

## **CABINET**

**7 JULY 2020**

### **COVID-19 RESPONSE**

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Alan Jarrett, Leader of Council  
Report from: Neil Davies, Chief Executive  
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#### **Summary**

This report provides further information as to the Council's response to the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) global pandemic, following a report to the previous Cabinet meeting (9 June 2020).

It also further outlines the approach in the coming weeks as priorities around the Council's response alter to reflect the partial lifting of the lockdown and moves to restart the economy and reopen businesses and schools.

#### **1. Budget and Policy Framework**

1.1 The Cabinet has responsibility for service provision, therefore, this is a matter for Cabinet.

#### **2. Background**

2.1 On 12 March 2020, the World Health Organisation advised that COVID-19 had become a Global Pandemic. In response the Local Resilience Forum (Kent Resilience Forum) put in place a Strategic Coordination Group (SCG). On 19 March 2020 the SCG decided that the virus was indeed a public health emergency and the response required would need a joint multi-agency approach. In accordance with the Civil Contingencies Act (CCA) 2004, this resulted in Medway activating its emergency procedures to put in place a Command and Control structure. On 24 March 2020, the SCG had declared COVID-19 a Major Incident.

2.2 The national and local response to the COVID-19 crisis has been unprecedented in peacetime. For the Council this has involved action across many spheres of activity both with regard to community leadership and the delivery of critical services across Medway. In delivering this response, much of the activity has been in partnership with other organisations including the Kent Resilience Forum (KRF) NHS, Police, care providers, local businesses, the voluntary and community sector and Medway Norse.

2.3 Following Government guidance, the Council's response has been focused on ensuring the core objectives of reducing the spread of the virus whilst protecting the most vulnerable members of our community. In doing this the efforts of Council staff across all directorates in both front line and support staff has ensured the continuation of key services. The Council response has been in line with emergency planning best practice and guidance.

### 3. Response management

3.1 In accordance with the CCA, Strategic (GOLD) and Tactical (SILVER) command structures were implemented to establish a local response to the pandemic. A COVID-19 strategy was agreed as was a process for considering and recording all decisions made.

3.2 The Medway Gold Group continues as part of the current structure. The Tactical Command (SILVER) has a cell structure that ensures the Council's critical services are being maintained.

3.3 Other cells in the structure are concentrating on non-critical services, e.g. Registration and Bereavement, Environmental services, Leisure and Heritage etc.

3.4 All of the service based cells are supported by Finance, HR, ICT, Governance, Procurement etc., also categorised as cells in the tactical response structure.

3.5 In line with Medway's Emergency Plan, the Tactical Commander has established an Emergency Control Centre within Gun Wharf. Due to the nature of the incident, much of the daily communication is done via Microsoft TEAMS to maintain distance between key staff. A daily Situation Report process is in place to report a Common Operating Picture for all of the designated cell areas.

3.6 Whilst not directly involved in either Strategic or Tactical Command Structure, the Leader has been heavily involved at all stages of the emergency, with daily briefings from the Chief Executive and weekly detailed briefings from the wider command teams. Early in the process the Leader established a weekly cross-party briefing in order to share information, obtain feedback and offer reassurance. The Leader has also given regular community reassurances messages to the Medway community.

### 4. Outbreak Control Plan

4.1 The Department of Health and Social Care has asked upper tier local authorities in England, to develop a COVID-19 Local Outbreak Control Plan. The primary purpose of these plans is to prevent, identify, and contain COVID-19 outbreaks collaboratively with partners. With provision of £300M in Government funding to support the plans delivery, Directors of Public Health in each upper tier local authority are required to develop these outbreak control plans, to be submitted to Government before the end of June 2020.

- 4.2 The Kent and Medway COVID-19 Local Outbreak Control Plan is being developed collaboratively with partners. These include Public Health England, the Local Resilience Forum and various council committees including Cabinet, the Medway Health and Wellbeing Board, the Kent and Medway Joint Health and Wellbeing Board, as well as the Kent and Medway CCG.
- 4.3 It is likely that there will be a need for officers, specifically the Director of Public Health and Chief Executive, to respond to local outbreaks at short notice. The Leader may also be required to use powers of urgency to protect the population of Medway.
- 4.4 Cabinet will have an opportunity to consider the Kent and Medway COVID-19 Local Outbreak Control Plan in due course but in the meantime the plan has been submitted to Government, as this was required to be done by the end of June. The Cabinet agreed at its meeting on 9 June 2020 to delegate authority to the Director of Public Health, in consultation with the Leader, to submit the Outbreak Control Plan.

## 5. Voluntary and Community Sector

- 5.1 As part of the COVID-19 emergency response, Medway Council established a Voluntary and Community Sector Cell principally led by the Public Health team. The cell had the following priorities:
- Establish a community support hub that assisted residents with accessing food, prescriptions and social contact, working in partnership with third sector groups who had the same ambition
  - Co-ordinate voluntary sector efforts to support residents negatively affected by COVID-19
  - Co-ordinate volunteers to support residents negatively affected by COVID-19
  - Support voluntary sector organisations who have experienced a large increase in demand due to COVID-19
  - Pool collective insights so that potential scams are identified and reported to correct authorities.
- 5.2 This Cell continues but at the time of writing the report achieved the following outputs:
- Delivered 3,541 seven day food parcels, equating to over 110,000 meals for vulnerable residents
  - Supported more than 200 residents with prescription collections, largely linking them with NHS volunteers
  - Over 200 onward referrals for services such as mental health support, debt advice, social care and housing advice
  - The sport and leisure service added a home shopping support service in April and within 6 weeks were supporting over 300 residents with their weekly food shop. This service is now winding down in preparation for centres reopening and residents referred to local volunteers to help if assistance is still needed.
  - The Council's vulnerable people hub has significantly reduced in demand but will stay operational, as the service outputs make up a

critical part of the outbreak control plan. The Council are also waiting on full guidance on what role it needs to play in supporting 'shielding' residents from central government, which may affect the direction of travel for the hub.

- 5.3 The Council also worked with local charities, faith groups and community groups to provide invaluable support to residents throughout the emergency period. The combined support that these groups provided to over 8,000 residents included:
- More than 1,000 food parcels, resulting in over 20,000 meals
  - 4,000 befriending calls to residents
  - 500 shopping trips conducted
  - 150 prescriptions collected
  - Other tasks that were supported include linking up pen pals, Zoom parties, gas and electric card top ups, daily activity packs and community challenges
- 5.4 As the work to get back to business as usual starts, a voluntary sector strategy group has been established including council, NHS and third sector organisations. This group has a number of objectives including identifying shared risks and opportunities for the voluntary sector, NHS and council in their shared ambition of supporting residents. It will also aim to ensure we have a joined approach with volunteer schemes, keep developing a positive relationship between the sector and the local authority. The financial viability of the third sector is an important aspect of this ongoing relationship.
- 5.5 To address some of the immediate concerns from the third sector, Medway Council worked with Kent Community Foundation (KCF) to establish a Coronavirus Emergency Fund. The focus of the fund was to offer community organisations funding to deal with emerging issues in the community affecting vulnerable people as a result of the continuing threat of COVID-19.
- 5.6 As of mid-May, the fund had supported a number of Medway organisations:
- 81 applications have been approved to Medway based organisations
  - Medway based organisations have received circa £112,000 of grant support
- 5.7 Medway Council has also awarded funding direct to third sector organisations that are providing immediate and urgent support to vulnerable residents, to the value of £177,000.

## 6. Critical Services

### **Vulnerable adults**

- 6.1 Medway Council provides support to over 2,700 adult residents with care and support needs, and the Council has ensured that those needs continue to be met during the COVID-19 pandemic, despite Government passing the Care Act Easement legislation, which allowed local government to prioritise the delivery of services to ensure that the most urgent and acute needs continued to be met.

- 6.2 We have responded positively to all Government guidance relating to COVID-19, including the Adult Social Care Action Plan, and have worked closely in partnership with health to implement new arrangements, particularly to support the prompt discharge of residents from hospital. This work ensured that Medway Hospital was well placed to manage any additional pressures resulting from COVID-19.
- 6.3 We have recently submitted our Care Home Support plan to the Department of Health and Social Care, which outlines the steps Medway Council has taken, in partnership with health, to support our care homes.

### **Children and Young People**

- 6.4 Children's Services moved swiftly and robustly to respond to the Covid-19 crisis, continuing to safeguard the most vulnerable children when face to face contacts are restricted, and availability of staff to undertake work with children is potentially limited. Priority Risk Assessments have been completed for every child and young person who is in receipt of a service identifying the historic risk, present danger, and any strengths and support mechanisms available to the family to help them to reduce the level of risk. These are reviewed regularly. This system has ensured that there is consistent decision making and effective oversight of all cases and particularly where children are most at risk.
- 6.5 Detailed and comprehensive operating procedures have provided staff with clarity on dealing with the crisis, including issues such as how to maintain contact with families, working from home and managing all aspects of child protection planning and processes. Challenges posed by PPE and the provision of IT equipment were minimised by a supportive corporate/tactical response.
- 6.6 Staff health and welfare has also been paramount. Risk assessments have been undertaken prior to every visit to ascertain whether families are symptomatic. PPE has been made available (masks, sanitiser and gloves) for staff undertaking essential home visits. Regular communications have been going out to staff. Staff have adapted to new and innovative ways of keeping in contact with children virtually.
- 6.7 Some of the young people in our care have welcomed the virtual form of contact with their social worker, appropriate to their circumstances. Youth workers have developed online activities which can be accessed by young people but also used by foster carers. Contact for children in care with their families has been maintained either virtually or using our contact centre, with appropriate social distancing measures and hygiene in place.
- 6.8 Early Help hubs in the community have remained open to offer practical support to families and a base for partners to work from.
- 6.9 Statutory meetings requiring multi-agency involvement across the child protection processes have taken place in virtual form throughout the response phase and attendance has been very strong, as a result essential meetings such as Child Protection Conferences and the Children's Improvement Board have not been cancelled. Regular meetings are held

with senior police and with health, ensuring Covid-19 does not impact the partnerships ability to respond to the most vulnerable children and/or emerging issues around domestic violence, drugs related county lines and other contextual safeguarding. There has been good cooperation between schools and Children's Social Care, both proactive in contacting vulnerable children not attending and liaison to maximise the drawn down of the digital support offered by the government to close the gap for these children. Daily consultation sessions have been made available to schools as children are returning, in order to identify and respond quickly to any emerging concerns.

## **Education**

- 6.10 We started joint planning work with schools very early in the crisis, working effectively through our Head Teacher's reference group (initially daily and then stepping down to bi-weekly). This joint approach has been in place from March, when Government ordered schools to close for all but vulnerable and disadvantaged children, and those of key workers. All meetings are followed by a briefing note, which is sent to all head teachers, trust chief executives and college principals. The group has given invaluable advice to enable prompt and clear decisions. We have been able to proactively engage regarding issues and problems within school environments and multi-academy trusts. Schools, including special schools, have remained open for key workers' children.
- 6.11 As of April 2020, we began to plan with our education partners, in line with the position that the council supported the phased re-opening of schools to as many pupils as possible in the nursery, year R, year one and year six as soon as practicable, on or after 1 June 2020.
- 6.12 In order to support schools, while ensuring we have the capacity to respond to head teachers who most need help, we have provided support with risk assessment evaluation, convened weekly meetings with trade unions, giving head teachers comprehensive advice about key issues such as the use of PPE.
- 6.13 The feedback from head teachers is that they feel they have been appropriately supported through both phases – the initial closure with only small numbers of pupils able to attend, and the phased re-opening.
- 6.14 In Medway, 76 primary schools (97 per cent) and 17 secondary schools(94 percent) have confirmed they have reopened in line with the government expectations and we continue to offer our support to head teachers during these challenging times..
- 6.15 As we move out of lock down we will be creating teams of integrated staff (incl. early help workers, assessment social workers, mental health workers, YOT etc.) regularly accessible to schools via Microsoft Teams to help identify priority needs of young people and parents in Medway and respond effectively to any surge that may occur.

## **Household Waste**

- 6.16 All of the weekly household waste and recycling kerbside collections have continued throughout the crisis, despite a continued 20% increase in household waste.
- 6.17 The Capstone and Hoath Way household waste and recycling centres reopened on 15 May 2020. A booking system was set up to ensure sites were not flooded with materials and to ensure we can manage social distancing on site. After the first week of high demand, as expected after a period of closure, the sites have maintained a steady flow of residents and capacity is sufficient to cope with current demand. The Cuxton site remains closed for the time being, due to impact on local road network, and demand for the site to reopen has been minimal.

### **Rough Sleepers**

- 6.18 Government issued an “everyone in” directive to all local housing authorities to provide accommodation for rough sleepers. The service was commended by MHCLG for its response in rapidly mobilising 30 spaces of accommodation in a local hotel and other forms of temporary accommodation. To respond to the complex nature of supporting the cohort, additional services were brought in to have a presence in this new provision including the Medway Taskforce, volunteer groups and health services. This contributed to not only removing some of the most vulnerable from the streets but keeping them there over the 10 weeks after receiving the directive from MHCLG.

### **Registrations and Bereavement**

- 6.19 When lockdown was first enforced instruction was received by the Registrar General that Deaths could be registered over the telephone and necessary documents could be transmitted electronically. This required a complete re-design of the Registration Service, which was implemented seamlessly in Medway.
- 6.20 With the assistance of four re-deployed staff from the Libraries Service, work has started in earnest to catch up on the 1200 unregistered babies born in Medway since lock-down began. The additional staff gives the service the capacity to register 180 babies per week, but with 100 babies being born each week on average, the additional staff will be required until mid-November at least to complete the task.
- 6.21 The Prime Minister announced on the 23 June that Marriages and Civil Partnership ceremonies could resume on the 4 July 2020. Guidance to enable this is expected by the week commencing 29 June 2020. The service has conducted 3 Registrar General's License (death bed) ceremonies whilst in lockdown.

### **Highways**

- 6.22 The Highways Departments' direction and guiding principles have not changed, we have remained focused on safely maintaining our critical services, at all times, minimising the impact on our customers and network users. We have worked in partnership, with Volker Highways, to ensure that

“business as usual” has been maintained, as far as the situation has allowed.

- 6.23 Reactive works have continued as planned, aided by the supply chain and the support of subcontractors. We have utilised the period to undertake additional patching, whilst the network has less vehicle traffic on it and in line with the government guidance on Permit Schemes.
- 6.24 The Permit Scheme has continued business as usual, encouraging possession of the network, during this quiet period and working with our statutory utility companies to facilitate their essential works and assist in the national response.
- 6.25 Whilst our planned lining programme commenced on time, our drainage cleansing regime was delayed, but is now underway, as were our maintenance schemes, which are now due to commence in the next 2 weeks but will all be delivered in year. Our capital scheme in Strood is also programmed to reopen.
- 6.26 The team have continued to work on large scale projects during the COVID-19 period, including the award of an LED Scheme, successfully bidding for the Challenge Fund Tranche 3a and presenting a programme for the capital addition received from the Department for Transport (DfT), within weeks.
- 6.27 The Highways team, alongside Volker Highways, are now completely back to business as usual, excepting a high number of staff continuing to work at home, but as buildings are deemed COVID-19 compliant, this final part of the service will phase back to office working, in line with social distancing guidance.

## 7. Non-critical services

- 7.1 Government advice was followed around the closure of non-critical services and facilities such as sports centres and libraries.
- 7.2 As part of the COVID-19 emergency response Trading Standards were tasked on the 22 March 2020 with the enforcement of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020. The regulations created the regime that caused the closure of many commercial and retail premises. The legislation is a key mechanism in the Government’s control strategy.
- 7.3 Since this date the Trading Standards team have:
- Maintained an overt presence in our High Streets and shopping Centres
  - Implemented the regulations with the overwhelming support of Medway businesses
  - Engaged with and visited 6,102 commercial premises
  - Voluntarily closed 73 non-compliant premises
  - Issued 11 Formal prohibition notices
  - Issued 9 Internet take down notices for prohibited businesses
  - Managed additional workload that manifested around scams, counterfeit PPE, product safety, animal health and travel law



- The team will also be engaging with the Sports Grounds Safety Authority (SGSA) and Gillingham Football Club to ensure that the relevant changes to the Safety Certificate and Operations Manual are implemented to allow for the resumption of competitive football when that is permitted.
- 7.4 Trading Standards will continue to rigorously enforce revised closure provision as shops and functions are permitted to re-open.
- 7.5 Local bus services operated at 50-75% of pre-COVID levels to provide key workers with journeys to work and meet basic shopping needs; public transport usage reduced to around 10% of pre-COVID levels.
- 7.6 Public car parking remained available throughout, with enforcement activity particularly in Controlled Parking Zones (CPZs) focussed on ensuring the safe operation of the public highway.
- 7.7 Free parking was made available to all NHS and Care Workers.
- 7.8 Green Spaces have been maintained by Medway Norse throughout the crisis ensuring open spaces have remained available as an essential part of combating social isolation and for exercise and dog walking.
- 7.9 The country parks have remained open throughout, with only the car parks being closed for a period of time until Government advice was changed to enable residents to drive short distances for exercise.
- 7.10 On advice from Government, all children's play areas and adult outdoor exercise equipment have remained closed throughout. The two skate parks, tennis courts and pump track were closed for a number of weeks but reopened following the initial easing of lock down measures.
- 7.11 A Resource Cell was established as part of the Silver Tactical Command Structure to manage the redeployment of staff from non-critical services to critical or central support services.
- 7.12 This approach ensured that staff in non-critical services remained engaged in worthwhile work and enabled the Council to maintain critical services without the need to employ extra staff. This involved the following re-deployment activities: Over 150 staff have been successfully redeployed using this methodology.
- The 2 mayor's drivers have been redeployed as crematorium operators
  - 6 library staff were redeployed to customer support to assist with answering calls/admin
  - 23 staff from sport, leisure, tourism and heritage have undergone training to assist with adult social care
  - 3 staff from Business Change and Community Safety have been redeployed to Adult Social Care Partnership Commissioning to coordinate PPE requests from Care Homes

- The Business Change Team have liaised with Education to support Easter Holiday provision for children of key workers and vulnerable children
- 5 staff have been identified that can be redeployed to run the Emergency Coordination Room if it opens full time
- The Business Change Team developed and managed a process to support the testing of Council and care home staff. Additional staff were redeployed to support with the administration of this process.
- Internal Audit & Counter Fraud have redeployed 11 staff (2 to finance and 9 to Revenue and Benefits)
- 89 staff from Sport, Leisure, Tourism and Heritage are supporting vulnerable people with shopping for groceries
- 4 Road Safety staff have been re-trained to process revenue and benefits indexing to assist with the increased demand for Universal Credit claims
- 1 Finance Officer from the Special Educational Needs Service will be partially redeployed to work on financial reconciliation within the theatres as a result of cancelled/exchanged shows and events
- 4 staff from the libraries service have been assisting with discretionary business grants
- 6 staff from the libraries service are now helping to register births and work through the backlog of birth registrations

7.13 The Resource Cell continues to support critical services and is currently redeploying circa 70 staff to act as “Greeters” to support the safe re-opening of Medway’s high streets and town centres.

## 8. Finance

8.1 Across all Finance teams, staff have continued to primarily work from home throughout the Covid-19 response and services continue to operate business as usual. The planned work of the Audit and Counter Fraud Team was considered non-essential in the initial Response effort, in line with the Council’s Business Continuity Plan. As such team members were redeployed to support more critical services within the division, supporting the organisation’s Response ‘command and control’ structure and monitoring the impact of decisions taken through the Response phase, not least the potential for fraud. From 1 July the Audit and Counter Fraud Team have resumed proactive assurance and counter fraud activities, working to a new agile plan focussing on the areas of highest risk and where the team’s resources can add the most value.

8.2 In addition to continuing with the day to day administration of the Council Tax, Business Rates and Benefits functions, including surges in workload volumes of up to 300% across some teams, the Medway Revenues and Benefits Service successfully implemented the following new schemes following government announcements:

- Council Tax Hardship Fund, representing £2.056million of grant funding to reduce the liability for those in receipt of Local Support for Council Tax (LSCT) by a further £150. We have distributed £1.449million to current LSCT cases. A further £166,000 will be used to apply a credit of

£208 to the council tax accounts of around 800 claimants who have received the additional £20 per week of working tax credits; this additional tax credit would otherwise be considered additional income and reduce the award of LSCT. The balance of £441,000 is available to fund discounts for new claimants and applications from Council Tax payers experiencing hardship, under our existing discretionary hardship relief scheme.

- Expanded Business Rates Retail discount to 100%, including leisure and hospitality sites and removing the Rateable Value cap, through which we have awarded £33.166million.
- Grants for small businesses and retail, hospitality and leisure businesses of grants scheme of £10,000 or £25,000 dependent on Rateable Value, representing a grant from government of £39.712million.
- We have distributed £33.580million to date, with £1,848,250 being ring-fenced for the new discretionary business grants scheme administered by colleagues in Economic Development. The balance of our allocation of government grant will fund further applications, which continue to be received.
- Business Rates holiday for non-local authority nursery schools through which we have awarded £286,000.
- Changes to Housing Benefit include increasing the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) and additional earnings disregard.

We have therefore distributed a total of £66.746million in financial support to date.

8.3 The Finance Operations Service has continued to deliver all routine payroll, insurance and finance systems support throughout the response. All payments to Council suppliers have been set to immediate terms on the financial system and daily payment runs implemented to ensure the Council's supply chain and local businesses are supported.

8.4 The Finance Strategy team successfully closed the Council's 2019/20 accounts alongside controlling all funding announced in the Council's budget and capturing all expenditure arising from the Covid-19 Response. The team are now working to produce the Council's Statement of Accounts alongside co-ordinating the first round of the Council's budget monitoring process. The team have also co-ordinated and submitted data returns to MHCLG that estimate the financial impact of Covid-19 on the Council. On the basis of the submissions to the second return, the government announced additional funding for local authorities. The third of these monthly returns was submitted on Friday 19 June 2020.

## 9. Staffing and resourcing critical services

9.1 HR continue to establish daily workforce data that helps the business understand the impact of COVID-19 on the workforce and therefore our services. This allows for redeployment between critical service areas and re prioritisation. HR continue to provide welfare support calls to individuals who are currently unwell and unable to work HR are working with Carefirst on a number of webinars and guidance to address wellbeing concerns.

- 9.2 HR have conducted virtual hearings to help progress case work and will continue to do so. HR advice is maintained virtually by email and telephone, this includes recruitment, advice to schools and virtual training for example, signs of safety (supporting the children's services improvement journey).
- 9.3 Many policies continue to be re-written following government guidance, including working from home, annual leave allowances, sickness, payments, risk assessments and contracts. A number of services have been redesigned through an agile process, these include, virtual hearings, virtual interviews, PDR moderations and training. Additional risk assessments have been designed to help guide managers when considering current work requirements for people in high risk areas.
- 9.4 There has been an increase in online learning, with many face to face class content being moved into eLearning sessions.

## 10. PPE

- 10.1 From the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, most of the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) supply chains failed to be able to meet the increased demand being put on the sector. This resulted in the Kent Resilience Forum leading a collaboration of procurement professionals with the objective to make known where certified PPE can be obtained from.
- 10.2 By being an active part of the KRF, Medway has been able to actively manage the local supply resulting in no known shortages. Furthermore, over 400,000 items of PPE have been delivered to Medway based organisations to date.

## 11. ICT

- 11.1 ICT consists of five service areas, Service Desk, Technical Operations and Administration, Infrastructure, Application Support, Networks and Cyber Security and Children and Adults Systems Support. Approximately 90% of ICT staff have worked from home, maintaining a business as usual service which has, in turn, enabled the Council to deliver critical and non-critical services.
- 11.2 Our technical infrastructure and network remains stable and has been excellent throughout the pandemic. Regular monitoring has enabled any potential issues to be quickly resolved.
- 11.3 Since the last report to Cabinet in June, the issue with regard to the pandemic 'pausing' the import of Laptops and Computers has ceased and usual service delivery has resumed.
- 11.4 ICT and Democratic Services continue to work closely to deliver live streaming of committee meetings using Microsoft Teams Live Events. The use of Microsoft Teams across the Council has been instrumental in

continuing to provide service delivery (i.e. Child Protection Conferences), work with partners and communicate with Members and staff.

- 11.5 ICT have also supported the Register Office with the reintroduction of birth registrations by developing an online bookings tool, supported HR with virtual hearings and are working with Medway Adult Education Centre to enable virtual learning sessions to continue.

## 12. Democracy

- 12.1 Since the report to Cabinet last month, a further number of overview and scrutiny and regulatory committee meetings have taken place with remote participation. On 24 June 2020, further guidance was provided to Members which advised how remote meetings must be conducted in the light of Government guidance.
- 12.2 A number of urgent decisions taken between March – June in response to the pandemic, either by the Leader or the Chief Executive, using urgency powers set out in the Council’s Constitution were reported in the last report. The following Covid-19 related urgent decision has been taken since then, as set out below.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Issue</b>	<b>Decision</b>
12 June 2020	Revised Arrangements for the Medway Test	Leader’s urgent decision to revise the arrangements and dates for the Medway Test owing to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 13. Communications

- 13.1 The major communications campaign last month was supporting the project to ensure our high streets could open safely for both workers and visitors. We pulled together a significant communications campaign for retailers and visitors to our high streets. Our aim was also to give people confidence in coming back to our high streets. Our work included a guidance pack for local businesses, an online toolkit with posters, postcards to show how to access guidance, design and print of extensive signage across our five town centres, 3,400 posters for bus stops and railing banners erected across Medway. We carried out widespread digital communications across Medway via social media, emails and our website.
- 13.2 Other campaigns we’ve run over the past month include:
- Working closely with our Schools Team to manage external communications around the return of pupils to our primary and secondary schools, and the Medway Test new dates.
  - Promoting our online Dickens 150 Festival which saw 3,000 people engaging and our social media reaching more than 500,000 people.
  - Reopening of Medway’s Registration Service
  - Continued promotion of all our wellbeing activities.
  - Promoting the work of our Early Help and IRO teams

- Promoted different national events including Carers Week, Loneliness Week, Windrush Day and Armed Forces Day
- Reinforcing new government guidance on subjects such as face coverings.

### 13.3 Communications statistics update include:

- From 23 March to 17 June we have issued 1,971 posts across all Medway Council's social media accounts and channels. In total, we have reached 18.3million people, made 4.8million impressions, received 29.2k link clicks, got 15.8k likes and received 3.1k comments.
- Issued 54 emails to our Medway community
- Issued eight infographics setting out how we've been helping Medway's community.
- Facilitated 31 media interviews most recently on opening of our high streets and armed forces day.
- issued 89 press releases
- Responded to 212 media enquiries.

### **Current projects**

- 13.4 The team is currently working with services to support them as they plan for reopening, supporting the communications of the new Hoo Satellite Testing Centre and the rolling out of communications with our colleagues at Kent County Council (KCC) of the Outbreak Control Plan and supporting our major project to ensure that our buildings are COVID compliant.

### **Internal Communications**

- 13.5 From a corporate perspective the Internal Communications function has sought to ensure all staff have access to:
- Up to date national news and priorities
  - Medway and service updates
  - HR updates and wellbeing support
  - Actions they need to take.

### **Digital update on Coronavirus (COVID-19)**

- 13.6 The Digital team has continued to operate largely as normal throughout the pandemic, working successfully from home using MS Teams to collaborate.
- 13.7 On Medway.gov.uk, the Digital Team created a dedicated section relating to [Coronavirus](#), to keep our customers up to date. New pages include [changes to our services](#), information for [businesses](#), [wellbeing advice](#) and [support for vulnerable people](#).
- 13.8 Working with subject matter experts, the team has updated more than 500 pages across the site including [parking](#), [Council Tax](#), [housing benefit](#), [crematorium and cemeteries](#), [schools](#), [support for the creative sector](#) and [translation pages](#).

13.9 Unique page views to Medway.gov.uk increased by 67.88% (15 March to 2 June 2020) compared to the same period in 2019.

13.10 Between 15 March and 5 May, the [main Coronavirus landing page](#) was viewed more than 125,000 times and the Service updates page more than 71,500 times.

### **Feedback about the website**

13.11 Customer feedback via the website has been very positive:

- Found all the information I wanted. Thank you
- Always up to date! Thanks
- Info good and up to date, clear and precise... job well done!!

13.12 The team has created new online services (transactions) in record time to support customers and staff, including:

1. [apply for a business support grant](#), allowing businesses to check their eligibility and apply for support. From 31 March to 30 April 2020, this new service received 5,181 page views, 3,459 applications and paid out more than £20m in grants successfully.
2. [Book a visit to a household waste and recycling centre](#), on behalf of both Medway Council and Kent County Council. In three weeks since go live, there have been almost 65,000 bookings for Kent and Medway (7,600 for the two Medway sites).
3. [Apply for a discretionary business grant](#), allowing small-business owners to get extra support. In the first week, it has been completed nearly 200 times.
4. An emergency food shopping delivery service, an internal process to allow Public health and Leisure colleagues to capture the customer's details, payment and shopping list, record the delivery and issue a receipt. The form has been completed more than 400 times.

## **14. Financial Implications**

14.1 At the beginning of the national response to the emerging Covid-19 pandemic in the UK, on 16 March the Communities Secretary Robert Jenrick assured Local Government Leaders that: *"This government stands with local councils at this difficult time. Everyone needs to play their part to help the most vulnerable in society and support their local economy. The government will do whatever is necessary to support these efforts."*

14.2 The Government has since announced a wide range of financial support packages for individuals, businesses and public sector bodies leading the Response, including emergency funding for councils. The Government has also commenced monthly data collection returns, requiring authorities to estimate the financial impact of the Covid-19. The data collection instructions set out that the exercise is for planning purposes, to help the

Government identify where the greatest pressures are likely to be going forward and inform their assessment of likely future costs.

- 14.3 In terms of direct financial support for local authorities, Medway received an initial £6.628million of emergency un-ringfenced grant funding in March 2020. Following submission of the first data return to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, a second tranche of £7.648million emergency funding was received in April.
- 14.4 The most significant elements of the wider packages of support announced are the Expanded Business Rates Relief scheme (£33.166million), the Small Business Grant and Discretionary Business Grant schemes (£39.712million) and the Council Tax Hardship scheme (£2.056million), which are all fully funded directly by the Government. All other funding announced directed at local authorities has been ring-fenced to specific activities and associated new burdens.
- 14.5 Though the Response is ongoing, as the nation moves back to business as usual, the government has announced some specific packages of support for local authorities:
- Adult Social Care Infection control fund: £2,091,910 to support adult social care providers to reduce the rate of COVID-19 transmission in and between care homes and support wider workforce resilience to deliver infection control.
  - Test, track and trace fund: £1,592,918 to mitigate against and manage local outbreaks of COVID-19.
  - Emergency Active Travel fund: £1,545,000 (indicative) to support local transport authorities with producing cycling and walking facilities.
  - Reopening High Streets Safely fund: £246,396 to put in place additional measures to establish a safe trading environment for businesses and customers, particularly in high streets.
- While gladly received, these funding streams are ring-fenced to specific, new activities and cannot therefore be used to offset any of the pressures resulting from the Covid-19 response and recovery.
- 14.6 The third of these returns was submitted to the MHCLG Friday 19 June. While the estimated impact was largely consistent between the three returns, the third return was the first to be informed by the emerging forecasts from budget managers as the first round of the Council's budget monitoring was underway. The returns indicate:
- Additional expenditure beyond that budgeted resulting from Covid-19 of circa £17million,
  - Income shortfalls resulting from Covid-19 of circa £37million,
  - Financial support of c£14m.
- 14.7 These estimates indicate a net pressure for Medway Council in 2020/21 of around £40million, and working with colleagues and partners across the sector, we continue to lobby the government to ensure local authorities are appropriately supported to manage the financial burdens of the Covid-19 response and recovery.



## 15. Legal Implications

- 15.1 The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 places certain legal responsibilities on public sector organisations to assist in the response and other phases of a civil emergency. Once the Covid-19 pandemic was treated as an emergency event, the Council had to comply with legal requirements as a category one responder. This has involved involvement in the Kent Resilience Forum at strategic and tactical levels with multi-agency partners to guide and deliver the Kent and Medway response.

## 16. Risk Management

### **Governance process**

- 16.1 Since the Council implemented the Emergency Planning procedures in response to the Covid-19 Pandemic, a risk assessment in line with the Council's Risk Management Strategy has formed the basis of all decision making and governance arrangements throughout the Response. Each Cell Lead has been responsible for maintaining a risk register detailing the impacts of COVID19 on their area of responsibility, following the Council's Risk Management Strategy. Cell leads have been responsible for managing risks scored below CII – significant likelihood, crucial impact (as such risks would routinely be managed on service/operational risk registers) while issues arising from risks scored at CII or above have been escalated to the SILVER and Gold commands (as such risks would routinely be managed through the Council's Strategic Risk Register). In addition, financial thresholds have been agreed to ensure that where a decision being made would commit the Council to new expenditure or result in the loss of income, appropriate financial authorisation is in place.
- 16.2 A Governance group within the Cell structure has been responsible for providing assurance on the effectiveness of risk management and the implications of actions taken through the Covid-19 response. While the Council's Corporate Risk Register Remains reflective of the key risks facing the organisation in the wider context, formal arrangements to monitor the Corporate Risk Register were paused during the initial response to enable staff to focus on managing risks in the Covid-19 Response. The Governance group will work alongside the Strategic Risk Management Group to resume routine monitoring of strategic risks as soon as possible during 2020/21, beginning with a fundamental review of the Corporate Risk Register in light of the Covid-19 Response and Recovery.
- 16.3 The Governance cell is also working to ensure the impacts of decisions made have been considered appropriately to ensure all decisions taken are sound and are in line with the Council's governance mechanisms. The Cell aims to ensure decisions:
- are made in accordance with appropriate Member and Officer decision making powers, according to the law and in line with the Council's constitution,
  - comply with relevant legislation and regulations,
  - are made within the Council's financial rules and are within the approved budget,

- do not significantly weaken the Council's control environment or pose a significant fraud risk, and
- do not create adverse impacts for people with protected characteristics under the Equality Act.

16.4 The Governance cell is continuing its role as we move back to business as usual, working alongside the rest of the command and control structure to ensure that risks are effectively managed and that the impacts of decisions made through recovery are appropriately considered.

16.5 Beyond the risks faced by Medway Council in the delivery of services through the Covid-19 pandemic, the impact on the economy of the Medway area is of paramount importance to the Council's recovery plans. The Council's Recovery Planning will be focussed on five key Cells; Economy, Infrastructure, Health and Social Care, Children's Services and the Voluntary and Community Sector and impact assessments are currently underway for each. These impact assessments will underpin the development of the Medium Term Financial Strategy and Capital Strategy, which in turn underpin the Council's budget for 2021/21 and beyond.

## 17. Recommendations

17.1 The Cabinet is asked to note the Council's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 18. Suggested Reasons for Decisions

18.1 To highlight the role that the Council has played in responding to COVID-19 as well as supporting the process in place for managing the restarting of services post lockdown and longer-term recovery.

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## Appendices

None

## Background papers

None