

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC GROWTH & NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

TO:	POLICY COMMITTEE		
DATE:	18 MAY 2020		
TITLE:	COVID-19 RESPONSE UPDATE		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	COUNCILLOR BROCK	PORTFOLIO:	LEADERSHIP
SERVICE:	ALL	WARDS:	BOROUGHWIDE
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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 To provide Policy Committee with an update on the Council's response to the Covid-19 emergency response.
- 1.2 Following the declaration of a major incident on 20 March 2020 by the Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Council set up its emergency response. This paper sets out some of the key issues which the Council has had to address, they include:
- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)
 - Setting up and operating the One Reading Community Hub
 - Rough Sleeping
 - Workforce
 - Testing
 - Building capacity into bereavement services and leading on the LRF's Temporary Place of Rest.
 - Rebilling Business Ratepayers to take account of reliefs announced, the payment of grants to businesses; and
 - Rebilling of Council Tax payers in receipt of the Council's local Council Tax Reduction Scheme to reflect the £150 Hardship Relief announced.
- 1.3 The paper also provides an overview of the current legal and financial issues arising from the emergency.

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 That Policy Committee notes the information set out in this report.

3. BACKGROUND AND POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 In response to the current national and international public health emergency situation, the Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum (LRF) declared a major Incident on Friday 20 March 2020. This activated the multi-agency response arrangements set out in the Pandemic Flu Plan. The Prime Minister's announcement at 8.30pm on Monday 23rd March set out expectations to all residents, businesses and public services around social distancing and self-isolation measures. The Council had already begun its response in the week commencing 16 March, leading to the closure of most council buildings.
- 3.2 In response to the immediate crisis, the council set up a GOLD and SILVER response structure, allowing it to provide an enhanced managed response to the emergency, whilst feeding into the regional processes. The Council also identified a strategic framework for the duration of the emergency and recovery period during which its priority objectives are to:
- Support and protect vulnerable children and adults by ensuring the social care system continues to function effectively
 - Support the people who are most vulnerable and isolated in our communities
 - Support businesses and the local economy, and secure Reading's economic recovery
- 3.3 Informed by these objectives each Council directorate and Brighter Futures for Children (BFfC) reviewed its services and documented a revised service offer taking account UK government guidance and the need to ensure capacity and resilience across essential services.
- 3.4 Except for a number of new services put in place to help manage and support communities through the crisis the Council has, as a result stopped or reduced the scope of many of its services in line with Government guidance. Democratic processes were scaled back and management tasks, including corporate and service planning were deferred.
- 3.5 In Reading (as of 28 April 2020), there have been 454 residents who have tested positive in hospital for Covid 19 and there have been around two and a half times more deaths within the Borough that would usually be expected at this time of year.

4. KEY ISSUES AND ACTION

- 4.1 There have been a number of key issues which have dominated response activity to date:
- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)
 - Setting up and operating the One Reading Community Hub
 - Rough Sleeping
 - Workforce
 - Testing
 - Building capacity into bereavement services and leading the on the LRF's Temporary Place of Rest
 - Rebilling Business Ratepayers to take account of reliefs announced, the payment of grants to businesses; and
 - Rebilling of Council Tax payers in receipt of the Council's local Council Tax Reduction Scheme to reflect the £150 Hardship Relief announced.
- 4.2 **PPE** - As has been well documented there are huge challenges in sourcing PPE. The Government's mechanisms for accessing and distributing PPE stocks have been delayed on a number of occasions leading to concerns over shortages for front line staff. Whilst the situation has stabilised and we have ensured the protection of staff and customers and the delivery of services to the most vulnerable, this has been as a

result of officers working tirelessly to procure stock through new providers, seeking donations and managing stock in line with Public Health England's guidance.

- 4.2.1 PPE is distributed through the Emergency Operations Centre and in addition to provision to inhouse teams, it can also be accessed by out of hospital care providers e.g. care and nursing homes and domiciliary care providers or key services providers such as Funeral Directors. To date, requests from external partners has been limited.
- 4.3 **One Reading Community Hub** - The purpose of the Hub is to a) support those who have been identified by the NHS as shielded with specific dietary needs and other support requirements b) pass on requests to voluntary sector partners from those who were not shielded but require support regarding access to food, benefits advice, befriending and assistance with collection of prescriptions etc. and c) provide a means for those wishing to volunteer to link into the voluntary and community sector.
- 4.3.1 The Hub went live two days after the announcement of full lockdown and involved the procurement of a separate call centre operation due to the volume of calls being received through the Council's own contact centre at that time; the setting up of numerous processes and work with partners to ensure referral pathways work, so that people receive the help and support they need.
- 4.3.2 The voluntary partnership approach has been very successful in reaching the most vulnerable and in need of support. The table below shows some of the outcomes of the Hub.

Support the people who are most vulnerable and isolated in our communities	Current
Total number of referrals received by the One Reading Community Hub (from 25 March)	2257
Total number of referrals that are part of the shielded group	761
Total number of food parcels delivered	1200+
Number of volunteers	1000
Number of calls received (daily average) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Note at the peak, this was 130 per day 	82

- 4.4 **Rough sleeping** - As part of the social distancing measures introduced by the Government, there was a requirement for all rough sleepers to be accommodated. Just a few days were given to identify the rough sleeping population, which included those that may have had temporary accommodation (e.g. sofa surfers) and get them into local accommodation. This was a significant logistical task and one requiring ongoing support. The number of rough sleepers accommodated is 124.
- 4.5 **Workforce** - Following the Prime Minister's announcement on Monday 23 March, all staff except those in essential services are working from home and will not return to their workplaces until further notice. Guidance has been issued to staff about how to work effectively remotely and ICT support has been provided as a priority to ensure employees can work from home effectively.
- 4.5.1 Services have taken account of guidance received from the government and set out their service offers. The service offer sets out which services can be maintained, which need to change, and which services cannot be delivered at this time. The service offer prioritises those that if not conducted could include breach of statutory duties, laws and regulations, risk to health, safety and wellbeing and key support services that are essential to the delivery of front line critical services to residents,

businesses and the community. An ongoing assessment is used to inform whether those services can be carried out safely and only where necessary from the workplace. One of the key parts of the assessment is ensuring that staff and customers are protected, by ensuring a proper risk assessment of the activity is applied.

- 4.5.2 The workforce has remained resilient, and COVID-19 related absences have broadly reduced over time. Initial impacts were felt in waste services, which resulted in the suspension of services such as Green Waste and Bulky Waste collections. Green Waste collections have now been re-instated following training of redeployed staff.
- 4.5.3 A number of staff (4%) who are unable to do their usual role have volunteered for redeployment on a temporary basis. In the main this is supporting the services such as the Hub or the Emergency Operations Centre.
- 4.5.4 Regular communications have been going out to staff and managers and this will continue on a daily basis. These communications share the latest Government and Public Health England advice as well support and good news stories. These have been supplemented by messages from the Chief Executive and GOLD.
- 4.6 **Testing** - This has been another area which has been under significant scrutiny and subject to daily changes in criteria and scope. Workforce testing is now co-ordinated through the Emergency Operations Hub, which engages with Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust to book staff identified against specific criteria. There are three Test Centres across Berkshire for these staff to attend and from 15 April, 194 tests have been carried out. The Government subsequently introduced regional Test Centres, which all staff can access if they are symptomatic.
- 4.7 **Bereavement Services and the Temporary Place of Rest** - Given the experience in other countries and predictions from the Government on the rates of mortality that might be expected, the Council has had to make arrangements for some of worst-case scenarios.
 - 4.7.1 The Registration of deaths is an important legal stage in ensuring that families are able to lay their loved ones to rest. Prior to the pandemic, registration of deaths could only occur face to face and the Council continued to carry out this essential service. The General Register Office (GRO), lifted these restrictions to protect the safety of staff and customers and this can now be carried out digitally. This has been a significant and important change which has had to be implemented at short notice.
 - 4.7.2 The Council has acted as the Lead authority for building, staffing and running a Temporary Place of Rest. This enables additional capacity to mortuaries and Funeral Directors in the event that the number of deaths exceeds established capacity. A significant facility has now opened which services the Thames Valley.
 - 4.7.3 The Council has also invested in ensuring that services can continue to be provided in the event of a system failure at the Crematorium on Henley Road, by purchasing an additional mobile cremator.
- 4.8 **Support for the Business Community**
 - 4.8.1 **Rebiling Business Ratepayers to take account of reliefs announced, the payment of grants to businesses.** The Government announced widespread reliefs and grants for business rate payers. All reliefs - £52.5m have subsequently been processed and Business Rate payers rebilled. Staff are currently processing the business grants and are writing to eligible rate payers where we do not hold the requisite information in order to process the payments as soon as possible. The cost of the Business Rate Reliefs and grants will be reimbursed by a S31 grant.

- 4.8 An Economy sub group was set up to engage with the business community and provide support. The objectives of the group are to:
- Provide accurate and timely signposting to Government sources of advice and support designed to keep businesses operational/afloat.
 - Facilitate access to these and other sources of support for business.
 - Ensure a responsive and supportive approach by the Council to business requests for advice/assistance.
 - Ensure effective collaboration between, and consistent communications from, the Council and Reading UK CIC.
 - Consider and respond to initiatives proposed from the business community.
 - Maintain a running dialogue with business representative groups and networks to offer support indirectly to the business community.
 - Ensure the Council support for business is prioritised in relation to other key priorities e.g. putting vulnerable staff/customers first.
 - Support business in planning for recovery phase and return to optimum form of BAU as circumstances allow.

A couple of key indicators are set out in the table below:

Support businesses and the local economy and secure Reading's economic recovery	Current
% of 2,025 eligible businesses in receipt of business support grant	69.65%
Reach of business-related social media (Note, in the week commencing 23 March, this was nearly 15,000)	6,000

- 4.9 **Hardship Fund.** The £500m Hardship Fund is to support economically vulnerable households and primarily focused on Council Tax relief for residents in receipt of local Council Tax Reduction (£150 per recipient). 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.

- 4.10 The response to Covid 19 has been complex and intense and will undoubtedly lead to longer term challenges which are being assessed and planned for. The table below highlights some of the ongoing challenges and responses to meeting the priority objectives.

Support and protect vulnerable children and adults by ensuring the social care system continues to function effectively	Number
Daily referrals to ASC ['normal daily average Jan/Feb = 17]	14
Adult Social Care - % of workforce available (total - less sick or self-isolating)	71%
Children's Social Care - % of workforce available	68.6%
Additional beds to assist the hospital with the anticipated surge of COVID19 residents who cannot go home immediately or where care at home is difficult due to sickness	30
Number of hospital discharges facilitated over the last month	80
Percentage of contacts that enter the Children's Single Point of Access	60% decrease

5. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The Council declared a Climate Emergency at its meeting on 26 February 2019 (Minute 48 refers).
- 5.2 It is acknowledged that there are certain activities which would not in normal times reflect the approach we would take in accordance with the declaration, such as the provision and supply of Personal Protective Equipment, which is often single use, not recyclable and therefore will have a carbon impact.
- 5.3 However, the Council is where possible designing its responses process to have the minimum environmental impact, for example, the use of route optimisation software in its food parcel delivery service to the vulnerable.
- 5.4 Officers have also been continuing to carry out impact analysis arising from the reduction of traffic. Analysis shows between a 32-39% reduction in Nitrogen Dioxide from the two continuous roadside monitoring locations on Caversham Road and Oxford Road.

6. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

- 6.1 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". The council has already started to consult with the voluntary sector and businesses community on how we should respond to the emergency. The Council will be working over the coming weeks to make sure that residents' voices help shape work going forward.

7. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 7.1 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; and
 - foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
- 7.2 It is imperative, that in responding to this emergency the Council protects the most vulnerable and marginalised in society. The revised priorities facilitate this. Progress is being continually reviewed to ensure that no section of the community is disadvantaged.

8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The Chief Executive has authority to take decisions on behalf of the Council as necessary to respond to emergencies where it is not practicable to obtain the necessary urgency approvals from the Council or its committees. The Chief Executive also has delegated authority in times of emergency to take such action as he considers necessary to protect the interests of the Council, having consulted with the Leader of the Council and Lead Councillors where appropriate. These provisions are set out in the Council's Delegations Register.
- 8.2 The Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader of the Council, took a decision to amend temporarily the Decision Book process to enable decisions to be taken more

flexibly during the current Covid-19 pandemic, which will enable Executive Directors and Statutory Officers, in consultation with the relevant Lead Councillor(s) to take decisions without waiting for a councillors call-in period. Councillors are able to seek a retrospective review of matters from the Decision Book through Policy Committee.

- 8.3 The Coronavirus Act 2020 received Royal Assent on 25 March 2020 and contained provision for the Secretary of State to make Regulations in relation to the arrangements for holding local authority meetings (Section 78), during the current pandemic.
- 8.4 The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020, came into effect on 4 April 2020. The Council has reviewed its decision-making processes, to allow for new online meetings.

9. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 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. However, early projections suggest the cost to the Council over a six-month period could be up to £13m.
- 9.2 The Government has to date announced two rounds of £1.6bn of funding for local government (£3.8m in the first tranche and £4.5m in the second 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. 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. It remains to be seen however, whether all costs are recoverable.

Regular reporting is required to the Ministry of Housing and Local Government on the financial impact.

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

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 10.1 None