

Classification: Public
Key Decision: No

Gravesham Borough Council

Report to: Strategic Environment Cabinet Committee
Date: 31 March 2021
Reporting officer: Simon Hookway / Wendy Lane
Subject: Portfolio COVID Update Report

Purpose and summary of report:

To provide Members of the Strategic Environment 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. Corporate Delivery Plan

- 2.1 In responding to the pandemic, a Corporate Delivery Plan was established to identify the key projects for the Council and to act as a monitoring tool for senior managers to ensure progress continued to be made where possible.
- 2.2 Specifically in relation to the Strategic Environment Portfolio, updates against the relevant activities identified within the Corporate Delivery plan are as follows:
 - 2.2.1 Stalled Sites progression
 - 2.2.1.1 Sale of Lord Street undertaken and being progressed through the planning system.
 - 2.2.1.2 M Block and reported to planning committee on 22 July with resolutions to grant permission. S.106 Agreement close to completion.
 - 2.2.1.3 Clifton Slipways decision issued in late 2020 with plans to progress.
 - 2.2.1.4 The Charter (re)approved and decision issued on 21 December 2020.
 - 2.2.1.5 Albion Waterside (Canal Basin) moving forward with planning application submitted. Aspiration on the part of the developer to widen the site area (authority for CPO in place if necessary).
 - 2.2.1.6 Former police station now sold with pre-application discussions anticipated and associated approaches on this and M Block regarding joint working (authority for CPO in place if necessary).
 - 2.2.2 Lower Thames Crossing
 - 2.2.2.1 DCO submission withdrawn by Highways England on 20 November 2020 with suggestion of resubmitting in July / August 2021, with potentially further consultation anticipated in coming months.
 - 2.2.3 Denton Master Planning
 - 2.2.3.1 Final report having minor typographical corrections made but shared with the property team. Quote received for the development of a Supplementary Planning Document but requires refinement. On hold due to not being time-critical (may also link to wider NE Gravesend work) and other more immediate pressures.
 - 2.2.4 Local Plan
 - 2.2.4.1 Currently being progressed in line with agreed timetable however, delay in availability of KCC transport model is likely to cause problems with remaining on agreed timetable. The Council went out to consultation on 23 October 2020 on the Emerging Local Plan Partial Review, Site Allocations and Development Management Policies documents and supporting evidence. The consultation closed on 31 December 2020 and 2,500+ responses

were received from residents as well as responses from landowners/developers or their planning agents and other local authorities/parish councils/statutory consultees/infrastructure providers.

- 2.2.5 Planning Service Improvement Plan
 - 2.2.5.1 The internal business process review was commenced towards the end of the 2019 calendar year. As a result of the COVID pandemic and the changes to working practices across council services, the review was not able to progress as had originally been planned. A number of suggestions resulting from the review have been shared with the Chief Executive, which are being considered and, where appropriate, will be progressed through structural changes that are in the process of being reviewed for the Planning department. The development of a service improvement plan will be taken into account as part of this review and the forthcoming structural changes.
 - 2.2.6 Street Lighting Project (retention/handover to KCC)
 - 2.2.6.1 Notice to terminate Agreement sent to relevant Parishes by Recorded Delivery. Other Parishes advised.
 - 2.2.6.2 Structural testing complete with no major issues, but electrical testing delayed until May 2021 due to a lack of resources on the part of the contractor, Bouygues. The adoption identification work is complete and identifies what work will be needed to convert the assets, albeit some cannot be brought up to adoptable standards. Costs for these works are due shortly.
 - 2.2.6.3 Subject to the adoption costs currently awaited, the Council and the Parishes will be in a position to decide if they wish to have any non-adoptable units removed rather than being responsible for their ongoing maintenance.
- 2.3 There will be continued monitoring of the activities identified within the Corporate Delivery Plan by the council's Management Team.

3. Response to the COVID workstreams

- 3.1 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 Strategic Environment Portfolio, the following actions have been taken:
 - 3.1.1 *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.

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.

Following the subsequent lockdowns - Since the start of November 2020, the council has paid out a further £5,740,634 through 1,984 individual Local Restrictions Grant payments (as at 22/03/21) and £934,982 Additional Restrictions Grants (as at 12/03/21) to businesses across the borough announced in November 2020 and January 2021, the council has continued to work with businesses in the payment of grants.

4. Maintaining council services

- 4.1 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.
- 4.2 For the Strategic Environment portfolio, this includes but is not exclusive to:
- A continued 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% and 96.6% for both categories respectively in quarter three.
 - Importantly for the council's suppliers, the council has maintained the payment of 100% of all valid and undisputed invoices within 30 days.
- 4.3 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).
- 4.4 For the Strategic Environment portfolio, this includes but is not exclusive to:
- **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 and other nationally significant infrastructure planning projects**
For the 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. The London Resort proposal was submitted in late 2020 and has been accepted for examination. The Tilbury Flexible Energy Project is going through examination with the Council particularly been involved on Green Belt and air quality issues. Input into Medway Council's Good Routes for Growth Housing Infrastructure fund project.

5. Next Steps and future workstreams

- 5.1 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:
 - 5.1.1 Economic Stimulus package announced alongside the Council's annual budget.
 - 5.1.2 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
 - 5.1.3 Progression of the Local Plan is both a local and national priority. As demonstrated by the Ministerial Statement from the Minister of State The Rt Hon Christopher Pincher MP on 19/01/2021, confirming that the Government has set a clear deadline of December 2023 for all authorities to have up-to-date Local Plans in place. In December 2020, the Government also confirmed the housing levels that the Local Plan needs to be accommodating.

6. Background papers

- 6.1 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>

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	<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	A number of the Climate Change Action Plan actions relate to the planning system.
Crime and Disorder	N/A
Digital and website implications	N/A
Safeguarding children and vulnerable adults	N/A