

Classification: Public

Key Decision: No

Gravesham Borough Council

Report to: Operational Services Cabinet Committee

Date: Wednesday, 24th March 2021

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Subject: Portfolio COVID-19 Update Report

Purpose and summary of report:

To provide Members of the Operational Services Cabinet Committee with an update against how the council has responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, both in terms of specific activities in response to the pandemic and how the council has managed to maintain service delivery across Council services.

Recommendations:

The report is for information purposes only.

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 23rd 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 In June 2020, a report was presented to the Committee to set out the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon the practical delivery of the respective services within the portfolio.
- 1.3 The purpose of this report is to provide an update to Members on the approach to the pandemic, both throughout the first lockdown and in response to any additional work streams that have been implemented as a result of the subsequent lockdowns announced by central government in November 2020 and January 2021. In addition, it provides an overview of how the council has continued to deliver its services, despite the additional pressure brought about by the pandemic.

2. Response to the COVID Work Streams

2.1 Throughout the pandemic, the Council has taken 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. Specifically in relation to the Operational Services Portfolio, the following actions have been taken:

2.1.1 Waste Management & Street Cleansing

2.1.1.1 Our Waste Collection and Street Cleansing teams have continued to deliver services despite the pressures posed by the pandemic.

2.1.1.2 To support residents generating extra waste while staying at / working from home, our Refuse & Recycling Teams have temporarily taken additional side waste. Compared to the previous year, 3,106.1 tonnes of additional waste has been collected, including a 14.7% increase in the recycling tonnage collected.

2.1.1.3 To support residents with bulky items to dispose of, our bulky waste team have worked additional Saturdays to deliver this service to residents more promptly. In the third quarter of 2020-21, our team carried out an additional 336 collections during the quarter to meet demand when compared to the previous year.

2.1.1 Horticultural Services

2.1.1.1 Throughout the pandemic, we have seen a significant increase in usage of all parks and open spaces across the borough. Being the primary destinations for the public to carry out their daily exercise with the large numbers of people homeworking, this has given rise to a marked increase in littering. To maintain the standard in these areas work schedules have been adapted in conjunction with Waste Management.

2.1.1.2 The Horticultural Team have the responsibility of inspecting the Council-owned playgrounds across the borough. These inspections have continued as scheduled throughout the pandemic, despite the additional demands placed on our frontline staff by the pandemic. These inspections have continued in order to ensure the safety of the play equipment on offer.

2.1.2 Cemeteries & Allotments

2.1.2.1 Throughout the pandemic the Cemeteries Team have rigorously followed all Government advice providing visitors to the cemeteries with the most up to date government advice by way of social media posts and notices on the main gates of the cemeteries.

2.1.2.2 The team have continued to provide burial services throughout the pandemic.

2.1.2.3 The Cemeteries & Allotments Manager has been in constant contact with all regular funeral directors and memorial masons ensuring the smooth running of the department whilst also

maintaining a high level of service. Corporate social media platforms have been utilised to issue essential and urgent updates to our community.

2.1.2.4 Establishing set service times has helped to manage times of high demand and has also reduced the administrative time spent telephoning the funeral directors about arrangements.

2.1.3 Regulatory Services

2.1.3.1 The Environmental Health Officers and Technicians within the Commercial Team have led the Council's regulatory response in relation to business compliance with the numerous Coronavirus regulations, as well as the COVID secure requirements for the Council's own workforce which fall within the remit of Health and Safety at Work. This has been a huge undertaking, requiring constant re-training and learning of new regulations, with almost 600 external complaints or enquiries, and 130 internal or corporate enquiries and notifications, being handled in total. This work has been vital in seeking to prevent the spread of the virus and protect public and employee health and safety.

2.1.3.2 In addition, officers across all teams within Regulatory Services have continued to proactively monitor, advise and enforce the various curfew and other requirements for the hospitality sector by way of evening or night-time visits across the whole borough.

3. Maintaining Council Services

3.1 Despite the substantial challenge presented by the pandemic, with the authority having to divert significant resources and, equally, adapt to a suite of new statutory requirements introduced by the government's legislative programme, the Council has continued to deliver quality frontline community services.

3.2 For the Operational Services portfolio, this includes but is not exclusive to:

- Ensuring that the Brookvale Depot is COVID secure to provide a safe working environment for all staff, as outlined in a previous report. These include enhanced cleaning & sanitisation procedures; the provision of hand sanitizer and cleaning wipes; social distancing signage; altered office layouts to facilitate social distancing; clear signage; and, regular communication with staff.
- 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.
- Waste Management and Horticultural Services have liaised throughout the pandemic to ensure that parks, open spaces and play sites are kept clean and free of litter. In some of the major parks, litter picking and bin emptying visits have had to increase significantly over and above what we would ordinarily be carried out. Park Rangers have also sanitised 'high touch' areas when visiting and inspecting play sites.

- As above, the Horticultural Team have continued to inspect play sites across the borough as scheduled throughout the pandemic, despite the additional demands placed on our frontline staff by the pandemic.
- The play site improvement programme was paused during 2020 as it was felt that any new play equipment would encourage individuals to meet up in contravention of social distancing guidelines. Several improvement projects are ready to expedite as soon as the conditions improve and it is acceptable for individuals to meet up outdoors and make use of the play sites.
- Burial Services have continued throughout the pandemic, although with restricted numbers of attendees. While burial services continued, rigorous social distancing rules were enforced. Unfortunately the chapel has had to remain closed for the duration due to the inability to provide a COVID-secure environment within the building.
- As well as continuing to act as a key consultee for planning applications, the Environmental Protection Team have handled some 1,000 complaints and enquiries, primarily relating to various nuisances such as noise and bonfires, since the first lockdown. Despite this significant challenge, approximately 99% of all such service requests received a first response with the five working day target.
- In addition to their COVID compliance remit, the Commercial Team have sought to continue to deliver food hygiene inspections and interventions in accordance with Food Standards Agency guidance to ensure, so far as reasonably practicable, that the public remain protected from food-borne illnesses.
- The Licensing Team have adapted extraordinarily well to the impacts of the pandemic, including the immediate introduction of agile working, to ensure that all licensing functions have continued to be available and provided to our customers, importantly, including all statutory functions. This was largely made possible by the teams' extensive, and now well established, digital offering.

For ease of reference, Members may wish to review Appendix 2 which provides the latest quarterly performance report as considered by the Operational Services Cabinet Committee on 9 February 2021. The report presents a statistical analysis of the Council's frontline service delivery for the portfolio throughout the pandemic.

- 3.3 Alongside the levels of performance achieved by its core frontline services, the Council has also worked throughout the pandemic to implement a suite of new projects and initiatives specifically designed to deliver on the pledges made within the authority's adopted Corporate Plan (2019-23).
- 3.4 For the Operational Services portfolio, this includes but is not exclusive to:
- The commencement of a Litter Bin Replacement Programme & Recycling 'On-the-Go' scheme has resulted in the replacement of the litter bins at St Andrew's Gardens with larger capacity units to improve litter management and collection efficiency. Recycling 'on-the-go' was also trialled successfully. The new style of litter bins have started to be rolled out at shopping parades across the borough and recycling 'on-the-go' will also be implemented at further parks, open spaces & shopping parades in the coming months.

- Continuing the digitisation of Waste Management services and processes by digitising the garden waste and trade waste services, making processes more efficient and seamless.
- Missed bins have been put onto our Collective system so that returning to missed properties is more efficient. The process is now entirely paperless, eliminating any risk of losing tickets etc. Missed bins that are reported by residents before 12pm go back on to the crews' work pack for the same day and anything reported after 12pm goes on the work pack for the following day so the new process is much more efficient; before the new process, it could take up to 4 days to return to a property. Bins that have an event logged against them, i.e. a contaminated bin, will be flagged up to a resident when they attempt to report a missed bin and so residents will easily be able to find out why their bin was not collected.
- Planning the further digitisation of Street Cleansing and play site inspections, including the exploration of the option to install litter bin sensors. These changes have the scope to fundamentally transform our Street Cleansing operations.
- Project planning for the delivery of enhanced recycling provision to Council-owned flats in the borough in conjunction with Housing, the Sheltered Team and private management companies.
- A Contaminated Bin Policy was adopted in June 2020 to help to tackle the increase in contamination rates in the past few years. Efforts have been undertaken to educate residents who contaminate their recycling bins and further communications are planned in the form of leafleting and a social media campaign. To date, average prohibitive contamination rates have fallen from 9.4% in 2019-20 to 6.1% to the third quarter of 2020-21.
- A Litter & Dog Waste Bin Policy was adopted by the Council in February 2021 to align with Government advice in developing an integrated strategy for dealing with the problem of litter and cleanliness that includes defining standards and working in partnership with local communities. The policy also complements the Council's pledge to become a carbon neutral borough by 2030, as the standards defined in the policy will support the public to be able to recycle as much of their litter on-the-go as possible. By having the appropriate number of litter bins with sufficient capacity in strategic locations, the efficiency of our Street Cleansing fleet can be optimised in order to reduce the number of vehicle journeys, further reducing our carbon footprint.
- The launch of the 'Adopt a Street' initiative for our Street Champions has continued, although the series of lockdowns has inhibited the borough-wide promotion of the campaign. The initiative currently boasts 230 volunteers who have pledged to 'adopt' more than 190 streets, parks, open spaces and alleyways.
- The Street Cleansing Team has continued to deliver an enhanced cleansing service in the town centre to support the on-going regeneration of the town centre. The town centre street cleansing service covers seven days a week from 7am till 6pm to enable the streets within the town centre to be cleaned more often and the litter bins to be emptied more frequently.

- The deep cleaning street washing machine has also continued to remove grime from the pavements throughout the pandemic, aided by the lower footfall during lockdown.
- Working closely with the Environmental Enforcement Team to align our processes and systems to strike a balance between the investigation of fly-tips and the timely removal of waste, including developing processes to give improved feedback to residents who report fly-tipping to the Council.
- Horticultural Services completed the winter 2020/21 tree planting program earlier this year than planned and saw the planting of 235 trees - (including 25 heavy standard trees). These trees were planted at various locations around the Borough on GBC owned land including Camer Park, Dashwood Open Space, Wombwell Park and the Riverside Leisure Area, Gravesend. Species planted included *Acer campestra*, *Corylus avellana*, *Crataegus monogyna*, *Prunus padus*, *Prunus spinosa*, *Rosa canina* *Pyrus chanticleer*, *Betula pendula*, *Tamarix* and *Prunus Pandora*.
- Horticultural Services also completed the annual winter bedding planting at Gordon Gardens, Windmill Gardens and Gravesend and Northfleet Cemeteries. These areas were bedded out with *polyanthus*, pansies, wallflowers, bellis and early flowering tulips to provide a much needed splash of colour in the Borough as we progress into spring.
- Works have started at Windmill Gardens on establishing a 'Buzz Garden' to help to redress the decline in wild bees in north Kent. The 'Buzz Garden' will be formed by turning the old unused grass tennis court into a mixed garden, full of flowers. It will be laid out in a formal style, to reflect the Georgian architecture of the area. Around this, the existing grass will be seeded with a vibrant mixture of wildflowers. Together, the wild and the cultivated areas will help to provide bumblebees with food and shelter throughout the seasons.
- An Allotment Bee Keeping Policy was adopted by the Council in November 2020 to acknowledge the critical role that honeybees play in the biodiversity of allotment sites and in helping improve the wider living environment. The policy will help to manage the process for enabling bee hives to be safely installed within our allotments and ensure their ongoing management.
- The commercialisation of the Vehicle Workshop (as Rosherville Servicing Limited) has continued despite obstacles posed by the pandemic. The MOT lane has been approved in principle by the DVSA (Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency) and works are being planned for the start of the new financial year, including upskilling the Workshop Staff to carry out these statutory inspections.
- A number of electric vans have been trialled by departments within the Operational Services directorate to ascertain the suitability of current EV technology for our operational requirements. As a result of the van trials, we have concluded that there is a place within the Council's fleet for electric vehicles and a proposal is being prepared for the managed transition to alternative fuelled vehicles.

4. Next Steps and Future Work Streams

- 4.1 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.
 - 4.1.1 We will continue to deliver refuse & recycling messages to assist residents working from home to effectively manage their waste and to help them to recycle as much as possible.
 - 4.1.2 With parks, open spaces and open spaces likely to remain busy as government restriction ease, park litter bin emptying and litter picking schedules have been brought forward and schedules now include attending every park each Saturday and Sunday morning. Extra resources have been put in place to ensure that Woodlands Park is serviced on mornings and afternoons at weekends.
 - 4.1.3 Playground equipment and outdoor gym equipment will be fully re-instated for public use from 21st June 2021, subject to the easing of government restrictions as planned.
 - 4.1.4 The number of people permitted to attend ashes interments may increase from 6 to 15 attendees from 12th April 2021. The number of people attending ashes interments may increase from 15 to 30 attendees from 17th May 2021, subject to the easing of government restrictions. The restrictions on funeral attendance may end and the chapel may re-open from 21st June 2021, subject to the easing of government restrictions.
 - 4.1.1 Owing to the restrictions put upon cemeteries and funeral services, an increase in the requests for the burial of cremated remains during the coming financial year is anticipated. There is also likely to be an increase in memorial services being held in the Cemeteries.
 - 4.1.2 It seems likely that the Commercial Team's 'new' remit in relation to COVID-compliance will continue for the foreseeable future. It is anticipated however that as we gradually move towards the new normal, this element of work will reduce and food hygiene inspections and interventions will increase. We currently await updated guidance from the Food Standards Agency on this matter.
 - 4.1.3 The Licensing Team also seek to re-focus efforts on becoming an even more accessible and efficient, modern day, service by maximizing the use of digital media to the benefit of customers and officers.

5. Background Papers

- 5.1 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.

IMPLICATIONS	APPENDIX 1
Legal	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.
Finance and Value for Money	<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"> • 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. • 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.
Risk Assessment	<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>
Data Protection Impact Assessment	<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 personal data or special category data or criminal offence data? 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 gdpr@medway.gov.uk. N/A</p>
Equality Impact Assessment	<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>
Corporate Plan	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.
Climate Change	Continued to work on projects including tree planting, bio-diversity, Recycling on the GO and electric vehicles. Full details are included within the report.
Crime and Disorder	N/A
Digital and website implications	N/A
Safeguarding children and vulnerable adults	N/A