

**Classification:** Part 1 – Public

**Key Decision:** No

## **Gravesham Borough Council**

**Report to:** Performance and Administration Cabinet Committee

**Date:** 10<sup>th</sup> June 2020

**Reporting officer:** Assistant Director (IT & Transformation) and  
Head of Revenues and Benefits

**Subject:** Coronavirus: Cabinet Portfolio Impact

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

To provide an overview of the impact of the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic upon the practical delivery of the respective services within the responsible Cabinet portfolio.

### **Recommendations:**

This report is for information purposes only.

## **1. Background**

- 1.1 The Covid-19 pandemic has had the most profound impact on the daily lives of UK residents of any event this century; 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.
- 1.2 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.
- 1.3 On 13 May 2020, a report was considered by Council outlining the social and economic impact the pandemic has had upon the Gravesham community and providing details of the council's comprehensive community support offer during the period. At that meeting, Council unanimously put on record its gratitude to all those involved across all sectors in the outstanding response to the global Covid-19 pandemic and, equally, expressed condolences to those who have lost loved ones in this tragic event.
- 1.4 This report aims to provide a focus on the Performance and Administration portfolio in regards to the practical impact of the pandemic and, specifically, to provide clarity on what new policies or amended working practices were established in order to adapt to what was, and continues to be, a rapidly evolving challenge.

## **2. Legislation and Government announcements in response to the COVID-19 pandemic**

- 2.1 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.
- 2.2 For district councils, 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.
- 2.3 In regards to the Performance and Administration portfolio specifically, the following provisions utilising existing legislation were announced as part of the Government's daily announcements/updates. These directly impacted upon the Revenues and Benefits service:

Government announcement	Impact
<b>Expanded business retail discount</b>	<b>New discretionary business rate policy written.</b>
<p data-bbox="325 331 507 362"><i>New scheme</i></p> <p data-bbox="325 398 576 430"><b>Nursery Discount</b></p>	<p data-bbox="695 331 1145 362"><b>Software changes implemented.</b></p> <p data-bbox="695 398 1310 497"><b>Website regularly updated with information. Letters issued and discount automatically applied to eligible ratepayer accounts:-</b></p> <p data-bbox="695 533 1294 694"><b>£11.54m expanded retail discount and £ 0.07m nursery discount successfully administered and provided to local businesses</b></p>
<p data-bbox="325 732 507 763"><i>New scheme</i></p> <p data-bbox="325 799 580 862"><b>Business Support Grants</b></p> <ul data-bbox="325 898 632 1028" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="325 898 588 929">• <b>Small business</b></li> <li data-bbox="325 965 632 1028">• <b>Retail, Hospitality, Leisure</b></li> </ul>	<p data-bbox="695 732 1350 929"><b>Devised new online form and provide/maintain communication on website and social media. Devised procedures to process eligibility checks. Work with key services including Economic Development; Finance; Communications and Audit.</b></p> <p data-bbox="695 965 1350 1064"><b>Grants have been issued to 1,106 eligible ratepayers totalling £13.6m from a government fund of £16.162m (22/05/20)</b></p>
<p data-bbox="325 1133 507 1164"><i>New scheme</i></p> <p data-bbox="325 1200 632 1263"><b>Council Tax Hardship Fund</b></p>	<p data-bbox="695 1133 1023 1164"><b>Existing Policy revised.</b></p> <p data-bbox="695 1200 1273 1232"><b>Complex software changes implemented.</b></p> <p data-bbox="695 1267 1334 1397"><b>Website updated, social media campaign and 4,246 eligible council taxpayer accounts amended automatically and issued with explanatory flyer.</b></p> <p data-bbox="695 1433 1334 1496"><b>£629,389 of fund £893,182 spent (22/05/20) for residents in need</b></p>
<p data-bbox="325 1534 647 1664"><b>Changes to Universal Credit (UC), Tax Credit and Local Housing Allowance (LHA)</b></p>	<p data-bbox="695 1534 1299 1597"><b>UC standard allowance and HB allowances increases and implemented on system</b></p> <p data-bbox="695 1632 1299 1695"><b>Effect on Council Tax Reduction Scheme – working age claimants</b></p> <p data-bbox="695 1731 1334 1762"><b>Updated system to reflect increase LHA rates</b></p>

2.4 The majority of government announcements came into immediate effect although in a number of instances the council was awaiting detailed guidance

### **3. Revenues and Benefits**

- 3.1 The demands on the service have been unprecedented with a number of initiatives impacting directly on all areas of the service (see paragraph 2.3) i.e. council tax, business rates and benefits.
- 3.2 The service made the following changes :-
  - 3.2.1 Staff have predominantly worked from home with some staff being strategically redeployed within the service. For example: some staff moved from recovery to assist in the processing of business support grants.
  - 3.2.2 As offices closed to public extra resource were put in place on telephones;
  - 3.2.3 The easing of verification in some areas on benefit claims in accordance with Department for Work and Pensions guidance
  - 3.2.4 Increased resilience put in place for assessment of benefit claims to ensure performance remains at a good level.
  - 3.2.5 Recovery of debt processes are constantly being reviewed

### **4. Corporate Performance**

- 4.1 In order to accurately monitor the impact of Covid-19 on critical frontline council services, the Corporate Performance team has worked with service managers to develop a new suite of 40 performance indicators (Performance and Administration element in Section 9). The suite has been reported weekly to the Corporate Management Team in order to enable critical early insight for potential intervention.
- 4.2 A cross-directorate group of officers was identified to operate as the council's Resilience Group. Acting as a research source and 'critical friend' to the Corporate Management Team, amongst its activities the group coordinated a series of reviews into the council's critical services. In doing so, the group was able to identify the various IT, HR and business requirements that were needed to ensure continued frontline delivery, enabling the Corporate Management Team to respond effectively. The Corporate Performance and Internal Audit teams are currently represented on the group, as activity now focusses on the preparations for a secure office environment.

### **5. Audit and Counter Fraud**

- 5.1 The Audit & Counter Fraud Shared Service with Medway was identified as 'non-critical' in the early stages of the response phase of the emergency situation. As such, the service ceased the majority of normal business, with staff redeployed to assist other services at both Gravesham and Medway. The bulk of this work for Gravesham has related to Business Support Grants, with the validation of applications to reduce the risk of fraudulent claims and calls to businesses that may be eligible but had not applied. In addition a representative from the service has been part of the council's Resilience Group in order to ensure the appropriate governance was in place when managing the urgent decisions needed during the response. This work around governance will also help with a new risk assessment

of the councils control areas and inform a revised 2020-21 A&CF workplan based on changes that have occurred in response to the pandemic.

- 5.2 While the service was deemed to be non-critical, it would not be advisable for the council to continue without an operating Audit & Counter Fraud function for an extended period. As the peak of the emergency response has now passed, the service has begun to focus on completion and finalisation of audit reviews still outstanding from the 2019-20 workplan to ensure that there is an adequate level of assurance work across the council for the Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud to be able to deliver an annual opinion on the framework of internal control; which is a requirement as part of the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards and also the Annual Governance Statement process. Some officers will continue to support other services as required until 30 June as A&CF look to commence work on the 2020-21 work plan and a return to normal business from 01 July.

## **6. Corporate Change**

- 6.1 The Corporate Change Team has been involved in supporting the council's response to assisting NHS Shielded and Extremely Vulnerable residents that require support from the council.
- 6.2 Officers have been directly involved in contacting residents and speaking with them to gauge their level of need (if applicable). This has been ongoing since the end of March and will continue for the foreseeable future.
- 6.3 Officers have also been working on the administrative side; setting up the process that we would follow in managing the cases (including Visio process maps to have a visual representation) and supporting the strategy development as required. Outside of the process side, officers have also been involved in ensuring that all cases receive their follow up calls at the right time, referring cases on to the visiting officers (and Police where necessary) for door knocks and ensuring that Management Team are provided with regular monitoring statistics on the process. The majority of this work has been out of hours i.e. working in the evenings to prepare the lists etc. for the following day.

## **7. Information Governance**

- 7.1 It was recognised early on by the Information Commissioners Office (ICO) that council resources available for responding to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests may be diverted to other areas. As such, guidance was issued to say the ICO will take a pragmatic approach to any complaints arising from FOI responses exceeding the 20 working day reply target during the COVID-19 response. The information governance team contacted all current requestors who had recently submitted an FOI to say there may be a delay in responding, and also updated the acknowledgement communication for all new FOI requests to reflect the current guidance. However, officers have endeavoured to return FOI's within the original timeframe where possible.
- 7.2 The information governance team also provided advice to officers on the appropriate handling of personal data received for NHS shielded and extremely vulnerable residents which was required for the operation of our community hub.

## **8. Corporate Governance**

- 8.1 It has been of even greater importance during this period for the council to maintain its strong corporate governance arrangements to ensure that it continues

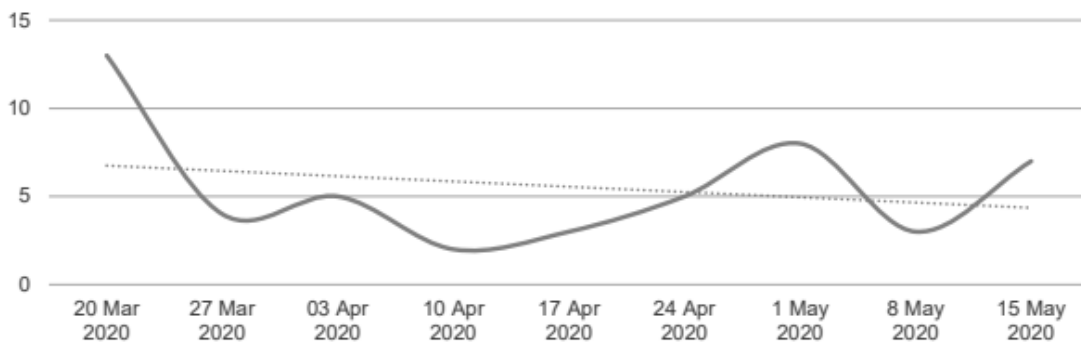
to follow its established procedures and processes for delivering council business and decision-making. As set out in paragraph 5.1, the council established a resilience group in order to ensure the appropriate governance was in place when managing the urgent decisions needed during the response.

**9. Performance**

- 9.1 In its response to Covid-19, the corporate Management Team moved quickly to introduce a dedicated suite of performance indicators. The aim was to enable early and targeted intervention and redirection of resources where it was needed to those critical services deemed underperforming.
- 9.2 In consideration of the practical challenges outlined at paragraph 2 to this report, within the Performance and Administration portfolio relevant performance monitoring as part of this suite involved:

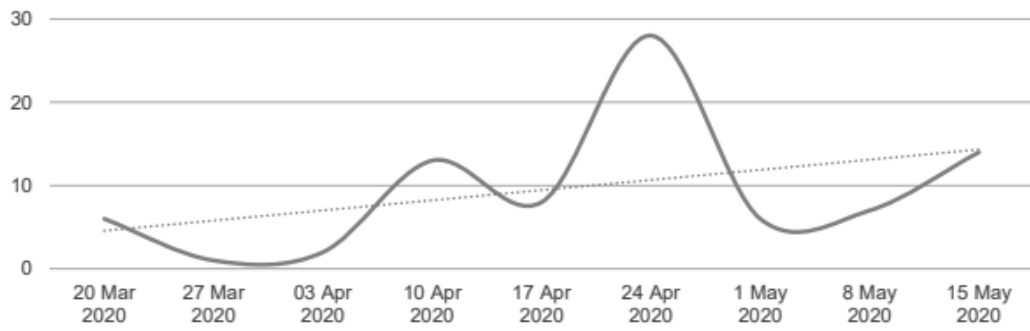
**CV 21** *Total DHP applications*

	20 Mar 2020	27 Mar 2020	03 Apr 2020	10 Apr 2020	17 Apr 2020	24 Apr 2020	1 May 2020	8 May 2020	15 May 2020
<b>OUTTURN</b>	13	4	5	2	3	5	8	3	7



**CV 22** *Total new Housing Benefit claims received*

	20 Mar 2020	27 Mar 2020	03 Apr 2020	10 Apr 2020	17 Apr 2020	24 Apr 2020	1 May 2020	8 May 2020	15 May 2020
<b>OUTTURN</b>	6	1	2	13	8	28	6	7	14



**CV 23** Average processing time for Housing Benefit claims (days)

OUTTURN	20 Mar 2020	27 Mar 2020	03 Apr 2020	10 Apr 2020	17 Apr 2020	24 Apr 2020	1 May 2020	8 May 2020	15 May 2020
		12.6	Collected monthly				11.4	Collected Monthly	



**CV 24** Average processing time for changes of circumstance in Housing Benefit claims (days)

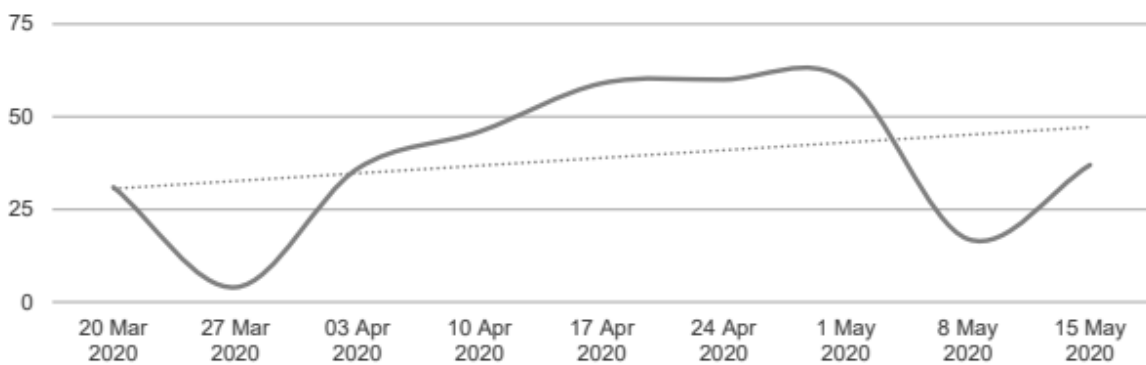
OUTTURN	20 Mar 2020	27 Mar 2020	03 Apr 2020	10 Apr 2020	17 Apr 2020	24 Apr 2020	1 May 2020	8 May 2020	15 May 2020
		4.0	Collected monthly				3.4	Collected Monthly	



C V 25

*Total new Council Tax Reduction Scheme claims*

OUTTURN	20 Mar 2020	27 Mar 2020	03 Apr 2020	10 Apr 2020	17 Apr 2020	24 Apr 2020	1 May 2020	8 May 2020	15 May 2020
	31	4	36	46	59	60	60	17	37

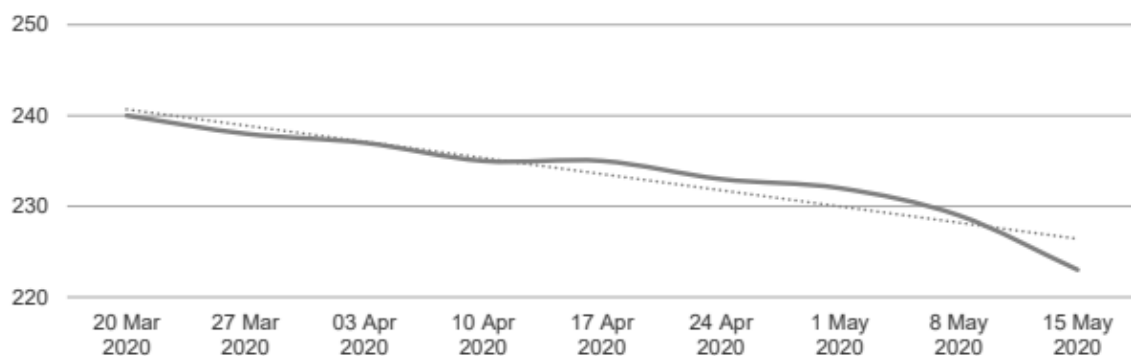


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*Total vacant commercial properties*

OUTTURN	20 Mar 2020	27 Mar 2020	03 Apr 2020	10 Apr 2020	17 Apr 2020	24 Apr 2020	1 May 2020	8 May 2020	15 May 2020
	240	238	237	235	235	233	232	229	223





9.3 Outside of this operational suite, in order to maintain delivery against the council's Corporate Plan, monitoring against the adopted Performance Management Framework was maintained throughout. Members will subsequently be presented with the latest quarterly report for consideration.

## 10. Next steps

- 10.1 The last few months have been a challenging time for services within the Performance and Administration portfolio. It has been a time not only dominated by a need to respond quickly to the crisis as it developed, but also a time to take stock and to progress a number of new initiatives, setting the foundations for recovery.
- 10.2 A fuller appraisal of the impact on services, especially in respect of those which collect income for the council, will not be fully possible until later in the year.
- 10.3 Steps are being taken to draw together key actions to be included in the Council's overall Covid-19 Recovery Programme.

IMPLICATIONS	APPENDIX 1
<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 25 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. This is identified at section 2 to this report.
<b>Finance and Value for Money</b>	It is currently too early to fully measure the impacts of the pandemic situation on the council's collection rates for council tax and business rates. These will continue to be monitored during the year and reported through the council's Performance Management Framework and will be presented to Members during the course of the year.
<b>Risk Assessment</b>	As per Finance & Value for Money section above.
<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>? No</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> <p>b. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper make a positive contribution to promoting equality? If yes, please explain answer. 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>
<b>Corporate Plan</b>	Strategic Objective #3 Progress
<b>Crime and Disorder</b>	N/A

<b>IMPLICATIONS</b>		<b>APPENDIX 1</b>
<b>Digital and website implications</b>	N/A	
<b>Safeguarding children and vulnerable adults</b>	N/A	