

Classification: Public

Key Decision: No

Gravesham Borough Council

Report to: Performance & Administration Cabinet Committee

Date: 25 March 2021

Reporting officer: Director (Corporate Services)

Subject: Portfolio COVID Update Report

Purpose and summary of report:

To provide Members of the Performance & Administration Cabinet Committee with an update against how the council has responded to the COVID 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:

None – 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 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 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 workstreams

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 Performance & Administration Portfolio, the following actions have been taken:

2.1.1 *Allocation of business grants*

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.

During the first lockdown period, 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.

Following the subsequent lockdowns announced in November 2020 and January 2021, the council has continued to work with businesses in the payment of grants. Since the start of November 2020, the council has administered seven grant schemes and paid out a further £6,634,595 through individual payments to businesses across the borough.

The council continues to provide weekly data to the department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) on support issued, alongside returns on post payment assurance activity. The council's Counter Fraud team has checked the records of all Small Business Grant payments, Retail, Hospitality & Leisure Grant Relief, and Discretionary Business Grants awarded during the first national lockdown, against bank accounts that have been flagged as part of the national alerts from the National Anti-Fraud Network (NAFN) due to potential connections to organised crime; no matches were found. The council has also recently provided grant payment data to the National Fraud Initiative (NFI) to enable comparison with the data from other local authorities to identify potential instances of fraud.

2.1.2 *Council Tax Support*

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. 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.

2.1.3 *NHS Test and Trace Support Payments*

From 28 September 2020, persons receiving a positive COVID-19 test result or who have been told by the NHS to self-isolate because of close contact with someone who has COVID-19 are able to apply to receive a £500 lump sum payment, intended to address any financial hardship that may be associated with the need to self-isolate. Local authorities were required to administer NHS Test and Trace Support Payments to those on means tested benefits, as well as discretionary payments to others who may be experiencing financial hardship due to being unable to work. At the end of February, some 961 applications had been received and assessed by the Benefits Team, resulting in 307 payments totalling £153,500.

3. **Maintaining council services**

- 3.1 Staff have continued to predominantly work from home with staff being strategically redeployed within the service to assist in the processing of business support grants and test and trace support payment applications as needed, as well as support other workstreams, such as the council's support for vulnerable persons.
- 3.2 The Revenues and Benefits teams have continued to offer telephone support for customers who require assistance. Requests for face-to face interactions have been limited to urgent situations only, or where there is no other way of providing the service; demand for this service has been extremely low from customers.
- 3.3 Debt recovery processes have been reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure they provide relevant and up to date support and guidance for those experiencing financial hardship due to the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 3.4 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.
- 3.5 For the Performance and Administration portfolio, this includes but is not exclusive to:
 - the council's Revenues and Benefits service maintaining its strong performance averaging 12.9 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 18.1 days against a target of 20 days, despite the increased workload.
 - 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 February 2021, 93.60% of council tax had been collected, compared to 95.36% at this time last year; 95.02% of business rates has been collected compared to 94.82% in February 2020. Comparatively, it is estimated that collection rates nationally are down by an average of 2% for council tax and 8% for business rates.

- Maintenance of a sufficient level of work against the 2019-20 workplan to ensure that there is an adequate level of assurance work across the council. This will enable the Head of Internal Audit & Counter Fraud to deliver an annual opinion on the framework of internal control, which is a required as part of the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards and the Annual Governance Statement process.
- The identification of an additional £70,000 in council tax from erroneous discounts, and recovery of two council properties, one of which was also linked to a fraudulent right to buy.
- Maintenance of response times for Freedom of Information Requests in line with previous year performance (84% of requests responded to within 20 working days).

For reference, Members may wish to review Appendix 2, which provides the latest quarterly performance report as considered by the Performance and Administration Cabinet Committee on 10 February 2021. The report presents a statistical analysis of the council's frontline service delivery for the portfolio throughout the pandemic.

4. Next Steps and future workstreams

- 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. Key activities that are underway to support the council's recovery plan are as follows:
- 4.1.1 Maintenance of performance of the Benefits service to ensure claims for benefits are processed as quickly as possible, whilst looking to increase accessibility through the rollout of Citizens Access.
 - 4.1.2 Application of the decisions taken by Gravesham Borough Council and Kent County Council to reduce the liability of working age residents in receipt of Localised Support for Council Tax during the 2021/22 billing period.
 - 4.1.3 Continuation of support to people suffering financial hardship through the Local Support for Council Tax Scheme, as well as the Exceptional Hardship Scheme and Discretionary Housing Payments.
 - 4.1.4 Making use of the Low Income Family Tracker (LIFT) Platform to identify persons and households most likely to enter financial crisis and target support to help them.
 - 4.1.5 In accordance with the Corporate Debt Strategy, offering advice and support to those who are having difficulty meeting their payment obligations to the council.

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	<p>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.</p>	
Climate Change	<p>N/A</p>	
Crime and Disorder	<p>N/A</p>	
Digital and website implications	<p>N/A</p>	
Safeguarding children and vulnerable adults	<p>N/A</p>	