

**Classification:** Part 1 – Public

**Key Decision:** No

## **Gravesham Borough Council**

**Report to:** Full Council

**Date:** 12 May 2020

**Reporting officer:** Chief Executive

**Subject:** Coronavirus Pandemic 2020: Gravesham Impact

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

To present Council with an overview of the impact of the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic on the borough and the subsequent response delivered by the council and key community partners.

### **Recommendations:**

1. That Council records its gratitude to all those involved across all sectors in the outstanding response to the global Covid-19 pandemic; the NHS and social care sector, the voluntary and business sectors, local community residents and the council's workforce;
2. That Council notes the report contents and the commitment to the presentation of future reports providing further details of the council's Covid-19 Recovery Plan.

## **1. Background**

- 1.1 This report summarises the work undertaken by the council to date in response to the global Covid-19 pandemic. It outlines the core legislative and operational issues emerging from the response to the pandemic, presents the scale of involvement from officers, partner agencies and residents, and considers potential key milestones facing the council, and the local community, in order to plan for an economic and social recovery

## **2. Overview**

- 2.1 The Covid-19 pandemic has had the most profound impact on the daily lives of UK residents since the second world war; significant societal restrictions on movement and association, coupled with intense harm to the national economy through the enforced closure of businesses and an inevitable loss of jobs. Collectively, the impact of Covid-19 is one of significant damage to the health and well being of the Gravesham community and, equally, presents a substantial challenge to the future sustainability of the council and its essential frontline community services.

- 2.2 While the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic are significant and inevitably long-standing, the principal impacts are on the health and well-being of those it directly and indirectly affects, with express condolences to those who have lost loved ones in this tragic event.
- 2.3 In presenting this report, Council may wish to recognise and pay tribute to the heroic efforts of our National Health Service and social care sector in responding to the pandemic. The council has worked closely and tirelessly with the NHS and a range of other local partner agencies to mitigate the effects of the pandemic and put in place an outstanding and comprehensive intervention programme for residents and businesses to protect them from harm.
- 2.4 Council may also wish to recognise the full range of local agencies, businesses and residents involved in the response and is especially the part our own staff played, and continue to play, in the most challenging and demanding of circumstances.
- 2.5 It has been inspiring to see how the borough has not only adapted to meet the scale of the challenge, but also the extent to which it has openly come together as one community to recognise and applaud key workers; truly a Gravesham to be proud of.
- 2.6 Against this context, the report will attempt to provide Members with a detailed overview to the council's portfolio of responsive activities in the community to date and present an outline of the impact and potential future recovery to the pandemic.

### **3. Government legislation**

- 3.1 In order to provide the powers needed to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, and to properly enable delivery against its already announced guidance at that point, the Coronavirus Act 2020 was enacted on 25 March 2020 as the Government's main legislative vehicle.
- 3.2 The Act has temporarily modified and introduced duties and powers relating to; social care, mental health, registration of deaths, inquests, regulation of investigatory powers, social gatherings, cemeteries, events, the postponement of elections, virtual local authority meetings and tenant protections from eviction. For district councils specifically, a total of 39 new or amended powers and duties were created through the Act, providing a framework within which to operate and shape a local response.
- 3.3 The majority of provisions came into effect on the date of enactment, but detailed further legislation in the form of statutory instruments and subsequent government guidance has been issued since that date and continues to be published. In support of this primary legislation, there has been a wide range of secondary legislation passed to adjust, often temporarily, existing parliamentary Acts, all of which has had to be factored into the council's formal programme of activity.

### **4. Gravesham activity**

- 4.1 Alongside the need to maintain its core frontline offer, in response to the fast-moving Covid-19 pandemic the council moved quickly to refocus its efforts and resources. Central to the council's response was the need to ensure appropriate support interventions for those most vulnerable local residents and, equally, to take on the responsibility for a timely and effective package of business support measures. An overview of how the council and its community partners have risen to the challenge is set out below.

a) Protecting shielded and other vulnerable residents

In the space of a few days, the council had established its Vulnerable Persons Team of officers. The aim was to harness the outstanding community spirit within the borough exemplified by the large number of people who volunteered to assist and put in place a timely and efficient distribution network to support emergency 'on the day' deliveries of food and essential supplies to Gravesham households.

As at the 27 April 2020, the council had received 2,587 referrals from the NHS relating to individuals who are clinically vulnerable should they contract the virus and who have therefore been told to stay at home for 12 weeks, regardless of when the Government restrictions on movement are lifted. Additionally, another 2,175 had either contacted the council directly or been referred by family, friends or neighbours. Of those, working alongside local volunteers and a range of local charity and voluntary organisations, almost 1,200 have already been supported, whether by providing them with essential supplies or medication, making welfare visits, or arranging for regular befriending calls to be made. Meticulous records are being maintained of all contacts to and by the council as can be seen from Appendix 2 to this report.

Additionally, in line with government guidance aimed at protecting rough sleepers and reducing the number of people on the streets during the pandemic, the Housing Service has worked hard to secure much needed temporary accommodation. At its peak, 33 rough sleepers were temporarily housed, and efforts to find permanent arrangements that are eligible for housing benefit commenced. The number of approaches for homelessness support has returned to normal, pre-Covid-19 levels, with weekly fluctuations to that support need.

It should be noted that the response to the Covid-19 pandemic is an ongoing effort that will not immediately end when societal restrictions are lifted; the council has a moral duty to continue its support for the community. Moreover, those who have received council assistance will invariably have formed a degree of dependency on its support and a strategy is being developed to address this ongoing need.

The Vulnerable Persons Team has proved hugely successful, largely due to the outstanding efforts involving officers putting aside their day job and doing whatever has been asked by the council to meet the needs of the local community.

Underpinning the Vulnerable Persons Team it must also be noted that Gravesham's community and voluntary sector, while facing significant pressures on funding and staff capacity, has been a critical element to the council's response, both in protecting the most vulnerable and in their efforts in tackling the social impacts of the crisis. For example, Alzheimer's and Dementia Support services has provided a befriending service to lonely and vulnerable people through regular telephone contacts to reassure those who are extremely anxious.

b) Business support

The council has been responsible for administering the Government's grant for smaller businesses in Gravesham. As of 1 May 2020, 987 of 1,186 potentially eligible businesses had received government business support grants, amounting to £11.9million, placing the council in the upper quartile nationally for the efficiency of this crucial support mechanism.

In order to work towards 100% uptake of the support available to small and medium businesses, the decision was made to write directly to all businesses believed to be eligible and to follow this up with a direct phone contact to those that did not respond by completing the eligibility checks the Government scheme requires to be made.

As with the Vulnerable Persons Team this was another joint effort involving officers drawn from various parts of the council and yet another example of how it has successfully worked to meet the needs of its local community during the crisis.

The council also had the responsibility of administering an expanded retail discount for 2020/21. As a result, ratepayers who had originally received a 50% discount were awarded a 100% discount; a scheme subsequently extended to include properties completely or mainly used for leisure, hotels and assembly such as public halls. The rebilling of those eligible businesses showing a nil liability for 20/21 will be completed in early-May. Both the grants and discounts are fully funded by Government.

In addition to directly helping businesses access financial support, the council has worked to gather intelligence in order to monitor the ongoing impacts of the pandemic on the local business community and, importantly, to help us plan for the easing of restrictions and the restarting of the economy. A strategy for the town centre has been developed and work is underway to plan for assisting the wider business community.

#### c) Council services

The council has met its new statutory duties and made required changes to its core services and thanks to the efforts of council staff many services have continued to be delivered, often dealing with an increased level of customer demand and, crucially, adhering to the NHS and Public Health England guidance on a safe working environment. The social distancing requirements has meant that the planned programme of council events has had to be cancelled at least until the end of July and potentially for a longer period if the need for social distancing is extended for a protracted period.

The council has processes and procedures in place to operate in times of crisis and our framework of business continuity plans have been fully utilised throughout the period to help maintain frontline service delivery. Below is only a selection of the council's services that have enabled such a comprehensive and successful community response:

- IT Services

Underpinning our ability to rapidly adapt to the Covid-19 pandemic has been the excellent support provided by the council's IT Services. Following the workplace guidance issued by the Prime Minister on 23 March 2020, over 50% of staff were subsequently provided with the equipment needed to work effectively and productively from home. The Service has also facilitated the holding of virtual council and committee meetings so that council business can be conducted safely in accordance with social distancing requirements.

- Communications & Digital Teams

Keeping people informed on how to stay safe at home and where to get help if they need has been a critical component to the council's response. The council's Communications and Digital Teams provided crucial support to; the successful advertising of the Vulnerable Persons Project, the development of regular detailed updates to staff informing them of the latest management decisions and essential messages of supportive health programmes, through to the delivery of the council's dedicated Covid-19 support page.

- Refuse, Recycling, Horticulture and Cleansing Services

The Government's measures to protect the NHS by asking people to work from home where possible and to stay at home other than for a small number of activities alongside the closure of household waste and recycling centres has resulted in a sizeable increase in household waste. Over 755 tons were generated in the week following Easter, representing an increase of 30% on the 580 tons collected in the week the Government's restrictions were imposed in late March. Not only were 100% of scheduled refuse and recycling collections undertaken in the month of April, for the service to have coped with such a large increase in demand proves an exceptional level of commitment and resilience.

It should also be noted that throughout the crisis, unlike many authorities, the council has maintained its garden waste service.

Throughout the Covid-19 outbreak, horticultural and cleansing services delivered from Brookvale Depot have been maintained on a consistent basis.

- Cemeteries

A full service has been maintained with the bereaved and funeral directors being made fully aware of the need to comply with social distancing requirements. As might be expected, there has been a noticeable upturn in requests for burials.

- Customer Services

The Covid-19 crisis has put considerable pressure on our Customer Services Team. The need to close the Civic Centre has meant customers have utilised both our website and our call centre to make contact with the council. A dedicated telephone line was established for Covid-19 related calls and similarly a dedicated email address was established for those who preferred to contact us by email. Additionally, the team has contributed staff to those tasked with making contact with the shielded and most vulnerable.

- Housing Repairs and Maintenance

Undertaking housing repairs whilst observing social distancing requires a specific approach designed to protect both tenants who may be vulnerable and our workforce. Where urgent repairs are required the tenant is contacted to ensure that neither they nor any other members of the household are displaying any symptoms of the virus and they are in self isolation. If they are then unless the matter is an emergency the repair will be scheduled for when the self isolation period for all members of the household has ended. If it is a true emergency then it will be carried out but with full social distancing measures and appropriate PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) for those undertaking the repair. Minor non urgent repairs are not currently being undertaken to reduce the risks to the workforce and tenants. Works to void properties are continuing where social distancing measures are capable of being observed.

The pandemic has unquestionably demonstrated the critical importance of local government in supporting not only the most vulnerable in society, but ensuring that partners across local areas can respond effectively and efficiently in times of crisis.

As a local authority, we have not only quickly reviewed and redesigned our services to support those most in need, we have acted as an enabler and broker for partners to do the same in a comprehensive and successful package of community support.

The council's workforce has proved itself to be flexible, deeply committed to the safety and wellbeing of our residents and ready to meet all challenges they have faced.

## **5. Impact and Recovery**

- 5.1 In addition to the immediate health concerns of Covid-19, it is clear that the economic impacts of the pandemic are already creating hardship. It is also likely profound societal changes are likely to become evident in the longer term.
- 5.2 As in the rest of the country, businesses in the borough have been severely affected by the economic impact of the lockdown. Many, including pubs, hotels and non-food shops, have temporarily closed. Much of the construction sector has stopped, whilst the manufacturing, travel and education sectors have been severely disrupted.
- 5.3 Although at the time of writing no formal government exit strategy from the social and economic lockdown has been announced, based on the experiences of other countries it is likely to be a phased return to economic activity, with some activities, including bars and restaurants, taking much longer to re-open.
- 5.4 Many firms have responded by reducing wages (including by taking advantage of the Government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme) or making redundancies. No statistics are yet available, but the Office for Budget Responsibility has indicated unemployment could rise to 10%, above the level experienced in the last recession. As at the end of March 2020, overall unemployment (3.5%) and youth (18-24) unemployment (6%) had risen to their highest levels since June 2013 and February 2014 respectively.
- 5.5 The direct and indirect impact of Covid-19 and associated government policy initiatives have had an already significant impact on the council's finances which it is too early to quantify. There have been direct costs arising from the outbreak including the purchase of food and other essential supplies for the most vulnerable, the purchase of additional IT equipment to facilitate home working for in excess of 200 members of staff and financial contributions to a business support hub and voluntary sector partners undertaking specific tasks to assist the Council in its support of the shielded and other vulnerable people.
- 5.6 However, the most significant impact will arise from a decline in most revenue streams, including council tax, business rates, housing rents, car parking charges, trade waste charges and payment holidays in respect of rents for commercial properties owned by the council. Some of these reductions in income will have lasting consequences whilst some will impact only on cash flow and the Government has sought to ease the pressure on local authority cash flows by postponing to the second half of the financial year payment by authorities of the Government's 50% share of business rates collected. The scale of lost income is difficult to predict at the moment but has the potential to be several million pounds. The Government has recognised that local authorities are facing financial challenges as a result of the Covid-19 crisis and has provided two tranches of financial support thus far, both of £1.6bn. This council's share of the first tranche was only £52,216 but from the second tranche the council will receive £1,054,438. These sums will mitigate to a degree the fall in income but, unless further financial support is provided by Government in due course, it is likely that there will be an adverse impact upon the council's medium term financial plan. Fortunately the council has a strong level of reserves which will be sufficient to avoid serious financial difficulty.

Future reports will provide informed estimates of the impact of the outbreak on the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account.

- 5.7 In seeking to mitigate the impact on the council and, more broadly, the local community, it is essential the council designs a fully informed Recovery Plan. Building on the community intelligence gained by the authority during its response activities, a suite of initiatives will be specifically designed to help drive the most effective delivery of council resources at this most challenging of times. The Recovery Plan, once prepared, will be presented to Cabinet for consideration at the earliest opportunity.

## References

The information in this report is correct as of Wednesday 29 April 2020. The coronavirus outbreak and the council's response has been fast-moving and Members will be updated on any further development and actions at the meeting.

The following websites provide guidance on local initiatives and strategic government guidance:

GBC: <https://www.gravesham.gov.uk/home/environmental-health/coronavirus-guidance>

Gov.uk: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-local-government>

LGA – Councillor resources: <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/coronavirus-information-councils/covid-19-councillor-resources>

IMPLICATIONS	APPENDIX ONE
<b>Legal</b>	The Coronavirus Act 2020 is the Government’s main legislative change in Response to the pandemic. Most of its provisions came into effect on 25th March 2020, but detailed further legislation in the form of statutory instruments, and government guidance have been issued since that date and continue to be published. Equally, a number of secondary instruments have been passed in order to adjust, often temporarily, existing parliamentary Acts to afford local government the required tools to deliver an effective response.
<b>Finance and Value for Money</b>	The response to the pandemic has necessitated unplanned spending not contained within the approved budget and has had an adverse impact upon revenue streams. Government has thus far mitigated these impacts by direct grants amounting to £1,106,654 which is unlikely to cover the full impact but the council has adequate reserves to avoid serious financial difficulties.
<b>Risk Assessment</b>	There are no direct risks presented through the recommendations of this report.
<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>?</p> <p>A definition of each type of data can be found on the Information Commissioner’s Office website via the above links. <b>No</b></p> <p>b. If yes to question a, have you completed and attached a DPIA including Data Protection Officer advice?</p> <p>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>.</p> <p>N/A</p>



<p><b>Equality Impact Assessment</b></p>	<p><b>Screening for Equality Impacts</b></p>		
	<p><b>Question</b></p>	<p><b>Answer</b></p>	<p><b>Explanation</b></p>
	<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? No</p>		
	<p>b. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper make a positive contribution to promoting equality? No.</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>		
<p><b>Corporate Plan</b></p>	<p>The recommendations of this report have no overarching impact to these criteria.</p>		
<p><b>Crime and Disorder</b></p>			
<p><b>Digital and website implications</b></p>			
<p><b>Safeguarding children and vulnerable adults</b></p>			