

**Classification:** Public

**Key Decision:** No

## Gravesham Borough Council

**Report to:** Cabinet

**Date:** 22 February 2021

**Reporting officer:** Michelle Batstone, Corporate Change Manager

**Subject:** Review of GBC response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

### **Purpose and summary of report:**

To provide Members of the Cabinet with a summary of the outcomes of the internal review that has been undertaken in relation to how the council has responded to the COVID-19 pandemic both through the first lockdown, and subsequent lockdowns announced.

### **Recommendations:**

Members are asked to note the outcomes of the review that has been undertaken, and the future work streams identified to support the borough's recovery from the pandemic.

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The practical impact of the global Covid-19 health pandemic for the council emerged in late 2019-20, principally via the Prime Minister's speech to the nation on 23 March 2020 and the enactment of the Coronavirus Act 2020. This resulted in the council undertaking a number of different work streams in order to support the community and the council's employees during the pandemic.
- 1.2 The Annual Governance Statement for 2019-20, recognised the importance that this has had on the council and as such, the need to undertake a review of the council's response to the pandemic from a governance perspective featured in the AGS through the following recommendation:  
*A recommendation by CIPFA for local government as a sector, is to undertake a review of the council's administration of the Covid-19 crisis. The review will consider both the decisions undertaken in direct response and the future planning for preparedness of a second wave of the virus. The review will also consider the underpinning approach to business continuity across the organisation.*
- 1.3 In line with the recommendation in the AGS, a review of the council's overall approach to the pandemic commenced at the end of the Summer 2020 and initially focused on the way in which the council responded to the first lockdown. The report also looks to provide an update against the additional work streams that have been implemented as a result of the subsequent lockdowns announced by central government in November 2020 and January 2021.

## 2. Responding to the first lockdown – March 2020 to July 2020

2.1 At the start of the pandemic, the council took responsibility for providing support to thousands of residents and local businesses across the borough, both in response to government initiatives but also in its role as a Community Leader. As such, the first part of the review looked at how the council had approached the following six areas:

- Supporting Vulnerable People (NHS Shielded and Extremely vulnerable residents);
- Interactions with external agencies;
- Allocation of business grants;
- Approach to rough sleepers at the time of the pandemic;
- Council tax support; and
- Council approach to social media and communications (external).

2.2 In undertaking the review of each area, officers who were directly involved in each of the areas detailed above were asked to provide their thoughts about the project both in terms of what went well but also what didn't necessarily work as planned and therefore could be changed/improved for the future.

### 2.3 *Supporting Vulnerable People (NHS Shielded and Extremely vulnerable residents)*

2.3.1 Once the first lockdown commenced, all local authorities were tasked with supporting those residents within their boroughs who were either identified through the NHS Shielding programme, or who were identified as being extremely vulnerable.

2.3.2 At Gravesham, the council took this responsibility very seriously and put in place a robust process to ensure all identified residents were contacted during the lockdown period, up until the point at which they felt they no longer required support. This was a collaborative response across the council with officers from several departments volunteering to make phone calls to residents, which were, at times, very difficult, officers from Parking Services and Safer Place Officer carrying out door knocks to those we could not contact and general project support from other departments as required.

2.3.3 By the end of the first lockdown period (July 2020):

- **5,214** residents in total (shielded and extremely vulnerable) were directly supported by the council.
- **11,491** phone calls were made over the duration of the project.
- **592** door knocks were undertaken for those residents where contact was not possible.

2.3.4 Feedback from residents across the borough was extremely positive, and was passed on to officers when they were making the calls:

*"..appreciative of our calls and said it was really nice to know that people are there who care for others in their community. Asked me to pass on their thanks to the people at the Town Hall."*

*"Thanked us for all the help and calls over the past few months"*

*“Thank you for all that we have done for them they are extremely grateful - all the calls have been lovely!!”*

## 2.4 *Interactions with external agencies*

2.4.1 During the first lockdown period, the council worked with a number of partners and agencies to ensure the provision of services to residents and businesses in the borough. Specifically, new relationships were forged with the following organisations:

- *The Foodbanks at the Hive and Riverside*  
The Foodbanks provided invaluable support to residents in the borough. Working with the Council, food parcels were prepared and allocated to those in need. As a result of this developing relationship, the council has committed to provide an annual grant to both sites to provide much needed funding, as both food banks are financed through fundraising.
- *North West Kent Volunteer Centre and Council for Voluntary Services*  
The volunteer services provided the Council with an additional resource to assist the large number of clinically extremely vulnerable residents in the borough through provision of befriending services, medicine collection services and general support. As a result of this developing relationship, the council has committed to provide an annual grant to support the continued work of both organisations.
- *Alzheimer’s & Dementia*  
In a similar way to the Volunteer centre, the organisation was able to provide support to some of the most vulnerable community in the borough, providing regular befriending calls to those who were in need.

2.4.2 The development of relationships with external agencies has prompted a full review of the council’s *Working in Partnership Framework* to ensure it is reflective of the current working arrangements that are in place. This will be presented to Cabinet and Full Council in due course.

## 2.5 *Allocation of business grants*

2.5.1 In response to the COVID pandemic, central government implemented a business grant scheme to provide support to small businesses, and businesses in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors. Local authorities were required to administer the grant process, including the payment of the grants to eligible businesses, with central government fully reimbursing local authorities for the value of the grants paid out.

2.5.2 The council put in place a robust process for identifying eligible businesses and ensuring grants were paid to businesses as quickly and accurately as possible.

2.5.3 In response to the first phase of lockdown, the council allocated a total of **£15,229,000** to eligible businesses in Gravesham:

- **1,191** businesses were allocated funds under the Small Business Grant Fund and Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grants.
- **75** businesses under the Local Authority Discretionary Grant Fund.

- 2.5.4 For a period of time towards the start of the scheme, the council was in the top **5%** of all council's in England in terms of the proportion of eligible businesses that had received grant funding.
- 2.6 *Approach to rough sleepers at the time of the pandemic*
- 2.6.1 In response to the COVID-19 Pandemic the government introduced the 'Everyone In' campaign, a national programme to facilitate a transition for rough sleepers from the streets in to safe accommodation and to support those who were homeless at the time of the pandemic through the forthcoming weeks and months. This initiative called on council's to accommodate all rough sleepers by 30 March.
- 2.6.2 The council provided accommodation for residents of the winter night shelter when it closed prematurely on 22 March 2020. Under the 'Everyone In' initiative, the council placed 23 people in temporary accommodation, including 4 rough sleepers identified during an early morning street count on 24 March.
- 2.6.3 The numbers in temporary accommodation have risen steadily during the quarter from 74 to 96, largely as a result of COVID-19 and the requirement to accommodate rough sleepers.
- 2.6.4 Council officers were able to respond to the additional demands placed upon them with the assistance of partners and implemented a central point of contact to enable clients to get in touch with the council quickly and easily; this was a key positive drawn out by officers when asked for feedback on the project.
- 2.7 *Council tax support*
- 2.7.1 In response to the COVID-19 Pandemic, local authorities were allocated a proportion of central Government's Hardship Fund to be provided to residents in the borough in providing financial support at this unprecedented time. Alongside this, the council's Revenues Team also provide general, ad hoc support to residents of the borough as required.
- 2.7.2 Working closely with the Communication team advice was issued to residents by way of a flyer, online and via social media re the Hardship Fund in advance of any credits being made.
- 2.7.3 A total of £500m of new grant funding was provided to local authorities across the UK to support economically vulnerable people and households in their local area. The allocation of funding to GBC was £893,182. The fund is currently on track to be sufficient to enable further awards for any new working age claims received until the end of the scheme on 31 March 2021.
- 2.8 *Council approach to social media and communications (external)*
- 2.8.1 In response to the pandemic, the Council was required to ensure that information was communicated to residents and businesses in the borough in the best possible way, ensuring that as many people were reached as possible.
- 2.8.2 A variety of communication channels were used; media, social media, posters and advertising, all designed to ensure messages were consistently and effectively communicated across the borough.

- 2.8.3 Letters were sent to every household on three separate occasions to provide an overview of the support available from the council and to provide details of how to contact the council to access this support. Three specific communications were undertaken; the first at the start of lockdown, the second when lockdown was extended beyond three months and the third at the start of lockdown 2.0 resulting in approximately **126,000** letters being sent across the borough.
- 2.8.4 Emails and letters were also sent to all businesses whose details are held on the Business Rates database and with Economic Development team to outline the support available for businesses.
- 2.8.5 Feedback received is difficult to evaluate; often feedback via social media is constant, varied and unpredictable and based upon an inaccurate view of what the council is responsible for. Some general themes obtained from the feedback are as follow:
- *Positive Feedback*
    - Largely positive at the start of lockdown, particularly around continuation of services such as waste and recycling collections.
    - Positive feedback around support for vulnerable and shielding.
    - Suspension of parking charges/resident permits
  - *Negative feedback*
    - Non-closure of parks where people were gathering and ignoring social distancing
    - Closure of cemeteries
    - Closure of town centre public toilets
    - Perceived non-enforcement of lockdown regulations
    - Cancellation of events
- 2.9 A summary of the recommendations resulting from each aspect of the review are shown in appendix two; these have been reported through the council's Management Team for consideration in future projects as necessary.
- 2.10 In addition to the specific areas of activity highlighted above, the council also supported residents in a number of different ways.
- 2.11 Specifically in terms of those residents in need:
- 2.11.1 Between March-June 2020, the council's Customer Services Team responded to **1,460 calls** to the council's dedicated COVID support line and **2,750 e-mails** to the dedicated COVID inbox. These were in addition to the specific vulnerable person's project detailed at paragraph 2.3.
- 2.11.2 Between April-June 2020, the council delivered **161 food parcels** to residents in need (130 individual residents, some receiving more than one food parcel over the period). These were residents that were outside the scope of the Government vulnerable persons project but were in need of support.

- 2.12 In June 2020, the Cabinet approved a new Corporate Debt Strategy for the Council. It was recognised that, as a result of the pandemic and the impact this would have on residents and business across the borough, the council would see an increase in the level of debt owed. Council officers explored the most effective way to undertake debt recovery, seeking to protect monies coming into the council to fund vital services, whilst adopting a fair and consistent approach to ensure that those who were facing financial hardship as a result of the pandemic were supported through this difficult time. A specific approach to debt recovery for those debtors classed as ‘vulnerable’ was implemented and residents and businesses were urged to contact the council in order to identify any payment problems as soon as possible, so that assistance could be provided by making alternative arrangements to pay or identifying where other financial support may be available through the council, the Benefits System or other partners.
- 2.13 Specifically in relation to rent arrears a campaign was deployed using social media, the council’s website and Your Borough to encourage anyone who was finding it difficult to pay their council housing rent to get in touch. As a result many tenants contacted the council and through an open dialogue officers were able to assist tenants with household budgeting and arranging revised payment plans to help them continue paying their rent through this very difficult period of time. Working with our tenants in this way has also helped to reduce our year-end rent arrear forecasts by £250,000.
- 2.14 Residents in the borough were also keen to provide support across the borough and between March-June 2020, the council received **582 volunteer** applications.

### 3. Subsequent lockdown period – November 2020 to date

- 3.1 In response to an increase in cases of COVID-19 across the country, a second, four-week, lockdown period was introduced across the UK in November 2020, which was followed by the introduction of a ‘tiered’ system for COVID restrictions in local areas. Whilst these rules were relaxed for a very short time over the Christmas-period, infection rates continued to rise, which resulted in the Government implementing a nationwide lockdown from 4 January 2021.
- 3.2 The second and third phases of lockdown, introduced additional work streams for the council, particularly in the areas of Business Support and supporting the national Test and Trace scheme.
- 3.3 *Business Support Schemes*
- 3.3.1 From November 2020, the council has been required to administer a vast array of grants to support businesses as follows:

Grant Title	Description	Amount payable	Amount paid up to 31/01/21								
Local Restrictions Support Grant (LRSG) Addendum <b>CLOSED</b>	Payable during the second national lockdown from 05 November to 01 December.	Based on rateable value: <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Rateable Value</th> <th>Grant</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>£1-£15,000</td> <td>£1,334</td> </tr> <tr> <td>£15,001-£50,999</td> <td>£2,000</td> </tr> <tr> <td>£51,000+</td> <td>£3,000</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Rateable Value	Grant	£1-£15,000	£1,334	£15,001-£50,999	£2,000	£51,000+	£3,000	<b>£672,546</b> paid to 434 eligible businesses.
Rateable Value	Grant										
£1-£15,000	£1,334										
£15,001-£50,999	£2,000										
£51,000+	£3,000										

<b>Grant Title</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Amount payable</b>	<b>Amount paid up to 31/01/21</b>								
Local Restrictions Support Grant (LRSG) <b>CLOSED</b>	Payable during the Tier 3 phase - 2 to 19 December 2020 to businesses required to close.	Based on rateable value: <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Rateable Value</th> <th>Grant</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>£1-£15,000</td> <td>£857.57</td> </tr> <tr> <td>£15,001-£50,999</td> <td>£1,285.71</td> </tr> <tr> <td>£51,000+</td> <td>£1,928.57</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Rateable Value	Grant	£1-£15,000	£857.57	£15,001-£50,999	£1,285.71	£51,000+	£1,928.57	<b>£63,656.85</b> paid to 59 eligible businesses
Rateable Value	Grant										
£1-£15,000	£857.57										
£15,001-£50,999	£1,285.71										
£51,000+	£1,928.57										
In addition to the above grant, any wet-led pubs (where under normal circumstances sales of drink are the main source of income rather than food) were entitled to a one-off Christmas Support Payment of £1,000.											
Local Restrictions Support Grant (LRSG) Addendum <b>CLOSED</b>	Payable during the Tier 4 phase - 20 December 2020 to 4 January 2021 to businesses required to close.	Based on rateable value: <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Rateable Value</th> <th>Grant</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>£1-£15,000</td> <td>£762.29</td> </tr> <tr> <td>£15,001-£50,999</td> <td>£1,142.86</td> </tr> <tr> <td>£51,000+</td> <td>£1,714.29</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Rateable Value	Grant	£1-£15,000	£762.29	£15,001-£50,999	£1,142.86	£51,000+	£1,714.29	<b>£381,076</b> paid to 432 eligible businesses
Rateable Value	Grant										
£1-£15,000	£762.29										
£15,001-£50,999	£1,142.86										
£51,000+	£1,714.29										
Local Restrictions Support Grant (LRSG) <b>CLOSED</b>	Payable during national lockdown - 5 January to 15 February 2021 to businesses required to close.	Based on rateable value: <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Rateable Value</th> <th>Grant</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>£1-£15,000</td> <td>£2,001</td> </tr> <tr> <td>£15,001-£50,999</td> <td>£3,000</td> </tr> <tr> <td>£51,000+</td> <td>£4,500</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Rateable Value	Grant	£1-£15,000	£2,001	£15,001-£50,999	£3,000	£51,000+	£4,500	<b>£1,000,320</b> paid to 432 eligible businesses
Rateable Value	Grant										
£1-£15,000	£2,001										
£15,001-£50,999	£3,000										
£51,000+	£4,500										
Closed Business Lockdown Grant	Payable during national lockdown - 5 January to 15 February 2021 to businesses required to close in addition to the above grant.	Based on rateable value (a one-off payment): <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Rateable Value</th> <th>Grant</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>£1-£15,000</td> <td>£4,000</td> </tr> <tr> <td>£15,001-£50,999</td> <td>£6,000</td> </tr> <tr> <td>£51,000+</td> <td>£9,000</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Rateable Value	Grant	£1-£15,000	£4,000	£15,001-£50,999	£6,000	£51,000+	£9,000	<b>£2,000,000</b> paid to 432 eligible businesses
Rateable Value	Grant										
£1-£15,000	£4,000										
£15,001-£50,999	£6,000										
£51,000+	£9,000										

3.3.2 Since the start of November 2020, the council has paid out **£4,117,598.85** through **1,789** individual payments.

3.3.3 In order to qualify for any of the above grants, the applicant had to be the ratepayer at a property in Gravesham, the business must not have permanently ceased trading and the amount of support awarded must not exceed state aid/subsidy control limits. All of the above grants were/are fully funded by the Government and if the level of funding is exceeded, this will be topped up.

3.3.4 In addition to the Government grant schemes, there are also two types of discretionary grants which are administered by GBC on an ongoing basis:

- Local Restrictions Support Grant (**Open**) – can be applied for in the period when there is no national lockdown in place. This grant is designed to support businesses that are allowed to open but have been severely impacted by the restrictions.
- Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG) – applied from 05 November onwards and can be used to support any business (open or closed), irrespective of whether or not they are a ratepayer. This support can be given directly to businesses in the form of a grant or indirectly through wider business support activities. The council has developed its own policy in respect of the distribution of the discretionary grants. The funding for the ARG is a fixed sum (although this has recently been topped up) and is intended to provide support until 31 March 2022.

3.3.5 It is anticipated that the grants will continue for sometime and will continue to be administered by the council.

#### 3.4 *Test and Trace Support*

3.4.1 From November 2020, the council has been supporting the national Test and Trace process by contacting those who have tested positive for COVID but have been uncontactable by the national service and Kent County Council. Processes have been put in place to review council systems for additional contact information and where possible, officers have contacted residents directly to obtain the required information for Test and Trace. Where contact details have not been sourced, door knocks have taken place, although with the introduction of the national lockdown on 4 January 2021, the door-knocking process has been suspended. Up to the end of January 2021, the council has received **79** referrals from KCC.

3.4.2 The council has also been required to administer Test and Trace Support payments for those residents who are required to self-isolate due to a positive COVID test or have been advised to self-isolate by the NHS:

- A mandatory scheme was introduced by Government with all local authorities required to administer the payments from 12 October 2020 at the latest. Anyone who had been notified on or after 28 September 2020 that they had to self-isolate able to make backdated claims where necessary. The scheme was initially suggested to last until 31 January 2021 however this has recently been extended until 31 March 2021. The scheme has been amended a number of times since its inception. To date, the council has been provided with £52,500 funding from the Government, although the Government has committed to covering all main scheme payments made by local authorities.
- In addition to the mandatory scheme that was put in place, this was supplemented with a discretionary scheme. Each council has been able to determine its own specific eligibility criteria for the discretionary scheme. The council recently reviewed this (19 January 2021) in response to additional funding for the scheme being provided by the government to support the scheme and also following a review of the eligibility criteria. A total of £66,000 funding has been provided by Government to support this scheme with payment made on a 'first come first served' basis.

- Payments made to date are as follows:

Scheme	No. Applications	No. Grants Paid	Total Paid
Mandatory	533	251	£125,000
Discretionary	323	31	£15,500
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>850</b>	<b>282</b>	<b>£141,000</b>

- In addition to the funding provided by the Government in relation to the grant funding, a sum of just under £27,000 was also provided to assist with the administrative costs associated with setting up the schemes.

3.4.3 Similarly to the administration of the business grants scheme, it is anticipated that support provided to the test and Trace process will continue for a number of months.

### 3.5 *Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) Residents*

3.5.1 The council has continued to support those classed as Clinically Extremely Vulnerable through the second and third phase of lockdown. Whilst the council did not stand back up the full process that was undertaken in the first phase of lockdown, all new referrals have had either a telephone call, text message or e-mail (wherever possible) to advise them of the support that the council has in place.

3.5.2 In addition, the council has continued to operate its COVID Emergency Helpline to enable any resident in the borough to contact the council should they feel that they require support. Following the announcement of the second and then third lockdown, there has been a significant increase in calls to this line which are being managed by the Customer Services Team. Following only **17** calls in October 2020, this increased to **152** calls in November 2020, **120** calls in December 2020 and **154** calls in January 2021. The team has also continued to respond to e-mails received specifically in relation to COVID and between November 2020 and January 2021, the team responded to just over **900** e-mails.

### 3.6 *Homelessness support services*

3.6.1 The winter night shelter provisions were reviewed to mitigate the risk of Covid-19. Officers worked with local community groups to open ten bedroom HMO, so rough sleepers could have their own rooms. As a result of the most recent lockdown, officers worked with Gravesham Sanctuary to enable rough sleepers to remain in the property throughout the day.

3.6.2 Council officers have successfully maximised opportunities to bring additional funding into the service, this has enabled the Council to continue to accommodate and resettle rough sleepers.

### 3.7 *Supporting the NHS Vaccination programme*

- 3.7.1 Most recently the council has been working with colleagues from the Kent Community Health NHS Foundation Trust (KCHFT) to open a mass vaccination centre at The Woodville, the second of its type to open in Kent. This opened on 02 February 2021 and will see residents who live within 45 minutes of the centre being vaccinated. To support this, the council is offering an hour's free parking for those attending the vaccination centre in a designated area of Parrock Street car park
- 3.8 The council's experiences following the first phase of lockdown in March 2020, has undoubtedly enabled the council to prepare for the additional pressures that the second and third national lockdown have brought upon all local authorities.

## 4. **Maintaining council services**

- 4.1 Despite the council having to divert resources to the pandemic and responding to ongoing requirements from central Government, the council has continued to deliver services to the public and maintain performance across its services:
- Working in close partnership with Kent Police, the council oversaw a **10% reduction in reported crime offences** in the borough against the same period in 2019/20.
  - Despite the challenges presented by the economic fall-out of COVID the council's Revenues and Benefits service maintained its strong performance averaging **12.8 days for the processing of all new Housing Benefit claims**, considerably ahead of comparative national and Kent averages (17 and 16 days respectively). In addition, claims for the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme have continued to be processed promptly with an average of **18.4 days** against a target of 20 days, despite the increased workload.
  - Operating in the face of a dramatic increase in waste tonnage produced during social lockdown, the council achieved its **highest ever rate of household recycling (45%), whilst delivering 99.8% of all scheduled bin collections** in the borough.
  - Adapting to the logistical challenges presented by COVID, the council completed **100% of emergency repairs on time** to households in the borough. This is in addition to all routine repairs also being completed within set timescales.
  - A significant improvement in the processing of planning application times. In the first quarter of 2020-21, **100% of major applications and 94.5% of non-major applications were processed inside set government targets**, increasing to 100% for both categories in quarter two.
  - Despite a significant upturn in demand for its services, and the challenges presented by the new working environment for its officers, there was a **40% reduction in corporate complaints** received by the council.
  - In its commitment to tackling the sizeable levels of health inequality in the borough, **770** people achieved a target outcome from the Gr@nd's healthy living services.
  - Importantly for the council's suppliers, the council has maintained the payment of **100%** of all valid and undisputed invoices within 30 days.

- 4.2 The collection rates for council tax and business rates have been maintained, which is a credit to both the council and residents/businesses in the borough. At the end of January 2021, **91.25% of council tax had been collected**, compared to 93.1% at this time last year and **91.09% of business rates has been collected** compared to 91.19% in January 2020. It is estimated that nationally, collection rates are down by an average of 2% for council tax and 8% for business rates.
- 4.3 In addition to the statistical performance data highlighted, the council has also continued to deliver against key corporate and strategic projects:
- **The Charter Regeneration Project**  
The council has continued to work with Rosherville Property Development Limited and the Reef Group to progress The Charter development in the town centre. The planning application was approved in December 2020 with works due to commence on site in the Spring 2021.
  - **Lower Thames Crossing**  
In response to the Development Consent Order (DCO) submitted by Highways England, the council provided a detailed response in order to raise concerns regarding the public consultation that was undertaken. This resulted in the DCO being withdrawn, following early consideration by the Planning Inspectorate.
  - **Climate Change Actions**  
The council has continued to deliver on its Climate Change pledge and in December 2020, produced its first Annual Report to provide an update to both Members and the public on the actions that the council has, and will continue to take to tackle climate change issues in the borough.
- 4.4 Performance continues to be monitored each quarter by the council's Management Team, Cabinet and the Cabinet Committees to ensure performance continues to be maintained and any potential areas of concern are identified at an early stage.

## 5. GBC Operational Activities

- 5.1 Whilst there has been, and continues to be, a vast array of activities being undertaken by the council in response to the needs of residents and businesses in the borough, there has also been a significant amount of activity affecting the internal operations of the council.
- 5.2 *Staff health and Well-being*
- 5.2.1 In response to the pandemic, GBC staff have demonstrated immense resilience in their ability to continue to provide services to the public. They have also provided support to not only their individual teams and departments, but across the council through the corporate approach that has been taken to the COVID initiatives that have required implementation.

5.2.2 It has however, been critically important to ensure that staff have been thoroughly supported through this extremely challenging time and the council has put in place a number of measures to address this:

- Changes to our overall HR processes to support staff
  - Guidance notes and FAQs were sent to all employees regarding testing, reporting procedures etc. and these have continued to be updated and circulated as government policy has changed.
  - Changes have been made to the amount of annual leave officers are allowed to 'carry forward' into the new financial year for the next two years.
  - The Homeworking/Remote Working policy is in the process of being updated to reflect the current working conditions to ensure these are consistently applied for the future.
  - Sickness due to COVID is not taken into account when assessing absence from work i.e. if an officer were to hit one of the specific sickness levels in the council's policy, this would not 'trigger' a review if it were related to COVID. Sick pay has also not been affected due to COVID.
  - The Lone Working Policy was reviewed whilst employees are home working and the Flexi-time Policy was relaxed regarding working within core hours to support employees with dependents and caring responsibilities.
  - Finally, for new employees the impact of COVID has been taken into account in probationary reviews, as it is recognised that they may not have had the full support required due to home working.
- Staff surveys to identify any concerns
  - Since the start of the pandemic, three staff surveys have been undertaken and the responses received have been largely positive. Concerns highlighted were mainly regarding equipment issues (at the start of the pandemic), health & safety due to office set up and home, contact with line manager and general wellbeing. Management Team addressed these concerns and appropriate action was taken, which was noticeable in feedback from subsequent questionnaires.
- Support provided to officers in terms of health and well-being
  - At the start of the pandemic HR arranged a weekly timetable of events/seminars to encourage both physical and mental wellbeing.
  - Care First have provided a weekly timetable of webinars to support employees and Managers which mainly concentrated on the effects of the pandemic.
  - Weekly virtual coffee 'catch ups' were held during the first lockdown with all employees as well as a staff Facebook page being set up to enable employees to have social contact with their colleagues.

- 5.2.3 The Trade Unions were consulted on the temporary amendments to policies and frequently asked questions prior to being circulated to employees. The Human Resources department have been working closely with the Trade Unions regarding employees individual concerns relating to PPE, employee welfare, health & safety and amicable resolutions were found, although we have had very few concerns raised. The Trade Unions have welcomed the social events that Human Resources have arranged for all employees.
- 5.2.4 Staff health and well-being continues to be a priority of the council and activities in this area will continue throughout the pandemic period and beyond.
- 5.3 *Review of the implementation of home-working*
- 5.3.1 COVID-19 has seen a major culture-shift for the council with a significant proportion of officers now working from home. Before the pandemic there was approximately 25% of the office workforce enabled to work remotely, with only a few these regularly connecting. By the end of June 2020 approximately 75% of the office workforce were enabled to work remotely, with a large proportion of these connecting every day.
- 5.3.2 In order to achieve this, the IT team have completed a major rollout of software and equipment to officers across the council to enable them to continue to work. This included the procurement, setup and distribution of new laptop devices, the deployment of a new two-factor authentication system to ensure council systems remained secure, introduction of a new Virtual Private Network system to provide increased capacity to council systems from home, and the introduction of new telephony software to allow the contact centre to work remotely.
- 5.3.3 The IT team also enabled a large move over to video conferencing so officers and Members could continue conducting meetings. This involved installation of equipment in meeting rooms and the Council Chamber, the distribution and setup of new video conferencing software, and collaboration with Committee Services and the Digital Team to evaluate, deploy and operate a new procedure for running Committee Meetings.
- 5.3.4 It is important that we not only recognise this huge task but also review the way in which this was completed, and is currently operating, in order to learn from this experience.
- 5.3.5 A Home-working Task and Finish Group, made up of officers of the council, has been established. The purpose of the group is to put in place additional support and training for officers and managers during the lock down period and to up-date the council's homeworking policies for the future. This is to understand as a Council, how we wish to operate in the future with regard to flexible working, ensuring that we retain the best aspects of flexible working, but also providing the best possible service to our residents.

#### 5.4 *Member engagement*

- 5.4.1 Members have also been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and have had to change the way in which they work with the introduction of virtual meetings and a number of committee meetings cancelled. Members have responded well to these changes and the use of virtual meeting platforms, such as Zoom and GoTo, have been successful with Members adapting to the new way of hosting and attending public meetings well.
- 5.4.2 It was felt that it would be prudent to obtain the views of Members, through the Leaders of the respective political parties, in order to identify any potential areas for future improvement. Feedback received from Members has been very supportive of officers and the way in which the council was able to respond immediately to the announcement regarding the pandemic. Specific areas highlighted by Members were the way in which the council communicated with residents to keep them informed of the overall response to the pandemic and general support available to them, as well as the support put in place for vulnerable people.

#### 5.5 *Future business continuity planning*

- 5.5.1 The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (CCA) places a statutory duty on all category 1 responders to have business continuity plans in place to ensure they can continue to deliver critical services during times of disruption. This duty relates to all functions, not just emergency response functions.
- 5.5.2 The Business Continuity Management system that is currently in place covers the council's critical services, including the activities and their dependencies, which are required to continue service delivery to the community. It covers all council departments that either provide these key services and/or support the critical dependencies. Additionally where services are outsourced or where contracts for critical suppliers have been established, those who are responsible for the management of these services, are encouraged through best practice, to make sure that appropriate business continuity measures are included within agreements. This is to ensure that the activity or service provision can continue to be delivered during times of disruption.
- 5.5.3 The Business Continuity Plans that are embedded corporately are based on an initial 3-day maximum tolerability time period, which allows Senior Management time to review the disruption, activate the necessary Action Plans for critical services and to put measures in place for an event with a longer disruption period. Additional departmental Business Continuity Plans have also been drawn up in recent years to cover longer – drawn out events that take place over a long period of time. This additional work was predominantly put in place for the original Brexit transition phases and has also been invaluable for dealing with the initial effects of Covid-19.
- 5.5.4 This robust approach to Business Continuity planning, which has been enhanced in recent years, has undoubtedly prepared council departments in their response to the pandemic. This has been particularly prevalent in relation to the large proportion of staff being required to work from home at very short notice, as well as having various systems in place which could be activated to help mitigate the effects of the pandemic on local services and the community in its widest sense.

- 5.5.5 In terms of future work, senior management are being asked to ensure that individual directorates/departments update their own service area plans on a regular basis, in order to make sure they are up to date in terms of personnel and the services that they provide and to encourage 'ownership' of these plans amongst the teams themselves. Regular testing of plans will also be looked at in the future as well as additional training amongst staff members via the Kent Resilience Forum.

## **6. Involvement with the Kent Resilience Forums**

- 6.1 The KRF is a partnership of organisations and agencies who work together to improve the resilience of Kent and Medway, and to ensure a coordinated response to emergencies that could have a significant impact on local communities.
- 6.2 In addition to the specific work streams that were undertaken by council officers, there was a significant amount of activity and engagement on a daily basis with the Kent Resilience Forum.
- 6.3 In terms of the Covid-19 response, this included officers from GBC being involved in the Command and Control structures that were put in place for the Kent and Medway area in order to deal with the major emergency at both a strategic and tactical level. This also included involvement in a number of associated sub-groups, such as the Vulnerable Persons and Communities Cell and the Procurement and Logistics Cell.
- 6.4 At the height of the emergency response, there was significant involvement by council officers with multiple dial-in's/ meetings twice a day, as well as additional sub-group meetings. This put considerable strain on the council's resources, as internal meetings and subsequent other group dial-in meetings were taking place, especially at a Senior Management level. The activities were however, shared between the Senior Management Team of the council in order to provide resilience across the council.

## **7. Next Steps and future workstreams**

- 7.1 The COVID-19 pandemic is still affecting the borough of Gravesham, and the entire country, and as such it is necessary for the council to continue to be responsive to the needs of its community, as well as supporting officers and Members alike.
- 7.2 The outcomes of the various strands of the review have demonstrated that the council has taken a very proactive approach to the pandemic and this continues to be at the forefront of thinking for Members, Management Team and council officers. The findings from this review have helped to inform processes and procedures which have had to continue to be used in response to the ongoing pandemic.
- 7.3 At the time of writing, as there continue to be encouraging signs that the worst of the pandemic is now behind us, the Council's attentions have increasingly been turning to recovery actions in order to support the community, local businesses and the Borough more generally.

- 7.4 These recovery actions have, and will continue to be, the subject of separate reports as they are developed, and comprise elements such as the Economic Stimulus package announced alongside the Council's annual budget, the Council's involvement (both as an employer itself and coordinator on behalf of local businesses) in the Kickstart employment programme for young people within the Borough and additional apprenticeships and career graded posts. Furthermore, a review of support for voluntary and community sector organisations has been undertaken to ensure the Council's funds are directed to those organisations providing direct support to the wider community and those in need.
- 7.5 Delivery of the Council's Corporate Plan ambitions remains a key priority, with many of these initiatives directly or indirectly contributing to the economic, social and health wellbeing of the Borough's residents. With this in mind, a review of the resources deployed in each area of the Council will be undertaken to ensure those limited resources are deployed in the most effective way to deliver on the Corporate Plan objectives given that the COVID pandemic has in so many ways changed the way we operate as a Council.
- 7.6 Collectively these actions, form part of a comprehensive package of measures designed to support residents, businesses and visitors of the Borough as we seek to restore the damage caused by the pandemic over the past year and continue our work towards delivering a Gravesham to be proud of.

## **8. Background papers**

- 8.1 Background papers pertaining to this report are held by the Corporate Change Manager. Anyone wishing to inspect background papers should, in the first place, be directed to Committee & Electoral Services who will make the necessary arrangements.

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IMPLICATIONS	APPENDIX 1
<b>Legal</b>	In response to the pandemic, the Government put in place the Coronavirus Act 2020 as well as updating the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984 and other key health-related regulations.
<b>Finance and Value for Money</b>	<p>Specifically in relation to the council's own budgets, updates have been provided in the quarterly budget reports that have been presented to and reviewed by Cabinet over the course of the year.</p> <p>In relation to funding specifically for COVID, the council has received funding from central Government in two key areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specific grants have been provided to enable the council to administer the schemes put in place by the Government, such as the various Business Grants schemes that have been put in place.</li> <li>• The council has also received c.£1.8m of non-ring fenced funding from the Ministry of Communities, Housing and Local Government (MHCLG) to help meet the unprecedented pressures resulting from the pandemic.</li> </ul>
<b>Risk Assessment</b>	<p>The COVID-19 pandemic presented, and continues to present, significant risks for the council, particularly in terms of delivery of critical services to the public. As has been demonstrated through this report, the council's overall response to the pandemic has enabled those services to continue to operate effectively.</p> <p>The pandemic also presented risks to the Gravesham community, both residents and businesses. The council has been able to support both groups in minimising these risks by ensuring prompt payments of grants and allowances to support them through this tough time.</p>
<b>Data Protection Impact Assessment</b>	<p><i>A data protection impact assessment (DPIA) should be carried out at the start of any major project involving the use of personal data or if you are making a significant change to an existing process.</i></p> <p>a. Does the project/change being recommended through this paper involve the processing of <a href="#">personal data</a> or <a href="#">special category data</a> or <a href="#">criminal offence data</a>? N/A</p> <p>b. If yes to question a, have you completed and attached a DPIA including Data Protection Officer advice? N/A</p> <p>c. If no to question b, please seek advice from your nominated DPIA assessor or the Information Governance Team at <a href="mailto:gdpr@medway.gov.uk">gdpr@medway.gov.uk</a>. N/A</p>
<b>Equality Impact Assessment</b>	<p>a. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper have potential to cause adverse impact or discriminate against different groups in the community? If yes, please explain answer. No</p>

IMPLICATIONS	APPENDIX 1
	<p>b. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper make a positive contribution to promoting equality? If yes, please explain answer.</p> <p>N/A</p> <p><i>In submitting this report, the Chief Officer doing so is confirming that they have given due regard to the equality impacts of the decision being considered, as noted in the table above</i></p>
<b>Corporate Plan</b>	The way in which the council has responded to the pandemic has ensured that services have continued to operate effectively, which is fundamental to the delivery of all objectives within the Corporate Plan.
<b>Climate Change</b>	There are no specific Climate Change implications resulting from this report. However, the Climate Change impact is being considered in key pieces of work, particularly in respect of the review of the council's remote working arrangements.
<b>Crime and Disorder</b>	There are no specific crime and disorder implications resulting from this report. It is clearly the council needed to continue to work with Kent police in responding to the pandemic and maintaining order across the borough which has been demonstrated in the crime performance statistics.
<b>Digital and website implications</b>	There are no specific digital or website implications resulting from this report. The council has used its website and other digital channels to improve accessibility of services for the customer and ensure information is provided in a timely and consistent manner.
<b>Safeguarding children and vulnerable adults</b>	Specific activities, such as the support provided to those deemed as Clinically Extremely Vulnerable, setting up a specific helpline and the ability to work with key partners throughout the pandemic has ensured that safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults has continued to be at the heart of all council activities.

## Appendix Two

### - Summary Of Recommendations

Supporting Vulnerable People	Business Grants	Approach to Rough Sleepers	Council tax Support	Social media and communications
<p><b>Clarity of information</b></p> <p>Whist recognised that, in this project, some of this was out of the council's control, there is a need to ensure there is clarity across departments with regards to processes. The clear example highlighted here is the allocation of food boxes and confusion between the role of the officers making phone calls and Customer Services when allocating the supplies. In future projects or should there be a need to resurrect this project, clear guidance to support officers in their roles is advised.</p>	<p><b>Implementing a mechanism to enable all interested parties to be updated on project developments.</b></p> <p>In this case, engaging with the Digital Team at all stages of the project to make the publication of information on the web timelier. This is something that should be considered in future projects in order to ensure information is disseminated to all officers as required.</p>	<p><b>Governance</b></p> <p>Should a project of this nature be required again, ensuring clear governance structures, both within the council and with external partners is key so as to understand roles and responsibilities and reporting lines. This will be a key consideration for all future projects</p>	<p><b>Availability of Guidance</b></p> <p>Wherever possible, guidance should be provided to all officers who are involved in a project to ensure that all officers are equally well-informed about the processes that are due to take place.</p> <p>It is recognised with the COVID response this was not possible at the beginning but as a learning point for other projects moving forward, this is something that should be undertaken.</p>	<p><b>Gravesham Branding and Promotional Material</b></p> <p>The council produced many varied messages which held the branding of Gravesham Borough council and as detailed, provided a 'trusted brand' for the community. This is something that should be followed should there be a national requirement for communications of messages again.</p> <p>Also, explore the use of alternative methods for communicating such as video messages/Podcasts from the Leader and other key figureheads to provide an alternative method of communication.</p>
<p><b>Review 'risk appetite' in the process</b></p> <p>The level of phone calls made was high and it is recognised that, particularly towards the end of the lockdown, a large number of calls were made</p>	<p><b>Production of guides/online tools to aide those involved and affected by the project.</b></p> <p>In future projects, consideration should be given to ensuring information is provided to those involved in the project in a way, which simplifies things for</p>	<p><b>Communication</b></p> <p>For future projects, there is a need to engage with all parties to ensure they have a full understating of their specific requirements in the project – a 'no surprises' approach.</p>	<p><b>Implementation of a Corporate Working Log</b></p> <p>It is recognised that the remote working log was a success within the Revenues &amp; Benefits Team. Consideration should be given to the potential of a similar log to be implemented</p>	<p><b>Use of Social Media</b></p> <p>Undertaking proper and through evaluation of all future requests for social media posts to ensure they are considered 'in the round' i.e. in line with other promotional campaigns and</p>

<b>Supporting Vulnerable People</b>	<b>Business Grants</b>	<b>Approach to Rough Sleepers</b>	<b>Council tax Support</b>	<b>Social media and communications</b>
<p>which were not necessary (in the eyes of customers).</p> <p>This was reviewed part way through and the ratings were amended.</p> <p>Moving forward, either with a second phase of this project or in other council projects, the recognition of the need to review these types of measures, as was undertaken as part of this project, is an important learning point.</p>	<p>officers. Determination of whether this should be through a specific 'guide' or through an online tool will be dependent on the nature of the project,</p>	<p>Ensuring the council uses all of its communication tools is something to also be considered – website, social media etc. to ensure messages are communicate din the best way to the majority of people.</p>	<p>on a corporate level (potentially working with the Digital Team) to enable officers to know the working patterns of colleagues and how to contact them moving forward.</p> <p>This action to be raised with the Homeworking Task and Finish Group as a potential improvement moving forward, given the potential for home/remote working to be continued in the future.</p>	<p>messages that are being progressed by the council.</p>
<p><b>Internal communications and contact</b></p> <p>Given the nature of the calls, implement more regular officer briefings/catch-ups through wither virtual meetings or on-site. Given social distancing requirements, not all officers may have been able to attend an onsite meeting but ensuring regular contact is made with officers to give the opportunity to discuss any issues or concerns they have would be useful.</p> <p>Whilst an emergency centre was set up, officers were not keen to work from a central point. If in fact they had, it</p>	<p><b>Communication</b></p> <p>Ensure that wherever possible, face-to-face meetings are used to convey instructions or guidance so that there is a consistent approach used by staff. This coupled with the production of guidelines/online tools will help to ensure all officers involved in projects fully understand what is required.</p>	<p><b>Policies</b></p> <p>It is necessary to review and update council policies as a result of the pandemic to ensure that the Council's policies address the priorities of the area. This includes the Housing Allocations Policy but cuts across all council services both internal and external. There may be a need to prioritise these but this is an action that should be taken across the council.</p>		<p><b>Multi-lingual Approach</b></p> <p>In future projects where a borough-wide communication plan is required, consideration needs to be given to providing information in alternative languages, tailored to the needs of residents in specific areas.</p>

<b>Supporting Vulnerable People</b>	<b>Business Grants</b>	<b>Approach to Rough Sleepers</b>	<b>Council tax Support</b>	<b>Social media and communications</b>
would have helped to some degree with the dissemination of information				
<p><b>Allocation of staff resources</b></p> <p>From a management perspective, there is a need to be clear on what is required from officers and how their 'usual' tasks can be supported if they are seconded onto a corporate project of this nature. It would appear that there has been an inconsistent approach to this across the council and this needs to be 'joined-up' in future projects. Consideration also needs to be given to the impact on officers who are potentially taking on additional workload to enable the secondment to take place.</p>	<p><b>My Business Account</b></p> <p>Review the current progress that is being made is rolling out the 'My Business Account' facility out to businesses in the borough. Consideration to extending this facility to enable businesses to sign up to the Economic Development mailing lists at the same time but also the potential for smaller businesses, such as those that are home-based businesses or those in managed workspaces, being able to access the site for useful information.</p>	<p><b>Business Continuity</b></p> <p>A review of business continuity plans should be undertaken by all council services to ensure that key learning points from the COVID experience can be taken into account. An overall strategic review of Business Continuity is being undertaken, and departments will need to ensure they take an active role and implement changes required.</p>		
<p><b>Workplace Skills Analysis</b></p> <p>It would be useful to understand the skills that are in place across the organisation to assist in this, and future projects moving forward. There is a tendency for the same officers to be called upon for specific tasks (the point highlighted here is regards to Finance and their skills with</p>				

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spreadsheets) and there are likely to be others across the council who possess the same or similar skills and would be able to assist.				
<p><b>Equipment for officers</b></p> <p>Ensuring that staff have the right equipment to enable them to undertake the tasks required is key. As identified through the feedback, things such as mobile phones, headsets for officers and ensuring connectivity through IT equipment is key. This will potentially be picked up as well through the remote working workstream that is currently underway.</p> <p>One suggestion for taking this forward is, should this type of project occur again, have a specific work space set up at the Council for officers to work from (such as the Council Chamber), so all equipment is provided. Whilst useful for some, under COVID this may not have been suitable for all but would provide an additional workspace away from the office.</p>				

Supporting Vulnerable People	Business Grants	Approach to Rough Sleepers	Council tax Support	Social media and communications
<p><b>Implementation of welfare checks</b></p> <p>Given the nature of the calls that officers were being asked to make, it would be beneficial to implement regular welfare calls with those officer directly involve din the project. Some of the calls were very difficult for officers and whilst all dealt with these with professionalism and compassion, specific phone calls to officers to discuss their personal welfare would be beneficial if this were to take place again.</p>				

