

This Report will be made public on 16 June 2020

Report Number: **C/20/08**

To: Cabinet
Date: 24 June 2020
Status: Key Decision
Responsible Officer: Ewan Green, Director of Place
Cabinet Member: Councillor David Monk, Leader of the Council

SUBJECT: COVID-19 Response to Date and Recovery Plan Framework

SUMMARY: This report provides an overview of the Council's response to date in relation to COVID-19 and seeks approval of a framework which will guide the development and delivery of the Council's COVID-19 Recovery Plan.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS (*Cabinet only*):

Cabinet is asked to agree the recommendations as the development and delivery of a Recovery Plan in response to COVID-19 will be a priority for the Council as the country moves into recovery phase. The Recovery Plan will include actions in four key areas which the Council has both direct and / or indirect responsibility to address: Community, Economy, Council Operations and Council Finance.

The Framework will establish a set of principles which will underpin the development of the Recovery Plan with due consideration, and alignment with, the emerging Corporate Plan, council service delivery and strategic priority programmes and projects.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. To receive and note report C/20/08.
2. To note the Council COVID-19 response to date and key issues arising from this.
3. To reaffirm the priority themes within the emerging Corporate Plan
4. To agree the COVID-19 Recovery Plan Framework and related Underpinning Principles.

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The emergency response to COVID-19 is led nationally by Government, regionally by the Kent Resilience Forum (KRF) and then locally by the Council and partners such as Kent County Council, Police, the Kent & Medway Clinical Commissioning Group and voluntary sector organisations.
- 1.2 In accordance with the Civil Contingences Act 2004 there is a declared state of emergency at national and local level in response to the coronavirus pandemic. The Act requires local public services to form Local Resilience Forums. In Kent it is known as the Kent Resilience Forum (KRF), which is formed by the emergency responders and specific supporting agencies and is required to plan for emergencies. The Council is an active member of the KRF.
- 1.3 A Gold-Silver-Bronze command structure is used to establish a hierarchical framework for the command and control of emergencies and disasters. Officers of the District Council will therefore participate in Gold (Strategic Planning) and Silver (Tactical Planning) command briefings throughout the emergency e.g. by participation in the strategic meetings (known as SCGs) and tactical meetings (known as TCGs).
- 1.4 In response to the coronavirus pandemic, all partners in the Kent Resilience Forum are operating the above “command and control” structure to provide the county wide strategic oversight, and co-ordinate the tactical response.
- 1.5 The Council continues to play a central role in the emergency response and engages with partners through the KRF at a regional level and with Government through national networks.
- 1.6 We deploy staff to the daily meetings on the SCG and TCG. We are also active participants in a number of themed “cells” focussing on specific activities.
- 1.7 We are also actively involved in a wide range of conference calls with the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government and other agencies/ forums involved in responding to the pandemic.
- 1.8 Notwithstanding this formal structure the Council is designated as a Category 1 Responder under the Act and we have a statutory responsibility to initiate our own response also.
- 1.9 Within this overall context the response across the District to date has focused on supporting those most vulnerable and ‘at risk’ residents, facilitating grants and advice to businesses, ensuring community safety and providing essential services.

2. Managing the Council Response to Date

- 2.1 The Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) gave early consideration to what steps we should plan for, both in respect of the continued delivery of our services and any actions we may need to take in response to the pandemic.
- 2.2 The previous decisions Members have made in relation to transformation, including the investment in more agile working solutions for staff through the replacement of PC's with laptops, meant we were well placed to ensure that in general staff could work from home.
- 2.3 To manage our response we initiated daily "Business Continuity" virtual meetings, with an extended senior team to include key staff leading on a number of themes relating to our own service delivery and to initiate our response to requests from the government and the KRF.

The key themes that formed the daily agenda for the meeting are as follows:

- Situation Update
- Staff
- Members and Democratic Process
- Council Services & Finance
- Support for Businesses
- Support for Communities
- Communications

- 2.4 The following provides an overview of the Council response:

2.4.1 Support for Communities - In line with Government guidance, the Council has established three Community Hubs to support residents, particularly those on the NHS extremely vulnerable "shielded" list and also others who may be considered vulnerable and in need of additional support.

There are 3 Hubs in operation to ensure that there is a District wider coverage:

- Folkestone Community Hub is being run by the Three Hills Sports Park
- Hythe Community Hub is being run by Age UK Hythe & Lyminge
- Romney Marsh Community Hub is being run by the Romney Marsh Day Centre

All three Community Hubs are being supported by Folkestone & Hythe District Council staff and resources.

Key activities undertaken through the Hubs are:

- Telephone contact to those residents on the 'shielded list'
- Provision of food for those not able to get or prepare it themselves
- Assistance with the collection and delivery of food orders
- Collection and delivery medical supplies

- Walks for dogs and other pets
- Offer someone to talk to for advice and reassurance

Contact has been made with residents included on the NHS shielded list (to date this is around 18,500 people, but the list is updated and added to on a daily basis). Checks are made to confirm that they have support in place from either family, friends or neighbours and that they have adequate food supplies and any medication that is required. Where residents require support appropriate action is taken including onward signposting to specialist and local community support networks such as Parish Council support and community volunteers. This ensures practical local support that can be sustained for as long as required.

In relation to the provision of food parcels and meals, there have been over 12,500 deliveries made to residents across the District.

2.4.2 Support for Businesses - The overall support given by the council to local businesses to date has covered a number of key strands:

1) Covid-19 Helpline: In partnership with Kent County Council and the other Kent Districts and Boroughs, a local Covid-19 Helpline was set up to give local businesses much needed guidance during the crisis and to explain the Government's Business Support Package. The helpline, run by the Kent & Medway Growth Hub, has been very well used - with 143 phone calls and 79 webchats Folkestone & Hythe businesses using the service between 25 March and 22 May 2020. It will continue to run until at least 30 June 2020.

2) Communicating directly with Business: this includes a number of strands, such as a dedicated Covid-19 business page on the Folkestone Works (which is regularly being updated by the Economic Development Team) and has had 3,411 visits between 23 March and 27 May, social media activity, and 5 Covid-19 e-bulletins to over 620 of our local businesses.

3) Rate Relief: Facilitating the 12-month Business Rates Holiday for all businesses in the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure sector (as defined by Government) and the Nursery Relief, which has been led by the Revenues Team.

4) The delivery of Small Business Grants and Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grants to eligible businesses in the District: following the receipt of £28.8 from Central Government, the Revenues Team have been tracking down eligible businesses, getting them to provide necessary details in order to process the grant funding, undertaking checks to verify the claims and getting the grants to businesses as expediently as possible. It is no mean feat that 83% of the grant money had been handed to 94% eligible businesses as of 19th May.

5) The Council has started to deliver discretionary top-up grant funding which is aimed at small businesses (fewer than 50 employees) that missed out on the existing grant offer. Both guidance and funding are still to be received from Government, with this funding is to be steered towards businesses in shared space, regular Market traders, charities (that would meet the criteria for Small Business Rate Relief), Bed & Breakfast establishments and creative businesses.

It is estimated that this will result in £1.292 mill additional support for eligible businesses and was launched June 1st 2020.

2.4.3 Staff - Our staff are our most valuable asset. As alluded to above, our immediate position was that wherever possible, all staff must work from home, only attending the offices if absolutely essential.

Over 90% of our office based staff were equipped to work fully remotely from home, with access to all IT systems and telephony. This meant that a decision was taken to close our offices to staff and the public, which was compatible with the guidance to all to “stay at home and stay safe”. We were able to operate a full telephony and online service to residents and businesses.

Once again the staff have without exception responded in a flexible and committed way, adapting to either new ways of working from home, playing their turn in rotas to go into the office to manage for example incoming / outgoing post, or by embracing temporary redeployment into different roles to support the community response.

Our strategy of a default position of working from home, has kept our staff safe, maintaining service delivery, and showing leadership in following both the public health messaging and other restrictions on movement.

2.4.4 Members and Democratic Process - The Leader and Cabinet Members have been integral to the Council’s response to the emergency, with virtual meetings at least weekly with the Chief Executive, Directors and senior officers as required.

Members have been advised previously of the changes introduced by the government in order to enable virtual meetings to take place in local government for the period up to 7 May 2021. In response to the changes, the Council has taken steps to implement virtual meetings locally by way of Zoom. Council meetings are being held virtually using this technology.

2.4.5 Council Services & Finance - Members have been updated by email on financial matters in relation to the impact of COVID-19. It is important to note that financial implications can be categorised into 3 different areas:

- 1) New costs that arise simply as a result of the emergency (e.g. setting up and operation of community hub facilities)
- 2) Expansion of some service costs that were not budgeted at the ‘new’ level due to the emergency (e.g. increase in temporary accommodation need)
- 3) Loss of income that would otherwise have been received by the Council in ‘normal’ times (e.g. car parking, other fees and charges, investment income, council tax receipts)

Predicting what the impact of COVID-19 will be for the Council is challenging because it depends on how long restrictions will last for and how quick or slow the recovery will be. However, we have attempted to estimate what this might be if only to inform the funding discussions; and have worked with other Kent councils in doing so.

The indicative 'ballpark' figures we arrived at which were reported to government through the monitoring process, anticipate an impact on the General Fund in the region of £4.5 million and a further £1 million on the Housing Revenue Account.

As mentioned above, it is important to understand that these figures are best guesses and these will undoubtedly change.

Two tranches of 'emergency' funding has been provided by the government. The first tranche received was just over £65k. The Secretary of State announced a second tranche of funding for local government as a whole on 18 April, and on 28 April, we heard that the Council was to receive an allocation of £1.18m from this second tranche. It is not clear currently whether there will be further significant tranches of funding provided by the government but it is felt unlikely that if even further funding was announced that it will be sufficient to meet the expected shortfalls as set out above.

This will necessitate a complete review of our Medium Term Financial Strategy and as well as the 2020/21 budget setting, further detail on this approach will be outlined within a paper to Cabinet in June.

The "new normal" is likely to require a review of our budget in any event as we adapt to delivering the priority services in different ways.

2.4.6 It is important to recognise that moving into the recovery phase of managing the COVID-19 emergency does not negate the need to be ready to be prepared to move back into the response phase should there be a requirement to do so.

3. Folkestone and Hythe District Recovery Plan

3.1 The Government has published its strategic plan to ease the lockdown and support the UK in recovery from the virus pandemic. This covers continued personal care, returning to work, public transport, returning to school and other issues such as hospitality and events. The full strategy can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/our-plan-to-rebuild-the-ukgovernments-covid-19-recovery-strategy>

3.2 The Kent Resilience Forum has is required to develop county wide Recovery Plans as part of the overall response to the COVID-91 emergency. This work is being progressed through the KRF structures and includes themes such as economy, infrastructure, children and young people and health. The Council is playing an active role in this work through senior officer representation.

3.3 Whilst the KRF recovery planning will be assist the District significantly it is crucial that that a Folkestone & Hythe Recovery Plan is developed, led by the Council and involving key stakeholders. This leadership will ensure that recovery actions focus on priorities for the District, reflect differing needs of

our distinct communities and are delivered as far as possible through locally accountable structures and partnerships.

A Recovery Plan will therefore be developed for the District and will align and will focus primarily on key issues and actions for the Council (although there are likely to be actions which the Council will request of partners also).

- 3.4 Nobody can predict how long “recovery” may take. Nor should we assume that the world, our locality, or our Council can or should return to exactly the same “business as usual”. It is more likely that there will be a “new normal”, and we need to take this opportunity to position ourselves to manage this transition.
- 3.5 Throughout the response to date the Council has had to significantly adjust the way in which services are prioritised and delivered. In turn our customers have had to engage with the Council, and receive services, in a different way. These new behaviours have set an important benchmark moving forward and this will be reflected in the Recovery Plan.
- 3.6 It is intended that the Recovery Plan will be based on an initial timescale to March 31st 2022. The plan will be reviewed regularly and updated as required within that period.

4. Corporate Plan Alignment and Delivery

- 4.1 It is essential that the Recovery Plan aligns effectively with, and supports delivery of, the Council’s priorities within the emerging Corporate Plan including:
 - High quality services for residents
 - The Medium Term Financial Plan.
 - The Council’s Transformation priorities.
 - A new economic development strategy.
 - Environmental sustainability and response to climate emergency.
 - Strategic projects
- 4.2 The new Corporate Plan is under development and this presents an opportunity to ensure alignment with the planning for recovery to maximise the quality and impact of outcomes for residents and businesses.
- 4.3 The Corporate Plan Working Group have been working on the redevelopment of the new Corporate Plan over the last 6 months. The plan will be focused over the 10 year span and the emerging priority areas are:
 - Housing & Infrastructure
 - Economy
 - Community Focused Services
 - Environment and
 - Transparency, Stability & Accountability

- 4.4 It is proposed to continue to engage with Members and residents on the development of the 10 year vision and priorities for the District and seek the Councils agreement of these. The framework / themes of the recovery plan (Community, Economy, and Council Operations & Council Finance), have clear links into the proposed themes of the emerging Corporate Plan.
- 4.5 It is therefore proposed that the Recovery Plan will be developed in line with this and will in effect be the focus of the Corporate Plan actions to March 31st 2022.
- 4.6 At operational level all Team Service Plans will then first and foremost be focused on delivery of the Recovery Plan.

5. Vision and Underpinning Principles

- 5.1 The Recovery Plan will be District wide and can only be successfully delivered in conjunction with key public sector partners, the voluntary sector and our communities. To that end it is proposed that all stakeholders are encouraged to coalesce under one vision which will set the tone and general approach for recovery across the District.

An example of this is for consideration is **Better & Stronger** which signifies a positive intent drive a more prosperous and resilient District for all in the future.

- 5.2 Accepting that the strategic and operational context for the Council will not revert to a known status quo and a 'new normal' will have to be positively embraced. The Recovery Plan will be guided by the following underpinning principles:

- Ensuring the Council's financial stability, resilience and growth.
- Delivering essential services for residents and businesses.
- The Council's role to facilitate local economic growth.
- Embracing transformation and accelerating opportunities to change the way in which the Council operates (e.g. launching MyAccount).
- Continuing to resource and drive forward strategic programmes and priorities (e.g. Otterpool Park, establishment of a new housing service).
- Reshaping services and budgets as required to ensure the Recovery Plan is adequately resourced.
- Engaging with our staff and customers.
- Building on the upsurge of community cohesion through positive enablement of communities.
- Working in partnership at County and East Kent level, where appropriate, in order to achieve better value and outcomes across all recovery actions.
- Promoting key issues at national and local level to ensure positive outcomes for the District.

6. Key Themes

- 6.1 It is proposed to base the Recovery Plan on 4 themes which will lead to a 'new normal' both at strategic and operational levels for the Council:

1. Community

It is important to recognise that the recovery phase will still require a strong and resilient community based response, particularly in relation to ongoing support for vulnerable and 'at risk' residents (although the level of response required through Community Hubs will not likely be as high as during the initial response to the COVID-19 emergency).

Recovery planning will therefore consider actions aimed at continuing an appropriate level of 'Hub' response alongside actions to further support the enablement of local community activities. A report specifically on this will be brought to Cabinet.

2. Economy

There will a key focus on economic recovery at national, regional and local levels. Key considerations for the Council locally will include maximising social value and benefit for the District's businesses through the purchase of goods and services locally, engaging with the development industry to facilitate revitalisation of private / social house building and commercial development and setting clear plans for the progression of major growth projects such as Otterpool Park and Folkestone Town Centre. In addition the Council will ensure that its core economic growth service delivery is focused on supporting local SME's, alongside partners at local and regional level, through recovery and into a new growth phase.

3. Council Operations

It is important to recognise that the current way in which the Council operates changed significantly in response to the challenges posed by COVID-19. This presents opportunities to consider how best the ongoing transformation programme might be accelerated to continue to embrace these changes for customers and staff alike.

This will focus on the way in which the Council reopens for business and will include consideration of the Council's role as an employer, property owner / landlord and delivery of services. It is intended that this theme will include implementation of the new Customer Access Strategy including the launch of MyAccount as a major step change in our customer interaction.

4. Council Finance

The impact of COVID -19 has resulted in unprecedented financial challenges for the Council. The initial priority will therefore be to continue to ensure a balanced budget is achievable for the financial years 2020/21 and 2021/22 demonstrating the Council is a viable 'going concern'.

This will require consideration of adjusted income levels, Government support, borrowing requirements and re-profiling of budgets for core services and strategic priority projects and programmes.

Council Finance and Budget setting will be the subject of separate reports to Cabinet and Council as required.

7. Engagement

7.1 Developing and delivering the Recovery Plan will be influenced by Members, residents, businesses public sector partners and the voluntary sector. Proactive engagement is therefore essential to help shape the actions to deliver the plan.

7.2 It is however also essential that the Recovery Plan is put in place at the earliest opportunity whilst recognising that flexibility and the ability to change direction in such uncertain times will be required.

It is therefore intended that an engagement plan is put in place which will assist in developing the initial plan, ensure an ongoing opportunity for residents and stakeholders to contribute and provide a platform for the Council to report widely on progress.

8. RISK MANAGEMENT ISSUES

8.1 The detailed Recovery Plan will be the subject of a risk assessment and this will form part of a further report in due course.

9. LEGAL/FINANCIAL AND OTHER CONTROLS/POLICY MATTERS

9.1 Legal Officer's Comments

There are no comments.

9.2 Finance Officer's Comments

There are no comments.

9.3 Diversities and Equalities Implications

An assessment of implications for diversity and equalities will be undertaken as part of the development of the detailed Recovery Plan and this will form part of a further report in due course.

10. CONTACT OFFICERS AND BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Councillors with any questions arising out of this report should contact the following officer prior to the meeting:

Ewan Green, Director of Place
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The following background documents have been relied upon in the preparation of this report:

None

Appendices:

None

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