge scale operation and fair play to the guys on the frontline who were doing their best because they really are up against it.

Cllr Millard: Yeah yeah, yeah hats off to them, yeah?

Cllr Millard: The situation we have faced over the past three months has truly been extraordinary. The challenges the Council faced were wide ranging – from continuing to empty people's bins, as Gareth explained, to organising business support grants and emergency shelter for the homeless. From chatting to Kathryn and Gareth, the silver lining in all of this has clearly been the huge outpouring of community spirit. The enormous role that both Council and communities are playing is uplifting - and the partnership between residents and Council will be the way that we rebuild, and even come back stronger from this crisis.

Cllr Millard: Thank you for joining us for our first ever episode of Talk Richmond. Next time we'll be looking at the weeks and months ahead and what the borough can expect going forwards as lockdown measures relax but the threat of the virus remains. For further information on the topics discussed check out the show notes below. If you have any questions email us on talk@richmond.gov.uk. And, very very important, please like and subscribe! I'm Jim Millard – thanks for listening.