

FINANCE

SEPTEMBER 2020

What a summer! An update from me is well overdue as the past few months seem to have both passed in a flash whilst at the same time those first days of lockdown also seem a lifetime ago. It seems we are all living completely different lives. I should have been reflecting on who won Wimbledon, how England did in Euro 2020 and where Great Britain ended up in the medal table at the Tokyo Olympics. Instead, everyone's talking about rushing back from holidays in France and cancelled holidays to avoid the quarantine. We did however get some football news with Marcus Rashford's work on free school meals for children who needed them over the summer and the Premier League eventually coming to its just conclusion (I would say that, all being Liverpool fans in my house).

On work, we've all been working from home now since the end of March. It's been a huge change in itself when we have been largely office-based and used to working in close proximity to our colleagues – we've had to find new ways of doing things (for example a team quickly setting up processes to remove the need for paper-based systems), meeting on Teams (and remembering to come off mute) and staying in touch (with examples of fancy dress team meetings, virtual coffee rooms and team quizzes). We've battled with system downtimes, which now thanks to digital services are so much better and more reliable, and have adapted amazingly well to home working with our Tech-tonic kit. As much as Teams is great (and I don't miss the daily commute) I still miss seeing colleagues' faces and catching up with your news all whilst I wandered the corridors. I'm still not sure how to crack that one but as it looks like home working is likely to continue for some time yet I am very open to any suggestions.

People and talent have done some excellent work on our new [Ways of Working guide](#) and I hope you've taken the time to look at it. It reminds us of the need to look after our own and our teams' wellbeing in these strange times and the resources available to us. It also reminds us that the safety of our staff is our priority with phased plans for any return to the office whilst reminding us of the guidance for working at home safely. The messaging nationally on COVID-19 and return to offices can seem quite confusing, but we are still asking staff to continue to work from home. The next phase of bringing back people who find it difficult to work from home is in the planning and more will come out on that as the details become available.

I have been so impressed and proud of the work that all our teams have been doing during this pandemic – everyone has pulled together to continue providing our business as usual services throughout with every team also taking on additional responsibilities and duties in response to COVID-19.

Through COVID-19:

An update on what our teams have been doing

1 Corporate finance

The pandemic hit our finance teams at one of our busiest times of the year: during year-end accounts. All the finance teams have monitored and reported COVID-19 spend for monthly government returns on top of the usual monitoring. The financial accounting team prepared the accounts in the midst of the pandemic and quickly set up accounts codes and conventions to enable us to monitor and report COVID-19 spend. The systems team have supported emergency payments to purchase PPE, rolled out procurement cards to enable emergency payments, supported the implementation of a system to enable volunteers to be paid or reimbursed for shopping for residents who couldn't easily access online and telephone banking. Strategic planning have coordinated our COVID-19 reporting and kept track of and monitored our related grants. The finance and resources team has supported the corporate pandemic response including challenges relating to our spend on food and food poverty, PPE, the BECC and CAN, and also, sadly, mortality management.

2 Social care & children's

Department finance teams have supported their departments in significant spending decisions as part of our emergency response and have been capturing and reporting COVID-19 costs to ensure we can make our case for government funding. The social care team have made much needed additional grant payments to care homes, made claims for financial support to the CCG, and very sadly being the administrator of last resort, had to deal with arrangements for increased numbers of funerals. The children's team has supported payments to early years providers facing financial issues, arranged supermarket vouchers for free school meals and looked for alternative arrangements to provide financial support other than cash.

3 Economy

The economy team quickly changed paper based systems using the O365 apps available to us and helped support the discretionary grant scheme to provide grants to local businesses facing significant financial issues as a result of the pandemic. The investment team, working closely with treasury colleagues, used the economic situation to our advantage and saved the HRA money by borrowing at a historically low interest rate and assessing the impact of the pandemic on our capital programme.

4 Environment

The environment team have supported the negotiations with our leisure provider and on social distancing measures, whilst also supporting the non-pandemic related priority of Hammersmith Bridge. And lastly, but not least the parking team, have worked really closely with the service to understand and forecast the impact on parking and traffic management measures which have had the most significant financial effect on the council to ensure we can make a robust claim for compensation from the government.

Creating a compassionate council

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Rental income

Our rental income team, whilst battling with lworld access, have had to deal with significantly increased levels of contact with tenants hit financially by COVID-19 and concerned around the impact of their financial situation. I can't imagine the stress people would be under worrying about keeping a roof over their family's head particularly during a pandemic. It must be tough dealing with people in that situation who would be sad, scared and angry but the team have dealt sympathetically with those with arrears. The service has taken a really proactive and compassionate approach, reassuring residents and signposting support available to them, sending texts, supportive letters and taking significantly increased numbers of calls. Sonia Meikle also held a well received Wellbeing Wednesday session for staff on welfare benefits. Given the financial environment rent collection is holding up quite well which is testament to the approach taken by the team.

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PMO & ZBB

Our PMO and ZBB teams have been in the thick of the response, being an integral part of the Silver arrangements, supporting the establishment of the CAN, developing the food strategy and coordinating the high priority issues around keyworker parking. They are now key to shaping the council's recovery programme as we look to a future of a new normal and address the financial challenges faced as a result of the pandemic.

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Business intelligence

The BI team have been working some magic through the pandemic; they were instrumental in the rapid implementation of the system supporting the CAN, including an automated system for contacting a large population of shielded residents. The team has been reviewing positive cases for trends (care homes and locations), created vulnerability lists for social care and children's services to target interventions, and provided intelligence on other areas such as school attendance. A series of dashboards provide clear management information which is being used by SLT.

That's just some of the things I know about – you'll all know many more examples of the amazing things that have been done. It's a long list but I thought it would be good to share examples across the department which you will be less aware of but which have all contributed to such a significant response. Thank you all for your work both on business as usual and all these additional things over the last few months.

As we can see, everyone has been working really hard. I know without the ability to take holidays and do what we would usually because of restrictions here and abroad, people might not be inclined to take their leave and wait for more normal times to return. However we don't know when that might be or what that will look like. So I do encourage you all to think about your leave and take time off and step away from work to find some time for yourselves, your friends (but only 5 at a time!) and families. It's important to take a break for your own wellbeing.

Race, inclusion & BLM



Another pivotal event over the summer was the killing of George Floyd. I have to tell you, I struggled, and am still struggling now, with what I can say and how I should say it. In the direct aftermath I felt I wanted and needed to listen. Whilst I'm mixed race and have experienced racism, to many or most who don't know me and my background, I might appear white. I didn't want to be the white person who thought they could empathise and understand whilst not living that same experience. I am highly conscious that I've been lucky with opportunities in my life. I haven't experienced systemic racism and bias (intentional or otherwise) because of the colour of my skin.

My boys are my world, and George's final pleas to his mum hit me hard. It made me rage at the injustice that mums of black boys and young black men don't have the luxury that I have whereby my sons are unlikely to experience racism and its destructive effects; boys, like them in every other way but the colour of their skin, are more likely to be expelled from school, stopped by the police, and experience serious health implications of COVID-19. It's simply unfair - I know that's not a strong enough word but I can't find another - and not a world I'm content to accept. I want to be part of the change that is long overdue.

Being from a mixed race background, I love diversity and believe that a society which values difference and blends cultures and experiences is one which is richer and will be more successful. It's one of the main reasons why I love Hammersmith. I was hopeful that the worldwide response and support of Black Lives Matter would bring real and lasting change and I have real worries that the momentum that the events brought with them is perhaps being lost, although I was heartened to see US baseball (a predominately white sport) decide to take a strike recently following the shooting of Jacob Blake. I'm not sure what will happen internationally/nationally so as an individual and within my sphere of influence I need to do what I can. Kim led the Now is Not the Time to Be Silent forums and following feedback we're setting up staff working groups to tackle the issues raised. I hope some of you volunteered to work with us on a group and I will look forward to working with you on these. I still don't know what I should say, or how I should say it. I will say that Black Lives Matter, that any form of racism is unacceptable, that I will be an ally, that I will use my voice to support anyone finding it difficult to be heard, that I will promote diversity and equality in Hammersmith & Fulham and that I'm sorry for not saying anything before now to you all, I wasn't sure how.

Can I encourage all of you to complete the excellent unconscious bias training, if you haven't already. I found it really thought provoking and important to understand that good intentions aren't enough and we need systems and processes to mitigate against the effects of our unconscious bias and behaviour. Thank you for your commitment to the GDPR training – I think we're now fully compliant across the department.

Staffing updates

New starters

A very warm welcome to all our new joiners in August and September:

Jodyann Russell, financial assessment and income collection officer, Kite Fafowora, graduate intern, Antonio Mesella, finance and debt officer, and our new finance trainees, Amy Elliott, Julia Norton, and Tom Berry.

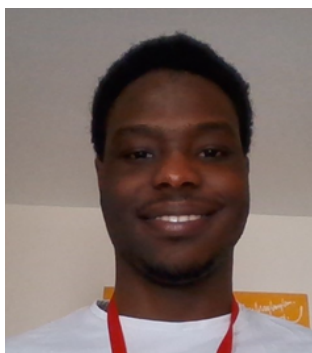
It must be pretty hard joining a team who you may never have met in person and hope you manage to settle in despite this.



JODYANN RUSSELL



AMY ELLIOTT



KITE FAFOWORA



ANTONIO MESELLA



JULIA NORTON



TOM BERRY

Leavers

We also have some well respected colleagues leaving us. Thank you for your contributions to H&F Emily Busby, Sabrina Kwaa and Firas Al-Sheikh.

In these times we can't see you off properly in the usual way but wish you all the best for the future.



EMILY BUSBY



SABRINA KWAA



FIRAS AL-SHEIKH

A final bit of light relief after such serious and important topics and a very full update... Did you know that we have a staff gallery? The current gallery is on the theme of Discovery, after Growth and Windrush. This month's theme is My New Normal and they are taking submissions until 25 September. Have a look [here](#) when you have a moment.

Well that's the summer round up. I am hoping now things have settled a bit I'll be in touch more regularly to let you know what's going on and what I'm thinking. I would be really pleased to know what you'd like to see or hear about across the department and the council. With summer out the way the countdown to Christmas is on, although what a COVID Christmas will be like I don't know... At the start of lockdown I had to take up running doing the couch to 5k as I had no one to share my sweets and biscuits with as I used to when I was in the office and so was eating the whole packet myself. Now that I have seen the tins of Quality Streets in the shops already I'm worried – I may have to start training for a marathon...

Take care

Emily

