

**Classification:** Public  
**Key Decision:** No

## Gravesham Borough Council

**Report to:** Cabinet  
**Date:** 21 February 2022  
**Reporting officer:** Michelle Batstone, Corporate Change Manager  
**Subject:** Update on GBC response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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

To provide Members with an update on the activities of various council departments in the continued response to the COVID-19 pandemic since the last update in March 2021.

### **Recommendations:**

Members are asked to note the updates provided in the report.

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 In March 2021, Members were provided with a report which set out a detailed update on the activities that officers had been undertaking since the start of the pandemic in order to support business and residents through the pandemic. The report also set out future workstreams which were put in place to assist in the borough recovery from the pandemic.
- 1.2 Twelve months later and the council has still been actively supporting residents and businesses to respond to the pandemic. The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an update on the activities that have been undertaken in the past year.

## **2. Supporting Vulnerable Residents**

- 2.1 Through the first three lockdowns, a team of officers supported a large number of residents through regular phone calls, provision of food packages and general support and advice.
- 2.2 This support has continued over the past year as follows:
  - *Ongoing COVID advice and support.*  
Dealing with general enquiries and concerns from the public around COVID; including where to access support or understanding restrictions.

- *Continued work with the volunteer centre to ensure ongoing volunteer support for those in need.*  
Whilst shielding, for example, ceased during the summer of 2021, many of those classed as clinically extremely vulnerable still need to take additional measures to remain safe.
- *Ongoing COVID grant funding support.*  
We have administered three tranches of support grants designed to focus on food, fuel and household support. These grants commenced in 2020-21 and have continued as follows:
  - Winter food and fuel grant 2020-21  
The total grant distributed was £66,660 which supported 712 families with children and 224 individuals and households without children. The council was supported by 15 community organisations in distributing the grants accordingly.
  - Additional food and fuel grant (July to Sep 2021)  
The total grant distributed was £46,615 which supported 368 families with children and 220 individuals and households without children. The council was supported by nine community organisations in distributing the grants accordingly.
- *Community Outbreak Management Fund.*  
We have continued to administer three tranches of funding, two disseminated via KCC and one directly awarded to GBC. The funds support work aimed to reduce the ongoing transmission of COVID and can range from communicating messages around staying safe, vaccination and boosters etc. to providing financial support to key community groups who are supporting our community e.g. food banks, volunteer centre.
- *Household Support Fund.*  
On 30 September 2021, the government announced that vulnerable households across the country would be able to access a new £500 million support fund to help them with essentials over the winter. This funding covers the period 6 October 2021 to 31 March 2022 inclusive and was initially allocated to County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England, with Kent County Council allocated £11.065m. On 21 December 2021 Kent County Council confirmed its intention to allocate £168,702.92 of its total funding to Gravesham Borough Council, on the basis this be directed to supporting a range of the most vulnerable households, particularly those unlikely to be known to the County Council. The funding has therefore been administered to provide financial support to local food banks, voluntary services and community groups as well as directly supporting rough sleepers, those at risk of homelessness or in temporary accommodation. In addition, a proportion of the fund will shortly be directly allocated to Council Tax Support claimants identified through the Low Income Family Tracker (LIFT) system as meeting certain poverty triggers around fuel and food.

2.3 The council is continuing to provide support and sign-posting to residents as necessary.

### **3. Supporting the vaccination programme**

- 3.1 The Woodville opened its doors as a vaccination centre for the borough in February 2021 and was open for 29 weeks. Over this time 104,434 vaccinations were delivered to residents of the borough. The centre was run by the Kent Community Health NHS Foundation Trust and was supported by the council's Woodville team of officers. A plaque commemorating The Woodville's role in the fight against COVID-19 has been put in place, and was unveiled by the Mayor when the vaccination centre closed in August 2021.
- 3.2 More recently, with the drive to increase the number of people receiving the vaccinations and booster jabs, the council has been working with NHS colleagues to identify a further, suitable site to act as a new vaccination centre. Due to the event programme planned for the Woodville, this site could not be used again. Instead, a number of local vaccination centres, offering vaccinations and booster jabs, were set up across the borough.

### **4. NHS Test and Trace Service**

- 4.1 The council continues to support the NHS Test and Trace service where necessary, with officers administering both mandatory and discretionary payments on a daily basis.
- 4.2 For the past year, this service has operated 7 days a week to provide support to the National Test & Trace service in contacting cases who have tested positive, where they have failed to provide information about their movements or who they have been in contact with. As well as checking records for additional contact information, officers undertake 'door knocks' – personal visits to addresses to try and make contact. To date, we have dealt with over 600 cases, many of which required a detailed records check, door knock and follow up call to ascertain specific information.
- 4.3 During 2021-22 Gravesham have administered 432 (£216,000) Test and Trace grants under the mandatory scheme and 287 (£143,500) across the discretionary scheme up to and including 01 February 2022 to successful applicants. In total however, the council has dealt with 1,666 applications in the same period; 975 mandatory and 691 discretionary applicants.

### **5. Allocation of business grants and business support**

- 5.1 Through the first three lockdowns, the council provided a significant amount of support to business in the borough both through the speedy allocation of grants but also through support and advice.
- 5.2 This support has continued throughout 2021-22, with the council responding to changes in government legislation promptly to assist businesses.
- 5.3 Communication channels including Gravesham Business Network and Gravesham for Business on Twitter, continue to grow; gaining over 200 members and 400 followers respectively since the beginning of the pandemic. Regular business news and details of assistance available to local businesses, is shared via these networks.

- 5.4 Two 'in person' business networking events with approximately 50 attendees have taken place in September and December 2021; in partnership with Whitehall Place, a new business hub at The Terrace and The Rum Puncheon, a public house showcasing newly-refurbished private function rooms.
- 5.5 In January 2022, Gravesham launched a Kent-first partnership to provide 12 months' free membership with the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB), to a limited number of businesses trading within the Gravesham Borough. The objective is to grow access to a network of independent, professional business advice and advocacy to help small businesses to thrive. To date, there have been eight applications which are in the process of being reviewed.
- 5.6 A commitment has been made to sponsor the Gravesham Business Awards 2022 which are due to take place in May 2022. This is an opportunity to identify and celebrate the success of local businesses who have innovated through the pandemic and hopefully to identify those who are adapting successfully to climate change and the Borough's 'net zero' ambitions.
- 5.7 Since Christmas 2020 the council has administered the following grants on behalf of government:
- *Additional Restrictions Grant*  
Initially announced in October 2020, the grant scheme was extended on a number of occasions during 2021 to support businesses severely impacted by COVID restrictions and, more recently, the rise of the Omicron variant. A total of £2.17m has been paid out through the scheme since December 2020, with £1.01m already paid in 2021-22, equating to 455 payments being made by the council. A further application process was launched in January 2022.
  - *Restart Grants*  
This scheme was intended to support non-essential retail, hospitality, leisure, personal care and accommodation sectors in reopening safely as COVID restrictions lifted in April 2021. One-off cash grants of up to £18,000 (£6,000 for non-essential retail) were made to 507 businesses totalling £3.66m.
  - *Omicron Hospitality and Leisure Grant*  
Announced in December 2021, this is a one-off grant to support hospitality, leisure and accommodation businesses expected to be challenged by the latest COVID variant. One-off cash payments of up to £6,000 can be claimed by eligible businesses and the application process opened in late-January 2022. Funding of £594,036 has been provided by government to enable payments under the grant scheme to be made.
- 5.8 The support provided by the council has been well received by businesses across the borough. A recent article in the Autumn edition of Your Borough provided an overview of the activities of the council and provided some positive feedback from local businesses.

## 6. Economic Stimulus Package

- 6.1 An economic stimulus package of measures was presented to Full Council in February 2021. These support business recovery in response to the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic and are funded out of the £3,088,725 of Additional Restrictions Grant allocated to Gravesham as part of the Government's financial support to businesses.
- 6.2 At that time, Additional Restrictions Grant funding was available for expenditure up to the end of March 2022. This was subsequently extended to 31 July 2021, as a result of a delay in the reopening of businesses under the Government's 'roadmap'. 100% of Additional Restrictions Grant was defrayed in Gravesham and as a result an additional allocation of £692,120 was made available and is helping to extend and supplement planned economic stimulus activity.
- 6.3 Overall, £2,181,430 has been distributed in the form of Additional Restriction Grants, primarily to businesses outside the business rates system that were not eligible for Local Restrictions Support Grants (LRSG) and Restart Grants, within specific sectors.
- 6.4 The sum of £770,065 was paid out to applicants for Severity of Impact Grants to businesses that had not benefited from other Covid grants and/or were of strategic importance to the Borough's economy.
- 6.5 The sum of £136,244 was distributed to community organisations whose trading operations had been impacted.
- 6.6 The sum of £63,106 was paid out in the form of Licence Holder Grants to taxi drivers, licensed premises and Members' Clubs.
- 6.7 The sum of £630,000 remains to be allocated and this is being distributed in the form of economic stimulus grants to applicants - business start-ups, use of vacant commercial units and adaptation projects in response to the Pandemic. Online applications are currently being encouraged for these grants.
- 6.8 Funding was allocated in the economic stimulus package to contribute to the funding of the Kent & Medway Growth hub in 2021/22. That sum is no longer required and has been re-allocated to other activity, including a Federation of Small Businesses membership opportunity for 50 local businesses.
- 6.9 In response to rising unemployment, the council committed to participate in the national Kickstart Scheme and has taken on 34, 6-month placements for young people. Of these, 19 are currently in place and two vacancies are due to be filled. To date one has been offered a full-time position with the council. Alongside this, the council is continuing to develop its apprenticeship and work placements.
- 6.10 Linked to the economic stimulus package, Welcome Back Funding (and Reopening High Streets Funding prior to that) has enabled the preparation of a Town Centre Recovery Action Plan and support for a number of actions to support the reopening and recovery of the Town Centre and local centres. These include marketing and promotion activity, 121 business support and workshops focussing on changing consumer habits and events and activity draw people back into the Town Centre. It is also funding area enhancements such as clean-ups and new planting schemes.

## **7. Council tax support**

- 7.1 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. In addition, further funding support has been made available to residents as follows:
- Hardship Payments to working age CTR claimants (£50 from KCC and £5 from Gravesham to cover council tax increase for 2021/22) totalling £255,000 (KCC element £232,000, GBC £23,000) have been paid out.
  - Exceptional Hardship and S13a non-claimant payments including those identified via LIFT (Low Income Family Tracker) will be total nearly £30,000.
- 7.2 The council will continue to support residents as necessary as the borough recovers from the pandemic.

## **8. Support for the homeless in the borough**

- 8.1 From 1 July 2021 the Rough Sleeping Service was relaunched and introduced a new Rough Sleeping Partnership Manager as well as introducing new support providers in including North Kent Mind and Serveco. This was the first time that the Gravesham Rough Sleeping Service was able to offer essential mental health support to those in crisis.
- 8.2 The Housing Service claimed £81,600 from government under the Protect Plus and Cold Weather Fund which enabled temporary placements into accommodation as well essential home starter packs for those in desperate need.
- 8.3 Gravesham consistently worked on the newly purchased 10-bedroom supported accommodation throughout a challenging year and were able to successfully open the scheme. This placed 10 entrenched rough sleepers from Gravesham into a high quality, safe and supported environment. This accommodation is manned 24 hours a day and offers support with mental health, drug and alcohol addiction and general living skills. In addition, the Rough Sleeping Service has also found accommodation for 11 other rough sleepers into privately rented, social housing and other supported provision. The service is equipped to provide follow on in reach to ensure the tenancies are sustained.
- 8.4 The Rough Sleeping Service have worked alongside Gravesham Sanctuary to provide a winter provision. This has seen 10 rough sleepers placed into accommodation avoiding 1081 days off the streets.
- 8.5 The Housing Options Service has completed a full restructure and introduced a new Landlord Liaison Service to build the relationship with the Private Sector. In addition, there has been growth within the service to ensure that we can provide an exceptional service to residents in Gravesham.

## **9. Support for council officers and Members**

- 9.1 Supporting the mental health and well-being of council officers has been critical throughout the pandemic. This is not only in ensuring that the council services continue to be provided to residents but also ensuring that staff welfare is prioritised to ensure all staff are supported through this difficult time.
- 9.2 Care First, the Councils Employee Assistance programme have been running daily webinars throughout the pandemic covering a wide range of topics related to health & wellbeing.
- 9.3 The Hybrid Working policy was implemented on 1 November 2021 for a trial period, due to be reviewed on 31 March 2022. Providing officers roles permit they are required to work in the office a minimum of two days per week, with the remainder of the week either from home or the office.
- 9.4 A number of drop in sessions were held by the HR Team throughout the pandemic to allow officers to keep in touch with colleagues whilst working at home. Each session had a topic, such as food, travel, hobbies etc. Management Team also hosted a few sessions during this time
- 9.5 Support for Members has also been important, ensuring that Members are fully supported in their roles so that they are able to continue to work for their constituents. All Members have now been moved to the Microsoft 365 platform, enabling them to meet virtually and engage with their residents in a better way.
- 9.6 Committee meetings remained virtual during the first few months of 2021 until the expiry of the regulations allowing them to take place on 6 May 2021. After this, meetings have taken place with a combination of safety measures in place such as facemasks, social distancing, and a reduced numbers of participants in the case of full council meetings.
- 9.7 Virtual meeting software such as Zoom and now Microsoft Teams have become valuable in conducting briefings and meetings with external partners. They have also been used for training sessions with a number of sessions in the annual members training programme being held virtually.

## **10. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- 10.1 There are no background papers pertaining to this report.

IMPLICATIONS	APPENDIX 1
<b>Legal</b>	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.
<b>Finance and Value for Money</b>	<p>The council has received some funding to support the activities in relation to COVID.</p> <p>The Council received a non-ring-fenced COVID-19 grant of £609k from DLUHC (then MHCLG) as part of the 2021/22 budget to assist with various expenditure pressures arising from the pandemic. To date, this has been used on a range of items including protective clothing and equipment, IT equipment to support agile working, temporary accommodation measures to support the homelessness, and grants to local community groups involved in responding to the pandemic.</p> <p>In addition, the Finance Team continues to support the COVID-19 response through involvement in the grants distribution process to local businesses, including the recently announced Omicron Hospitality and Leisure Grant. This includes facilitating payments via the creditors process as well as completing a series of post-assurance checks required by Central Government/</p>
<b>Risk Assessment</b>	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. The council continues to monitor its services to ensure they continue to be resilient as well as supporting staff to undertake their roles whilst ensuring their own health and well-being.
<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>



IMPLICATIONS	APPENDIX 1
	<p data-bbox="432 219 1469 286">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 data-bbox="483 304 523 331">No</p> <p data-bbox="432 371 1525 465"><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>	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.
<b>Climate Change</b>	There are no specific Climate Change implications resulting from this report. The piloting of the new Hybrid Working Policy, which has been developed in response to the pandemic will however, work towards the reduction in emissions from staff commuting as more people develop a hybrid approach to working.
<b>Crime and Disorder</b>	There are no specific crime and disorder implications resulting from this report.
<b>Digital and website implications</b>	There are no specific digital or website implications resulting from this report.
<b>Safeguarding children and vulnerable adults</b>	Continued activities, such as the support provided to those deemed as Clinically Extremely Vulnerable, has ensured that safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults has continued to be at the heart of all council activities.