

COUNCIL RESPONSE TO CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

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| TO: | POLICY COMMITTEE | | |
| DATE: | 24 MARCH 2020 | | |
| TITLE: | COUNCIL RESPONSE TO CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC | | |
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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report sets out the Council's immediate response to the Coronavirus (Covid-19) Pandemic which is now facing the Borough, the Country and the World.
- 1.2 To guide the actions of the Council and its work in partnership with others at this critical time, the Council will for the remainder of the outbreak, and the subsequent recovery period, focus its efforts on several key priorities, which whilst aligned with the priorities in its Corporate Plan are necessarily different and more limited in nature.
- 1.3 To ensure that the Council's governance arrangements are agile and able to respond to what is a very dynamic situation the Urgency Procedures within the Council's Constitution have been invoked.

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

Policy Committee is asked:

- 2.1 To endorse the three point Strategic Framework and underlying principles set out in Appendix 2 in order to focus and guide the Council's response to the current Coronavirus Pandemic.
- 2.2 To note the Interim Governance arrangements as set out in Appendix 3 attached.

Appendix 1 - Local Resilience Forum Multi Agency Response Structure Diagram

Appendix 2 - Strategic Framework and Underlying Principles

Appendix 3 - Interim Governance Arrangements

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 The Council's Corporate Plan 2018-2021 (which was refreshed in Spring 2019) sets out the following six priorities:
 - Securing the economic success of Reading

- Improving access to decent housing to meet local needs
 - Protecting and enhancing the lives of vulnerable adults and children
 - Keeping Reading's environment clean, green and safe
 - Promoting health, education, culture & wellbeing
 - Ensuring the Council is fit for the future
- 3.2 Full details of the Council's Corporate Plan and the actions which will deliver the priorities are published on the [Council's website](#) and demonstrate how the Council meets its legal obligation to be efficient, effective and economical.
- 3.3 The Council also has significant duties to respond to emergencies under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. This is the most relevant legislation in relation to an emergency response to a Pandemic. This Act delivers a single framework for civil protection in the UK and establishes a clear set of roles and responsibilities for those involved in emergency preparation and response at the local level. The Act divides local responders into two categories, imposing a different set of duties on each.
- 3.4 Those in Category 1 are organisations at the core of the response to most emergencies (the emergency services, local authorities, NHS bodies etc.). Category 1 responders are subject to the full set of civil protection duties and are required to:
- assess the risk of emergencies occurring and use this to inform contingency planning
 - put in place emergency plans
 - put in place business continuity management arrangements
 - put in place arrangements to make information available to the public about civil protection matters and maintain arrangements to warn, inform and advise the public in the event of an emergency
 - share information with other local responders to enhance co-ordination
 - co-operate with other local responders to enhance co-ordination and efficiency
 - provide advice and assistance to businesses and voluntary organisations about business continuity management (local authorities only)
- 3.5 Category 2 organisations (the Health and Safety Executive, transport and utility companies) are 'co-operating bodies'. They are less likely to be involved in the heart of planning work but will be heavily involved in incidents that affect their own sector.
- 3.6 Category 1 and 2 organisations come together to form 'local resilience forums' (LRF) (based on police areas) which help co-ordination and co-operation between responders at the local level. Reading BC and the other Berkshire unitary authorities are part of the Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum.
- 3.7 While the LRF and associated sub-groups focus on planning for incidents, there are other levels of control that convene to manage the response to an incident as it occurs. They are:
- Bronze - Operational level, at which the management of 'hands-on' work is undertaken at the incident site or impacted areas
 - Silver - Tactical level of management is introduced to provide overall management of the response
 - Gold - Strategic decision makers and groups at local level. They establish the framework within which operational and tactical managers work in responding to and recovering from emergencies.
- 3.8 On 19 March 2020, the Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum declared the Coronavirus Pandemic to be a Major Incident, the Council has also declared a Major Incident.
- 3.4 A "Major Incident" is defined as:

An event or situation, with a range of serious consequences, which requires special arrangements to be implemented by one or more emergency responder agencies.

- 3.5 A Major Incident is beyond the scope of business-as-usual operations, and is likely to involve serious harm, damage, disruption or risk to human life or welfare, essential services, the environment or national security.
- 3.6 A Major Incident may involve a single-agency response, although it is more likely to require a multi-agency response, which may be in the form of multi-agency support to a lead responder.
- 3.7 The severity of consequences associated with a major incident are likely to constrain or complicate the ability of responders to resource and manage the incident, although a major incident is unlikely to affect all responders equally.
- 3.8 The Council was and is working closely with its partners across Berkshire and the LRF to respond to the threat of Coronavirus. A number of structures exist under the LRF which enable the multi-agency response. These are illustrated in Appendix 1. Attached.
- 3.6 It is now clear that the current Coronavirus Pandemic will:
 - (a) disrupt the lives of our residents and poses a significant risk of to the most vulnerable
 - (b) detrimentally damage the world, national and local economy
 - (c) disrupt the ordinary business of the Council and other public services for a significant time, and
 - (d) place significant demands on the Council's leadership role in the coming weeks and months.
- 3.7 Consequently, the Council must revise its priorities for the foreseeable future in order that it can respond to the challenges both currently being faced as well as those to come.

4. THE PROPOSAL

- 4.1 To enable the Council to fulfil its leadership role at this incredibly challenging time, and to guide its work with partners in providing the support that residents and businesses need, it is proposed that the Council's current Corporate Plan priorities are reframed to provide clarity of purpose and that a three point strategic framework is adopted based around the following three broad priorities:
 - (a) To support and protect vulnerable children and adults by ensuring the social care system continues to function effectively
 - (b) To support the people who are most vulnerable and isolated in our communities
 - (c) To support businesses and the local economy, and secure Reading's economic recovery
- 4.3 Appendix 2 attached, sets out the Strategic Framework which will deliver the three priorities together with the underlying principles of how we will work.
- 4.4 In order to meet the challenge of the Pandemic it is vital that the Council's decision making is more agile. The current way of doing business by bringing people together in rooms to discuss problems is not sustainable. The Government has issued clear guidance about social distancing and it is making amendments to legislation to enable virtual meetings to take place.

4.5 To deal with the Pandemic, the Council has instigated the Urgency Procedures in the Constitution. This allows for a smaller group of councillors to make decisions in Policy Committee on behalf of the other Committees. The first of these meetings has been established. A renewed schedule of meetings will be presented to Policy Committee. A summary of these new interim governance arrangements is shown at Appendix 3.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

5.1 The proposal to reframe our priorities is in line with the Council's strategic aims.

5.2 The strategic aims are:

- To Develop Reading as a Green City with a sustainable environment and economy at the heart of the Thames Valley
- To establish Reading as a learning City and a stimulating and rewarding place to live and visit
- To promote equality, social inclusion and a safe and healthy environment for all

5.3 None of these can be achieved unless the entire Borough comes together to address this emergency and emerges strongly on the other side. Although we have taken the step of closing some of our buildings to protect staff and service users, in line with government guidance on social-distancing, we are still meeting the needs of our customers.

5.4 We are working in partnership with key partners, the business community and our vibrant voluntary and community sector to mobilise to address both the immediate and longer-term needs of the Borough.

6. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

6.1 The Council declared a Climate Emergency at its meeting on 26 February 2019 (Minute 48 refers). We will not lose sight of this imperative and if progress reports are not immediately evident during the heightened activity to respond to the virus, members should be assured that work will continue nonetheless.

7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

7.1 Section 138 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 places a duty on local authorities to involve local representatives when carrying out "any of its functions" by providing information, consulting or "involving in another way". We have already started to consult with the voluntary sector and businesses community on how we should respond to the emergency. We will be working over the coming weeks to make sure that residents voices help shape our work going forward. I cannot at this moment report what form that will take, but I will report back to councillors in due course.

8. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

8.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149, a public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to—

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
- advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;

- foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

8.2 It is imperative, that in responding to this emergency we look to protect the most vulnerable and marginalised in our society. Our revised priorities facilitate this. We will continually review our progress to ensure that we do not leave behind any section of our community.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

9.1 There are none arising directly from this report.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 There are significant financial implications in responding to this emergency both in terms of additional costs as well as reduced income levels and officers have put in place procedures to record and track both. Additionally, the refocusing of staff to deal with this emergency will inevitably mean some savings are delayed or not delivered as planned. The Council's monthly budget monitoring arrangements will be used to formally report on the financial position.

Officers are also working closely with our arms length companies to understand and help address the financial implications for them and to ensure they can continue to provide services where necessary and do not become insolvent because of this pandemic.

10.2 The Government has to date announced £1.6bn of funding for local government (£3.8m for Reading) to meet additional costs including: adult and children's social care, support for rough sleepers, support for those at higher risk and lost income. A further £3.2m (£21k for Reading) emergency funding for rough sleepers has also been announced. These funds are due to be received on the 3rd April. However, the Government have assured councils that they should respond to the emergency and record costs so that they can be reimbursed later and in that spirit the Council has 'committed' £100k to support the Voluntary and Community sector.

10.3 In addition to the above, the Government have announced widespread reliefs and grants for business rate payers. Guidance on the application of the reliefs was issued on the 20th March and software providers are in the process of making the necessary changes to facilitate processing. It is anticipated that the Council should be able to apply the reliefs and rebill Business Rate payers by the end of this week. In the interim a stop has been placed on those accounts which are paid by Direct Debit. Additionally, Staff are writing to eligible rate payers in order to process the grants payments which have been announced. The cost of the Business Rate Reliefs and grants will be reimbursed by a S31 grant.

10.4 The Government have yet to publish details of the £500m Hardship Fund it announced to support economically vulnerable households. It is understood that this is primarily focused on Council Tax reduction for those most in need. Officers will review the Council's Hardship Policy in line with the Guidance when it is published and refer it back to Policy Committee for approval. It should be noted that this assistance is in addition to existing discounts, the ability to spread payment over 12 rather than 10 months and the Council's local Council Tax reduction Scheme.

10.5 It is also worth noting that the Government have announced that Universal Credit and Tax Credits will increase by £20 per week for 12 months from the 6th April and the 7 day wait period for ESA has been removed.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Corporate Plan 2018- 2020
Chancellor's Budget 2020
Government Announcements & Guidance