

Local leaders came together today in the plenary hall of the Consell de Formentera for the first of two debates on the state of local affairs. Local premier Alejandra Ferrer opened the gathering with remarks about the current landscape, a stock-taking of governance and a look at actions ahead.

Before overviewing efforts in recent months to mitigate the effects of the pandemic, Formentera's chief officer extended condolences "to the family and friends of our fellow islander who lost her life to Covid-19" and "to all those who have lost loved ones to this crisis".

The premier highlighted the fact that the 14 March invocation of emergency orders to combat Covid-19 came days after the Consell had already ordered the closure of various services in an effort to keep islanders safe and limit spread of the virus.

She pointed out that "through lockdown, lockdown easing and constant changes to directives for islanders and island businesses, every branch of local government took great pains to communicate and keep islanders in the know so protocol could be followed".

"Little by little we exited lockdown, and our efforts were rewarded:" —Ferrer recounted— "Formentera was one of the first to begin de-escalation, a transition to the new normal that tested more than the managerial abilities of our administration and local businesses; it tested islanders' own adaptive capacity".

Diada de Formentera

The Consell chief also drew attention to local government's programming around Formentera's yearly celebration, the Diada de Formentera, describing it as "a thank-you to the island's essential service providers who, by helping us remain calm throughout the state of emergency, guaranteed not only our safety, but our quality of life too", she said.

Economic reactivation

On Formentera's reopening to tourism, President Ferrer said that the rosy outlook around the public health situation in early summer and Formentera's head start on the new normal "made for a relatively good season—one in which most local establishments managed to reopen". "But nothing could stop late August", she said, "with spiking numbers of national and international infections that brought the high season to an abrupt end".

By Ferrer's lights, everyone played a part in Formentera's ability to demonstrate managerial flair — a strength she promised would "help in the run-up to summer 2021, when efforts will need to centre on cementing Formentera's status as a safe-as-possible destination".

"The public health crisis hasn't disappeared and the current state of affairs is eminently complicated", asserted the premier. "Coming out on the other side will mean taking things slowly and acting sensibly", Ferrer insisted, "but it's also going to take personal responsibility, collective effort and capacity to adapt to evolving situations".

Social and business relief

"Everybody knows that the worst of the economic contraction lies ahead", Ferrer stated. "The Consell has already issued what will likely be the first in a line of decrees outlining an economic and fiscal response to the economic and social fallout from the Covid-19 public health crisis".

As she pledged to continue "shaping new measures and initiatives to help islanders cope the consequences of the pandemic and support Formentera's social and economic fabric", the president highlighted the following measures:

-Safeguards to strengthen social support systems for families, businesses, employees and freelancers
-Immediate relief for the most at-risk individuals and families
-Strengthening the fabric of the local business community
-Building community cohesion and social support so that no islander is left behind
-Economic reactivation
-Economic diversification including help for agriculture and emerging technologies with an eye to attracting new business and entrepreneurs

“Our end-game is to soften the economic toll of this public health crisis on islanders, the local tourism sector and Formentera businesses”, said the president. “Collective efforts will be vital to reorganising and reactivating the island’s economy. One thing is clear: many people are facing challenges and relatively few resources are available. Our approach must be sensible, and the priority needs to be easing the tax burden on vulnerable families and businesses so we can return to normal as soon as the public health situation permits”.

Social services

Ferrer underscored efforts to create more robust support for families and enable the island’s social services to fast-track payments related to social welfare and family assistance. Expedited payouts also include those made to the Consell’s own service providers, Ferrer said.

According to Ferrer, the situation currently unfolding has laid bare the essential role of social services and the need to reexamine social policy. The following measures are among those already enacted by the Consell de Formentera to fortify the social safety net and guaranteed basic income:

-Putting €325,000 originally intended for the 2020 cycle of Formentera’s participatory spending initiative toward deflecting the crisis’s effect on local families’ pocketbooks
-Freeing up a part of the 2019 surplus for investments in social policies in 2020
-Reallocating €300,000 for food and basic necessities
-Bolstering assistance included in a deal with Formenterers Solidaris (€30,000)

Ferrer also underscored a budget tweak voted in last month’s plenary assembly which will translate into distinct lines of funding this winter, promising that “the biggest among them will go to housing and social welfare”, said the premier.

Sustainable island

Ferrer devoted the second half of her remarks to efforts to make Formentera more environmentally, socially, culturally and economically sustainable.

In Ferrer’s words, “so far as attracting visitors and shaping tourism strategies is concerned, the idea couldn’t be clearer. We must lead with what sets us apart in terms of culture, environment and heritage while bettering services for tourists and quality of life for islanders”. The challenge

in 2021, she said, will boil down to being able to “offer reassurances on public health safety and on our ability to ensure the safety of visitors and residents alike”.

Right to housing

One particularly crucial task, Ferrer said, is that of safeguarding people’s basic rights, “and that includes having access to decent housing”. The premier described such access as “one of the most serious problems faced by islanders” and insisted public health turmoil had only made things worse. In that sense, Ferrer trumpeted the decision to direct €150,000 of the recent spending tweak to targeted housing assistance.

“Put simply, our top priorities are young people, training opportunities and not only access, sanitation upgrades, growing towns, streamlining administrative formalities, supporting our small-town business community, creating infrastructure for old people and fostering all islanders’ active participation in local government, promoting basic exercise, supporting culture, rehabilitating local heritage, completing our network of bike lanes, putting in place a new transport service, monitoring and limiting moorage, improving organic waste management, investing in clean energy, investing in our farmers’ co-operative and local agriculture and, 365 days a year, building a Formentera that offers better possibilities to its businesses and, in doing so, improves available jobs and builds a more balanced society”.

Ferrer concluded by pointing to her administration’s overarching goal and the “driving force behind all our efforts: a better, happier life for everyone”. “Since the creation of the Consell, Formentera has gone through serious changes and delivered on historical pleas, and the time has come to think about what kind of island we want to be. Formentera is a place where quality of life, and people, come first.”

Party members took the floor to offer their own remarks following Ferrer’s speech. Ferrer used the time accorded for her rebuttal to close the day’s session. In a second session on Tuesday 6 October, party representatives will propose items for debate in the plenary assembly.

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