

COVID-19 RESPONSE**SUMMARY:**

The Covid-19 Pandemic has seen the Country face enormous changes to everyday life. The Government has brought in a nationwide lockdown of all but essential activities. The Council is still running most services with its demand led services under the most pressure. The Council also faces significantly reduced income and a rise in costs and whilst there are Government assurances that it will make funding available to cover these losses it is far from clear. Since the lockdown the Council has had to take urgent decisions related to its way of working and direct service provision. The purpose of this report is to outline to members formally some of those challenges and to record the decisions that have been taken.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Cabinet is asked to:

- (i) Note the contents of the report
- (ii) Formally recognise the effort and hard work of all staff involved in maintaining services and the efforts of the many voluntary sector organisations and volunteers during what are challenging, demanding and uncertain times

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Covid-19 Pandemic has seen the Country face enormous changes to everyday life. The Government has brought in a nationwide lockdown of all but essential activities.
- 1.2 The Council is still running most services, with its demand led services under the most pressure. The Council also faces significantly reduced income and a rise in costs and whilst there are Government assurances that it will make funding available to cover these losses it is far from clear.
- 1.3 Since the lockdown, the Council has had to take urgent decisions related to its way of working and direct service provision. The purpose of this report is to outline to members formally some of those challenges and to record the decisions that have been taken.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The outbreak of the Covid-19 was initially restricted to China. As the outbreak spread Governments and health organisations began to plan for a worldwide outbreak. The UK Government began to bring in restrictions in order to ensure that the NHS and health services could cope with the expected outbreak in this

country. Restrictions were brought in that firstly related to international travel, then gatherings of people followed by restrictions on domestic travel, workplaces, pubs and restaurants, shops and public spaces.

- 2.2 The current lockdown was made law through the Covid 19 Act that saw all but essential journeys banned with those allowable to be for exercise, medical reasons, shopping, work (if it couldn't be done at home) and helping vulnerable people. A national shielding programme was introduced and the Local Resilience Forum for Hampshire (LRF) declared a major incident triggering an emergency structure from all partners including the Council.
- 2.3 From the start, the Government has made clear to Local Authority Leaders and Chief Executives, that councils are a valued and vital partner in the fight against the virus. The message has been consistently that money is not an issue and that councils should do what is needed to beat the outbreak and to assist and protect the vulnerable.
- 2.4 Despite the lockdown, the Government wishes to keep the economy going as much as possible and it has provided an unprecedented level of financial support to businesses. Local authorities were asked to lead the message locally relating to the need to ensure social distancing with Districts particularly relied on to deliver the "last mile" to the community.

3 COUNCIL ACTIONS SO FAR

- 3.1 Following the declaration of a major incident by the LRF, the Council was required to set up an emergency structure which it did. A Gold group was established (ELT) which was responsible for strategic decisions, a Silver group that looked after operational issues and a Bronze group that was specifically aimed at the community welfare response.
- 3.2 The Gold and Silver groups will now wind down as services are in the "Business As Usual" (BAU) mode with decision making reverting back to the normal ELT / CLT arrangements. A major project was initiated to follow Government guidelines on social distancing. The project saw the Council move to a workforce that was mobile with all but a handful of essential posts working from home. The Council brought forward its mobile project from the ICE Programme and following a major effort from the IT Service was able to acquire, build and distribute extra laptops for 30 employees.
- 3.3 The move to home working was challenging for many people and as such the Council, through its HR team, put in place a range of initiatives to support individuals and teams. Managers are having to manage differently and as such the organisational culture has started to shift out of necessity. Every employee should be congratulated for their efforts. Members too have been supported to use new technologies and should be congratulated in how they have risen to the challenge also.

- 3.4 Currently, the Council has a very low level of employee absence and this is being managed. Members are being updated daily and officers have taken the view that more information is better at this stage.
- 3.5 Formal meetings were cancelled, and the Chief Executive was given an enhanced delegation by Cabinet to take urgent decisions (See report on the Agenda for this meeting). The Government has since introduced new regulations and this Cabinet meeting will be the first under the new arrangements.
- 3.6 In line with Government guidelines the Council moved to a home working model. To give some idea of the scope of this the IT Service moved very quickly and brought forward a package of measures for everyone to allow home working for most people.

4 SPECIFIC SERVICE CHANGES

- 4.1 The Council is currently maintaining the majority of services. These are being managed largely staffed by teams working from home and offering as near as possible a “BAU” service. However, there have been some changes as to how services are provided, which is outlined in 4.2 and 4.3 below.
- 4.2 Most facilities that provide the opportunity for public gatherings or encourage non-essential travel have been closed, either by direction from the Government or because the Council has interpreted that it is the right thing to do, in accordance with the Government’s guidelines. The key changes are:
- Farnborough and Aldershot Leisure Centres and associated facilities have been closed
 - Preparatory work necessary to enable the Aldershot Lido to start its season at the end of May has not been possible. An extended period of lockdown or social distancing will most likely mean that the Lido will not open this Summer. This will be confirmed by the end of April.
 - Princes Hall Theatre has been closed
 - Refuse, recycling, bulky waste and garden waste collection arrangements have all been changed. Refuse and recycling collections have been moved to an alternating cycle with residents receiving a refuse collection one week and a recycling collection the next. Flats have remained with weekly refuse collections. Bulky waste and garden waste collections have been suspended for the time being but remain subject to review
 - Playgrounds have been closed
 - Council run car parks have been left open, but cash machines have been emptied and no charges are being levied
 - The Council Offices have been closed to the public and are attended each day by a skeleton staff picking up essential work that cannot be delivered from home
 - Council run public conveniences have been closed
 - The Crematorium is open for services, however, restrictions to the number of mourners to facilitate social distancing have been introduced and access

to the grounds have been prevented, although further guidance is anticipated in the latter respect and this may change.

4.3 The Government have announced a series of new initiatives to help businesses and individuals, some of which the Council are required to deliver or facilitate.

4.4 The key areas where the Council is required to act are as follows:

- Small Business Rate Relief and Grants – all small businesses are receiving extended assistance as regards their business rates liabilities and are entitled to cash grants which the Council has received funding for and is paying
- Rate Relief and Grants for the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Sector – two new schemes specifically to help this sector are being implemented by local Councils and as for small businesses, the Council has received funding for these schemes and has been paying the grants since the week commencing 6th April 2020
- Council Tax and Council Tax Support – additional funding has been received from Government to allow those in receipt of Council Tax Support an additional award of around £150 to offset their Council Tax bill. This is currently being implemented. For other residents needing more time to pay their Council Tax a range of support arrangements is available from the Council Tax team based on individual circumstances
- Housing extended duty for those sleeping rough – the Council is required to take all necessary steps to ensure that nobody is sleeping rough at this time – the Housing Team is picking up this obligation and at the point of writing the Council does not have anyone on the street

Rushmoor Local Response Centre (LRC)

4.5 As part of the Hampshire-wide co-ordination work, a Coronavirus Hampshire Helpline has been established to offer advice and practical help to vulnerable residents who do not have family, friends and neighbours that they can call on for assistance. The helpline acts as a triage and information gathering facility to ensure that the right support is given to the client. Depending on the need, the requests are dealt with directly by Hampshire County Council or health partners or sent to district based LRCs to process them.

4.6 Rushmoor's LRC is being run by the Council and staff have been drafted in from services to man the helpline. Both the County and local helplines are running seven days a week from 9.00 am to 5.00 pm. Since it was set up the LRC has dealt with around 230 cases, some of which have been complex. The sorts of queries include:

- Food requests/shopping
- Prescriptions
- Dog walking
- Transport requirements
- Befriending

- 4.7 Locally the Council also has a team of officers working with Rushmoor Voluntary Services (RVS) on the Council's welfare and community response to the pandemic. This work is significant and demanding and, in addition to the delivery of the LRC, is focusing on a range of work streams:
- Co-ordination of volunteer requests and providing support through responders and care groups
 - Provision of a local food supply and distribution hub – which is carried out at Princes Hall – this includes co-ordination with foodbanks
 - Support to homeless, rough sleepers and other special groups with specific health concerns
 - Liaison and co-ordination within the Hampshire-wide network and especially Hampshire County Council. There is also a North Hampshire grouping consisting of Basingstoke and Deane, Hart, Test Valley and Rushmoor.
 - A communications stream has been established, working with RVS, which is sharing details of the helpline as well the key coronavirus messages. This stream is also focusing on other information, including diversionary activities, health and well-being and the needs of particular groups like those who do not have access to the internet, those with disabilities and the Nepali community.
- 4.8 It is likely that the Welfare and Community Group and the LRC will be running for some time.

5 RISKS

- 5.1 The key risks to consider concern the ability of the Council to manage the financial impact and to ensure key services can be delivered effectively.
- 5.2 A number of decisions have been taken concerning service delivery, as outlined in this report, to ensure vital services such as Waste and Recycling and the Crematorium can remain operationally effective. Service delivery will need to be reviewed in consultation with members over the coming weeks and months as part of the Council's ongoing response to Covid-19.
- 5.3 Covid-19 does pose a significant risk to the Council's finances. Income from Council Tax and Business Rates is expected to be at risk, with income from fees and charges (e.g. Car Parks, Planning application fees) expected to be under some pressure. This is set out in more detail in Section 7.
- 5.4 In addition, Covid-19 does present a number of risks to the delivery of the Council's Business Plan, Regeneration Programme and key procurement activity. Inevitably, there will be a requirement to review priorities and work programmes to ensure adequate risk mitigation is in place, with the Council's Corporate Risk Register being reviewed by Heads of Service.

6 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Some urgent decisions have been taken by the Chief Executive under a broader delegation granted in the early stages of the emergency. These will be used sparingly as it is important to maintain a transparent fair and accessible approach to decision making.
- 6.2 The Government acted swiftly to adopt the Coronavirus Act 2020 and make the following Regulations touching on the role and operations of the Council:
- The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020 which deals with the closure of certain premises and venues. The proper designations are in force for environmental officers to enforce and the Secretary of State has designated councils as prosecuting authorities for offences arising. So far, the Council is working to support businesses in explaining the restrictions and there have been no breaches so far.
 - The Local Authorities & Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 allow for virtual council and committee meetings to take place and officers are working on protocols and updates standing orders to facilitate full member engagement and public participation where appropriate eg Planning.

7 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 Whilst this report has no direct financial implications, there will be an impact on the Council's Finances from Covid-19. As indicated in the Revenue Budget Monitoring Report Q3 2019-20 (Report No: FIN2012), the Council's major income streams and cashflow have been under pressure as a result of the change in the economic climate due to Covid-19.
- 7.2 Over the immediate short-term, the Council has seen a reduction in income from Council Tax, Business Rates and Fees and Charges. Additional expenditure has been incurred, particularly around the Council's role in supporting the welfare of vulnerable individuals and IT costs associated with enabling Council staff to work remotely. Government funding has been provided to the Council (£42k) as part of the £1.6bn made available to local government.
- 7.3 At this stage it is difficult to quantify the longer-term impact on the Council's finances. Initial work has focussed on high-risk income and expenditure budgets, Council Tax and Business Rates, and cash flow forecasting. The Council has provided financial management information to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and will continue to do so as required. Further work will be undertaken over the coming weeks on these areas to provide an evidence-based financial position to support on-going dialogue with Government and future decision making.

- 7.4 Officers have been proactive in highlighting these financial pressures to Government, with regular calls and submission of information with MHCLG, District Councils Network (DCN), Local Government Association (LGA), and Society for District Council Treasurers (SDCT).
- 7.5 It is worth noting that the Council does have balances and reserves available to help mitigate some of the financial risks and pressures outlined. However, it is expected the Council will need to review the 2020/21 budget and Medium-Term Financial Strategy over the coming weeks and months to ensure the Council remains financially resilient.

8 CONCLUSION

- 8.1 Whilst this has been and continues to be a challenging time the Council has responded with urgency and efficiency. The focus has been to get the job done and provide services that residents deserve and need.
- 8.2 The financial and economic challenges will no doubt be far reaching and long lasting and both will need managing at local level. However, the Council having mitigated the risks also needs to look to the future and look for the opportunities that exist.
- 8.3 A new way of working has been established and should be built on so that a new norm can be established leading to more modern and efficient ways of working that embraces new technologies. Different approaches to leadership and management will be required and the Council's new Workforce Strategy will reflect this going forward.
- 9.4 The Council will need to work with its key partners to develop and support the local economic and community infrastructure in the future. All of the challenges will require a new way of working and thinking. The pandemic has created a step change in how businesses and public bodies operate.
- 8.5 The Council will look to learn the lessons of Covid-19, build on the successes and ensure that it is fit for purpose for what may be a very different landscape in the future.

Paul Shackley
Chief Executive