

# SOUTH DUBLIN'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19 CRISIS

Since lockdown measures to limit the spread of the coronavirus were enforced by the government in late March, South Dublin County Council has been working continuously to maintain its range of services for businesses and to provide community support and advice, especially to those vulnerable and 'at risk' citizens in the county, during this pandemic.



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While citizens in the county are being asked to stay at home where possible, council staff are working to maintain parks, keep streets clean, answering emergencies, maintaining the planning system, co-ordinating community response initiatives, providing housing support services, supporting business, paying creditors and taking calls to maintain a degree of normality to essential council services.

This has entailed innovative approaches to remote working, online solutions to service provision and community engagement around children's entertainment, the arts, libraries, keeping fit and looking after our mental health.

Following the announcement by An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar on Friday 27 March of new nationwide COVID-19 measures to limit the spread of the virus, South Dublin County Council (SDCC) decided to

close all council offices and implement physical distancing practices for staff, while ensuring that the essential services we deliver were provided across all functions.

This included the provision of work-from-home solutions, alternative shift patterns and rostered hours for those required to travel outside of their homes for work purposes.

#### COMMUNITY CALL RESPONSE FORUM

In early April, SDCC set up the Community Call Response Forum – a co-ordinated community effort to provide supports to 'at-risk' citizens during the COVID-19 emergency. Comprised of national organisations and local groups, the group has answered the call of over 1,000 people to date and delivered food supplies, medication and more, to vulnerable individuals and groups.

Representatives from the Community Call Response Forum have proactively reached out to older people needing to hear a friendly voice, single parents who might be finding it difficult during this time and the recently bereaved, now living alone having to deal with their devastating loss.

Citizens throughout South Dublin County have shown great resilience and respect for the guidance issued by the government on physical distancing, while the council has provided numerous supports for those having to remain indoors.

To name a few, the South Dublin County Sports Partnership provides exercise classes online every Monday to Thursday, while the council's mental health app 'MindMindR' has been extensively promoted through social media. Music Generation South Dublin are continuing to run music lessons for young people online. South Dublin County libraries have provided numerous initiatives online for all ages.

Aware of the financial strain the COVID-19 emergency is placing on citizens and businesses, the council has put in place supports and procedures to assist during this time. These include working with local businesses on commercial rates and with tenants experiencing difficulties on rent or mortgage payments. The COVID-19

Community Emergency Fund has been introduced to provide financial support for community groups participating in the Community Call initiative.

**PLANNING PROCESS**

With the planning process having a key role to play in the economy, during COVID-19 South Dublin County Council's planning team has adapted its processes to ensure a high-quality service is maintained.

New planning applications are received by post only and then scanned and validated, with staff working remotely to assess and determine applications and hold pre-application meetings. Up to early May, 55 planning applications were processed, decisions issued on 19 applications while six Strategic Housing Development applications were progressed.

**FIRST 'FIELD HOSPITAL'**

The provision of additional medical facilities was a priority in the development of the government's response to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis and South Dublin County Council has been to the fore in working with fellow public sector bodies to ensure their timely provision.

Statutory amendments were recently made by the government to help facilitate



**Chaired by SDCC's Chief Executive, Daniel McLoughlin, South Dublin COVID-19 Community Response Forum is convened weekly by way of remote video meetings.**



**The 'In This Together' initiative, launched by An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar on 24 April, focuses on the role played by local authorities during the current COVID-19 times to help individuals take care of their physical and mental health and wellbeing.**

speedy construction of works and the Citywest Hotel and Conference Centre was identified as a suitable location in which to locate a 'field hospital' and 'step-down' facility.

Recognising the need for works to commence as soon as possible, while at the same time ensuring the safety of people in or about the building, South Dublin County Council proactively liaised with Dublin Fire Brigade, the HSE's Fire Prevention Officer and individual fire safety consultants for Citywest to ensure the necessary level of oversight was implemented to enable prompt delivery of the facility.

The 'Works (COVID-19) Notice' in relation to the 'field hospital' at Citywest Conference Centre was



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submitted to the council via the Building Control Management System and validated on the same date. This speedy collaboration enabled the Citywest facility to become the first such location in the country, thereby easing pressure on hospitals in Dublin and the surrounding areas.

#### MULTI-AGENCY SUPPORTS

In response to Action 4 in Ireland's National Action Plan in Response to COVID-19, South Dublin County Council was mandated to establish a multi-agency South Dublin COVID-19 Community Response Forum.

The Forum was subsequently formed on Saturday 28 March with a wide variety of stakeholders, including the Mayor of South Dublin, ALONE, An Garda Síochána, An Post, Civil Defence, the HSE, South Dublin Volunteer Centre, Traveller Support Groups, Tus Nua/ Older Persons' Council, Tusla and many more.

Chaired by SDCC's Chief Executive, Daniel McLoughlin, the Forum is convened weekly by way of remote video meetings. Its overall objective is to facilitate and co-ordinate the most appropriate response

to the needs of vulnerable people living in the community where their usual supports become unavailable.

It leads the co-ordination of COVID-19 community supports and resilience, including:

- Identifying vulnerable groups and individuals in South Dublin County;
- Ensuring delivery of targeted social care supports and assistance;
- Helping vulnerable individuals in isolation;
- Ensuring the resilience of existing community services;
- Harnessing offers of assistance from enterprises/businesses generally.

#### CONTINUITY IN SERVICE DELIVERY

SDCC's Business Continuity Plan has identified the essential services for the continuity of operations and service delivery, which has required remote working capability.

Key to remaining accessible to all was the dedicated customer care team. Typical customer care volumes dealt with by the team include over 500 daily phone calls and

up to 100 email and web enquiry forms. While 50% of calls received are typically dealt with by the customer care service team directly, the remaining queries are referred to relevant people in each service department. The team has stepped up to the challenge and continues to deliver an excellent service from home as the council maintains physical distancing in the offices.

#### EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS

The council made communicating openly and effectively with citizens in South Dublin County a priority and developed channel plans for each avenue of communication to ensure the right content was being delivered at the right time. A dedicated space was set up on the council's website [www.sdcc.ie](http://www.sdcc.ie) to gather all COVID-19 relevant information with messaging being pushed out to citizens through social and local media.

In March and April, council posts were seen over five million times across all platforms with around 208,000 engagements on council content. The focus has been to deliver up-to-date local and national COVID-19 information while

promoting key campaigns such as the Community Call, and 'In This Together' initiative (which was launched by An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar on 24 April).

Responding to COVID-19, particularly in the early stages of government guidelines on social distancing, safe working and then travel limitations, required a new approach to internal communications and a plan that ensured senior management could be assured all staff received the same information at the same time.

The Communications Unit and Human Resources worked together to workshop the issue and develop a plan that could be quickly implemented to cover any gaps in contact details and methods of communication.

These two sections were seen as vital in the initial stages as a comprehensive staff contact list needed to be developed that included staff emails, work contact numbers and personal contact numbers.

Once gathered, the working group analysed the data to pinpoint gaps in teams and individuals and developed an internal communication plan to gather any contact details that were required.

By understanding the needs and

capabilities of staff, the council has developed a multi-channel approach to deliver effective internal communication during these testing times. A newly-developed SMS service has complemented existing internal communication methods and each notification has also been sent through digital newsletter, intranet and posters in depots.

Individual internal updates on the council's website alone have been viewed by up to 75% of staff. The intranet and posters provide reminders to staff when starting work, be that logging on to the intranet or starting work in one of the depots.

Internal staff feedback has been overwhelmingly positive towards the move and information flow has increased substantially at a time when many staff are physically apart.

#### 'IN THIS TOGETHER' INITIATIVE

South Dublin County Council has offered a range of activities and resources as part of the government's new 'In This Together' initiative. The campaign encourages everyone to set a new daily activity, which helps them to feel a little healthier or a little happier during this pandemic.

It signposts useful advice to help people of every age group to cope with the ongoing restrictions, whether they're looking after children, dealing with self-isolation, or coping with cabin fever. 'In This Together' draws together a huge range of activities that people can pursue at home or their locality, with family members or with friends online. There are ideas and activities for people of all ages.

#### Some highlights include:

- SDC Sports Partnership live exercise classes including yoga, pilates, at-home exercise.
- The Libraries Borrow Box
- Online music classes with Music Generation
- Five-minute crafts with the Library Service
- Age-Friendly News
- Bouncing Baby Book Club
- LEO online courses

The initiative has also drawn together a huge range of advice and supports available online for people of all ages, including the 'MindMindR' app, the Mental Health Facebook talks (which took place from 27 to 30 April), in addition to the promotion of SDCC's parks and getting back to nature.

Throughout this COVID-19 lockdown, South Dublin County Council has remained available to citizens and business, despite having to close its council offices. It is continuing to successfully meet the challenge during this time in provide continuity in service delivery by phone, email, and web enquiry forms, including 'Fix Your Street' queries and to ensure that the information provided is correct and updated in an ever-changing environment.

For further information on all South Dublin County Council activities and programmes visit [www.sdcc.ie](http://www.sdcc.ie) or check out any of the council's social media channels.



**The council's mental health app 'MindMindR', which was relaunched in 2019, has been extensively promoted through social media. The initiative was spearheaded by former Deputy Mayor of South Dublin County, Cllr Cathal King, to help to reduce the stigma still attached to mental health issues, and encourage more people to ask for help.**