

BUSINESS SUPPORT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

30 MARCH 2021

COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

Report from: Neil Davies, Chief Executive

Report from: Perry Holmes, Chief Legal Officer

Summary

This report provides further information as to the Council's response to the Covid-19 (Coronavirus) global pandemic.

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 Response to and recovery from the pandemic is a matter for Cabinet. Scrutiny of that response and recovery is a matter for the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committees. This Committee has the additional responsibility of providing guidance and leadership on the development and co-ordination of the scrutiny function for all of the O&S committees, including guidance on priorities for scrutiny activity.

2. Background

- 2.1 On the 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 the 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 the 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 & 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, 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. Other cells in the structure are concentrating on non-critical services, e.g. Registration & Bereavement, Environmental services, Leisure & Heritage etc. All of the service based cells are supported by Finance, HR, ICT, Governance, Procurement etc., also categorised as cells in the tactical response structure.
- 3.3 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 communications 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.
- 3.4 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 & 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 plan's delivery, Directors of Public Health in each upper tier local authority, including Medway, have developed outbreak control plans.

5. Vulnerable People Hub and Testing

- 5.1 As part of the Covid-19 emergency response, Medway Council established a Vulnerable People Hub for people who needed to access essential items such as food and medicine. It also includes referrals to befriending services. During the first national lockdown this resulted in large volumes of requests for food parcels.
- 5.2 Over the last five months, the hub has focused on providing support for Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) residents and people who have been asked to self isolate by the NHS. All 10,000 originally identified CEV residents have been contacted by the Public Health Team including the latest 6,000 residents who were classified as CEV following the COVID Q risk work conducted by the NHS. The team have continued to monitor the inbox for referrals and receive regular phone calls for support. Most enquiries result in arranging access to a priority food delivery slot from a local supermarket, or a food parcel being delivered by the team.
- 5.3 With shielding likely to come to an end on 31 March 2021, this service will once again be moth balled and on standby should infection rates increase rapidly or shielding advice return.
- 5.4 Additional support for families with food has been accessed using the winter grant. During the October half term, Citizens Advice Medway provided a range of food hampers and vouchers for Free School Meal (FSM) eligible children. During the Christmas half term break a wide range of public and voluntary sector partners worked collaboratively to deliver food hampers to all FSM eligible children. In February half term, all 9,400 FSM eligible children were issued an e-voucher to access food via the Edenred system, including a well received activity pack. This has also been agreed for Easter half term.
- 5.5 The Winter Grant was also used to donate £50,000 to local food charities, top up the Emergency Assistance Grant administered by Citizens Advice Medway and support families known to Children's Social Care.
- 5.6 Since November, Medway Council has provided a local Test and Trace service, taking referrals and tracing Medway residents that the NHS T&T are unable to contact. At the height of infection rates, the team employed 8 additional workers to run this service.
- 5.7 In November 2020, the authority also took on responsibility for asymptomatic community testing. After support from military personnel to mobilise the service these are now fully run by Medway Council. Four sites are staffed with mainly MCG staff and one is being delivered at Medway Park by Sports and Leisure (Council employed) staff. The current capacity of the system is approximately 2160 tests / day. The service has been extensively advertised across a range of mediums including print, radio, social media and direct SMS contact. 100,042 tests were performed from 5

December to 1 March. 1,262 of these were positive, giving an overall rate of 12.6 per 1,000 tested. Over the most recent seven days (22nd February-1st March) the rate was 2.6 per 1,000 tested.

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 submitted our Care Home Support plan to the Department of Health and Social Care, which outlined the steps Medway Council has taken, in partnership with health, to support our care homes.

Children and Young People

- 6.4 Children's Services continued to respond robustly to the Covid-19 crisis, continuing to safeguard the most vulnerable children. Detailed operating procedures and Priority Risk Assessments have been reviewed regularly for every child and young person who is in receipt of a service ensuring that there is consistent decision making and effective oversight of all cases and particularly where children are most at risk.
- 6.5 Staff health and welfare has also been paramount. Staff availability has remained stable throughout. PPE has been available for staff undertaking essential home visits. Since January 2021 vaccinations have been offered to around 540 frontline Children Social Care staff. Take up of the vaccine offer has been good with around 80% accepting. Regular communications have been going out to staff. Staff have adapted to new and innovative ways of keeping in contact with children virtually.
- 6.6 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. Early Help hubs in the community have remained open to offer practical support to families and a base for partners to work from.

- 6.7 Contact for children in care with their families has been maintained virtually with use of our contact centre on a case-by-case basis, with appropriate social distancing measures and hygiene in place.
- 6.8 Statutory meetings requiring multi-agency involvement across the child protection processes continued in virtual form and attendance throughout the response phase has been very strong. Good cooperation across senior police, health and schools has been maintained responding to any emerging concerns.
- 6.9 Recruitment to key posts has continued as has the drive to recruit social workers. For example, Lee-Anne Farach, has been appointed as the new Director of Children & Adults.
- 6.10 The Children's Social Care response to Covid-19 will be altered over the coming weeks to reflect the partial lifting of lockdown. The Service's recovery roadmap will seek the appropriate return of face to face arrangements over time, but keep some of the benefits of the Covid-19 operating arrangements in terms of the agility provided by virtual and remote working and stronger partnership working. Examples include a carefully managed return to group work in Early Help and Youth Services, a gradual resumption of face to face family time at the Sunlight Centre for children in care, combined virtual and face to face Child Protection Conferences to take place at Eagle Court/Family Hubs and continued virtual multi-agency meetings.

Education

- 6.11 We started joint planning work with schools very early in the crisis, working through our head teacher reference group from mid-March 2020 (initially daily and then stepping down to bi-weekly). Shortly after the group had been convened, the 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 engage with school leaders well regarding issues and problems within school environments and multi-academy trusts. Schools, including special schools, have remained open for key workers' children, the vulnerable and children with education, health and care plans.
- 6.12 Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have begun to plan for our recovery with our education partners, in line with the position that the Council supports 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, since the end of the first lockdown. The returns to school in September 2020, and most recently on 8 March, have been very successful in terms of the level of pupil attendance and the enthusiasm overwhelmingly expressed by most pupils and their parents.
- 6.13 In order to support schools, while ensuring we have the capacity to respond to heads 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.

- 6.14 The feedback from head teachers is that they feel they have been appropriately supported through both phases – the closures, during which only small numbers of pupils were able to attend, and the phased re-openings.
- 6.15 In Medway, all schools are open, with nearly all primary schools fully open on 8 March, and secondary schools fully open during the week beginning 15 March, following three in-school tests for all their pupils.
- 6.16 The Council has in place teams of integrated staff (including early help workers, assessment social workers, mental health workers and YOT staff) regularly accessible to schools via Microsoft Teams to help to identify priority needs of young people and parents in Medway and respond effectively to any surge that may occur.

Household Waste

- 6.17 All of the weekly household waste and recycling kerbside collections have continued throughout the crisis, despite a continued 20% increase in household waste.
- 6.18 The household waste and recycling centres remained open during the latest government lockdown with the booking system operating well and enabling safe use of the sites by operators and public.

Rough Sleepers

- 6.19 The 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 & Bereavement

- 6.20 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.
- 6.21 Medway Registrars continued to register births and deaths throughout the second lockdown, although births have been registered at a reduced volume. Marriages have been halted since December 2020 and only

permitted in exceptional circumstances. According to the Government's roadmap to recovery Statutory Marriages and Civil Partnerships may resume on 29 March 2021 with a maximum of six attendees. From the 12 April 2021 (at the earliest) the number of attendees will be increased to 15, however further clarification is being sought regarding permitted venues. Not before the 17 May 2021, the number of attendees be increased to a maximum of 30.

- 6.22 Medway crematorium has seen a huge increase in demand, in some cases doubling from the same time last year. To meet this increase in demand the length of service slots has been managed, maximising capacity. As of 1 April 2021, Medway Crematorium will return to a business as usual operating model, albeit with maximum attendance set to 30 mourners and social distancing facilitated.

Highways

- 6.23 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.
- 6.24 Reactive works have continued as planned, aided by the supply chain and the support of subcontractors. We utilised the first lock down period to undertake additional patching, whilst the network had less vehicle traffic on it and in line with the Government guidance on Permit Schemes. Since then, reactive works have been business as usual.
- 6.25 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. An increase in permit requests, for quarter 4, is unusual and it appears Public Utility companies are anticipating a return to normal in the middle of the calendar year, so are trying to utilise the final phase of lower traffic levels.
- 6.26 All planned programmes (carriageway/footway resurfacing and lining) have been completed, to budget, except the gully cleansing programme which was agreed would roll over into the first quarter of 2021/22 and all new programmes for 2021/22 are being finalised.
- 6.27 The team have continued to work on large scale projects during the COVID19 period, including:
- the award and mobilisation of an LED Scheme, which is now being delivered operationally;
 - successfully bidding for the Challenge Fund, in relation to Medway Tunnel and associated link roads, which is currently in the mobilisation phase; and
 - Completing the programme plan for the installation of a new bridge in Green Street Gillingham. The bridge has been fabricated and the

intention is to lift out the old bridge and drop in the new one, on the same night, during the early May bank holiday.

- 6.28 The Highways team, alongside Volker Highways, continue to be 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 and government advice.
- 6.29 The Medway Tunnel quarterly closures have been completed as per normal, during Covid-19, adhering to social distancing rules, completing the installation of the cross passage doors, as well as all routine maintenance to ensure the tunnel remains safe and open as a critical route.

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.
- 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 CPZs focussed on ensuring the safe operation of the public highway. Free parking was made available to all NHS and Care Workers.

- 7.7 Green Spaces, children's play areas, skate parks and country parks 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. On advice from Government, all adult outdoor exercise equipment and tennis courts have remained closed.
- 7.8 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.
- 7.9 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 250 staff were successfully redeployed using this methodology.
- 7.10 In the first lockdown the following staff were redeployed:
- The 2 mayor's drivers were redeployed as crematorium operators
 - 6 library staff were redeployed to customer and business support (CABS) to assist with answering calls/admin
 - 23 staff from sport, leisure, tourism and heritage successfully completed training to assist with adult social care
 - 3 staff from Business Change and Community Safety were redeployed to Adult Social Care Partnership Commissioning to coordinate PPE requests from Care Homes
 - The Business Change Team liaised with Education to support Easter Holiday provision for children of key workers and vulnerable children
 - 5 staff were identified to be redeployed to run the Emergency Coordination Room if it opened 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 redeployed 11 staff (2 to finance and 9 to Revenue and Benefits)
 - 89 staff from Sport, Leisure, Tourism and Heritage supported vulnerable people with shopping for groceries
 - 4 Road Safety staff were re-trained to process revenue and benefits indexing to assist with the increased demand for Universal Credit claims
 - 1 Finance Officer from SEN was partially redeployed to work on financial reconciliation within the theatres as a result of cancelled/exchanged shows and events
 - 4 staff from libraries assisted with discretionary business grants
 - 6 staff were redeployed to register births and work through the backlog of birth registrations
- 7.11 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.
- 7.12 During the second lockdown many of the redeployment activities resumed to support critical services.

- 7.13 Theatre staff supported Public Health with the setup and ongoing logistics of the Food Bank within the Brook Theatre and the PPE distribution hub.
- 7.14 Sport and Leisure staff assisted with phone calls to vulnerable people.
- 7.15 CABS and Library staff were redeployed to assist with admin duties for critical services covering grant payments, trading standards and Environmental Health.
- 7.16 Around 100 Sport, Leisure, Tourism and Heritage staff setup and then ran a Covid-19 testing centre at Medway Park Sports Centre. Staff from Hoo Pool were also redeployed to assist with the testing centre at Chattenden Community Centre.

8. Finance

- 8.1 Since the beginning of the Covid-19 restrictions, the Council has now delivered the following support to businesses:
- Expanded Business Rates Retail relief of £34.193million;
 - Small Business grants of £22.020million;
 - Retail, hospitality and leisure grants of £14.095million;
 - Discretionary grants of £1.848million;
 - Local Restrictions Grant (Closed) Addendum scheme (Lockdown 2) of £1.895million;
 - Local Restrictions Support Grant (Sectors) of £1,517;
 - Local Restrictions Support Grant (Closed) - Post 2 December 2020 of £393,287;
 - Local Restrictions Support Grant (Closed) addendum - Tier 4 of £1.077million;
 - Local Restrictions Support Grant (Closed) addendum - Post 5 January 2021 of £2.834million;
 - Closed Businesses Lockdown Payment of £5.667million;
 - Christmas Support Payment for wet-led pubs of £69,000; and
 - Additional Restrictions Grant of £138,068.

We have therefore distributed in excess of £84million in financial support to businesses to date.

- 8.2 In respect of support for residents, the Council has delivered the following:
- 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.
 - Emergency Assistance grant – the Council received £336,715 and the decision was taken to use this funding by increasing the capacity of the existing Local Welfare Provision scheme delivered by Citizens Advice Medway, as part of the Medway voluntary sector consortium, 'Better Together'.
 - Test and Trace Isolation Payments Scheme with £441,500 paid through the mandatory scheme, and a further £376,000 paid through the discretionary scheme.

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 it known where certified PPE can be obtained from.
- 10.2 By initially being an active part of the KRF, Medway was been able to actively manage the local supply resulting in no known shortages.
- 10.3 In August 2020, the DHSC took over the supply of PPE from the resilience forums. All services feed their service specific requirements into Category Management, who in turn liaise with public health colleagues prior to raising orders. The subsequent deliveries are made monthly to the Brook theatre, whose staff then disseminate the PPE to the relevant teams.
- 10.4 If within the monthly deliveries an urgent need arises, then the DHSC accommodate this as and when.

11. ICT

- 11.1 ICT consists of five service areas, Service Desk, Technical Operations & Administration, Infrastructure, Application Support, Networks & Cyber Security and Children & 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 report to Cabinet last month, 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 supported the Register Office with the reintroduction of birth registrations by developing an online bookings tool, have supported HR with virtual hearings and are working with Medway Adult Education Centre to enable virtual learning sessions to continue.

12. Democracy

- 12.1 Council meetings have been taking place remotely since April 2020 in accordance with the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020. These Regulations came into force on 4 April 2020. They apply to meetings of the Council, Committees and the Cabinet taking place before 7 May 2021.
- 12.2 The Regulations have enabled local authorities to hold meetings remotely including by (but not limited to) telephone conferencing, video conferencing, live webcast, and live interactive streaming.
- 12.3 Meetings have been held via the MS Teams Live Events platform and have been available to view online for 180 days following each meeting. Updates on remote meetings have been reported to the Cabinet on 9 June 2020, 7 July 2020 and 25 August 2020, with a report to the Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 20 August 2020.
- 12.4 Democratic Services have worked closely with ICT during the year to ensure meetings have been held as smoothly as possible. More recently, the Portfolio Holder for Business Management has requested that work be undertaken to develop an e-voting solution and testing of this is ongoing. The Portfolio Holder for Resources has requested that work be undertaken to improve the audio/visual aspects of meetings and this work is also ongoing.
- 12.5 As stated above, the current legislation applies to meetings taking place before 7 May 2021. It has been confirmed that this legislation cannot be extended owing to the sunset clause. With regards to the holding of remote

meetings beyond this point, the Association of Democratic Services Officers (ADSO) and Lawyers in Local Government (LLG) have been lobbying the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to change primary legislation to enable local authority remote meetings to take place beyond the current statutory deadline of 6 May 2021. In addition, ADSO, LLG and Hertfordshire County Council have instructed counsel to issue proceedings in the High Court to seek a declaratory judgement to enable such meetings to take place within existing legislation. Members will be updated on developments and in the meantime, officers are making the necessary contingencies to ensure meetings can continue to take place, including Annual Council, on 19 May 2021.

- 12.6 A number of urgent decisions have been taken since March 2020 in response to the pandemic, either by the Leader (subject to access to information rules) or the Chief Executive, using urgency powers set out in the Council's Constitution. Each of these decisions has been reported to the next Full Council meeting for information, in accordance with the Constitution, thereby providing Members and the press and public with timely updates.

13. Communications

- 13.1 The Communications Team has continued to ensure that the Medway community has been kept informed of vital information relating to Council services, Government guidance and health related information during the past six months and has responded to requests for guidance and support. Having focussed primarily on Recovery last summer and into the autumn, we then tackled the quadruple whammy of the November move back into national restrictions, the moves in to Tiers 3 and 4 in December and the new national lockdown in January, all bringing with them different communication messages.
- 13.2 The major communications campaign has been the launch of our symptom-free testing facilities - the first community testing sites in the south east. We started with specific community groups, requiring careful targeting of businesses and residents, which has gradually opened out to the whole community. A fully integrated communications campaign, including direct text messaging, social media, email campaigns, posters, community group and local business groups communication, signage, website publicity and FAQs, has ensured that we reached the right people at a time when ensuring awareness of the facility and the importance of regular testing was key. We also communicated to the public what to expect when visiting a test centre. A joint media campaign with our military colleagues resulted in widespread national coverage of our project featuring lovely images of the site at Rochester Cathedral. More than 115,000 tests have now been carried out demonstrating the success of the campaign.
- 13.3 Other campaigns we have run over the past six months include:
- Targeted work with our BAME communities using videos and other assets (translated into different languages) to ensure they are aware of Government guidelines, testing, vaccinations and help available.

- Young people's campaigns focussed on encouraging them to continue to follow the guidelines safely as research showed us that the Government messages were not resonating with them. We have also focussed on supporting their mental health during this latest local lockdown.
- Working closely with our schools to encourage safe behaviour outside school gates.
- A campaign that recruited more than 200 Community Champions to support in their local communities.
- "Help us get back to the things we love" - campaign encouraging local people to keep adhering to Government guidance and play their part to get back to normal as soon as possible.
- Stay Warm and Well campaign for older vulnerable residents with safety advice, recipes, flu advice etc for the winter months.
- Better Connected programme helping people over 65 reconnect with their community.
- Flu campaign encouraging those most vulnerable in our communities to get their winter flu jab. This year's campaign saw a big uptake in the jab.
- Supporting the Kent and Medway Clinical Commissioning Group to promote vaccination to the most vulnerable in our communities.
- Continued promotion of the Government guidance on subjects such as the importance of face coverings.

13.4 The communications statistics update from 1 September to 19 March includes:

- We have issued more than 2,300 posts across all Medway Council's social media accounts and channels. In total, we have reached 33.2 million, made 6.8 million impressions, received 46,000 link clicks to our websites, got 15.5k likes and received 4.4k comments and 11.3k shares.
- Issued 157 email newsletters to our 95,500 subscribers, with an average 40% open rate, and an engagement rate of 76% - higher than the national average.
- Issued 16 messages from the Leader, Councillor Alan Jarrett, to the local community, with these seeing the highest open rates of our emails.
- Facilitated 73 media interviews.
- Issued 177 press releases
- Responded to 529 media enquiries.
- Special winter Medway Matters edition issued in January/February 2021.

13.5 Current projects – the team is currently working with services to support them as they plan for their reopening as part of the new Government roadmap. This includes support for the re-opening of our high streets, a major campaign to encourage new and repeat membership of our sports centres, a libraries campaign, and a major campaign to encourage Medway businesses to apply for the Government's Additional Restrictions Grant. We will also continue to support with vaccine hesitancy campaigns to targeted communities and with the Government's messaging. We also continue to work closely with our colleagues at Kent County Council on shared initiatives.

13.6 Internal Communications - from a corporate perspective the Internal Communications function continued to keep staff and Councillors regularly updated on important issues related to COVID-19 through our weekly

bulletins and emails as necessary. We have also introduced a monthly video to all staff from the Leader and Chief Executive to enable them to talk directly to everyone on key issues and a weekly update email to all staff from the Chief Executive.

14. Digital update on Coronavirus (Covid-19)

- 14.1 The Digital team has continued to operate as normal throughout the pandemic, working successfully from home using Teams to collaborate.
- 14.2 [Medway.gov.uk](https://www.medway.gov.uk) received 18,644,040 page views between 3 March 2020 and 2 March 2021, compared with just over 10,542,000 in the same period the year before.
- 14.3 This means page views to [Medway.gov.uk](https://www.medway.gov.uk) have increased 77%, visits by more than 30% and we've had 36% more users compared with the same period last year.
- 14.4 The most viewed Covid-related page on [Medway.gov.uk](https://www.medway.gov.uk) in the past year have been the [Covid-19 homepage](#) with 480,246 page views. Then follows the [Covid-19 testing pages](#), [Service updates page](#) and the [Covid-19 business landing page](#).
- 14.5 The Digital team has worked closely with Silver cell leads and colleagues to keep the Service updates page accurate. The team has also developed a way of pulling in national data to display on [Medway.gov.uk](https://www.medway.gov.uk), showing the infection rate in Medway, compared with the England rate. Statistics show this is really well viewed by customers who return to it regularly.
- 14.6 New Covid-specific online services which the team has built for customers and colleagues during the past year include:
- Book a tip visit
 - Apply for a business grant
 - Apply for a test and trace isolation payment
 - Apply for parking vouchers (hubs closed)
 - Click and collect items from a hub/library
 - Report a business of concern (those not following the Covid-19 regulations)
 - Make a food parcel donation
 - Emergency food service request (back office process for colleagues)
 - Dispute a council tax summons
 - Ask a question about the Covid-19 Local Outbreak Control plan

15. Financial Implications

- 15.1 At the beginning of the national response to the emerging Covid-19 pandemic in the UK, on 16 March 2020, 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."* 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 most significant elements of the wider packages of support announced for businesses and individuals 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.

- 15.2 The Government has conducted monthly data returns requiring authorities to estimate the financial impact of Covid-19 on expenditure requirements, losses of income from fees and charges and potential reductions in revenue from local taxation. This data collection is for planning purposes, to help the Government assess the financial pressures impacting on local government and to inform decisions regarding future funding of the sector. In terms of direct financial support for local authorities, Medway received an initial £6.628million of emergency non-ringfenced grant funding in March 2020. During 2020/21, the Council has received a further three tranches of this funding totalling £16.441million. The Council is also forecast to receive £7.033million through the Government's Sales, Fees and Charges income compensation scheme.
- 15.3 The Round 3 Revenue Budget Monitoring Report to Cabinet on 2 March, which is also included as an item on the agenda for this meeting, reflected that the Council's budget had increased by a total of £78.214million of Covid-19 grant expenditure during the year. The overall forecast position reflected the use of £18.308million of the non-ringfenced grant to bring the Council to an underspend of £3.142million.

16. Legal Implications

- 16.1 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.

17. Risk Management

Governance process as we move into Recovery

- 17.1 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.

- 17.2 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.
- 17.3 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.
- 17.4 The Governance cell is continuing its role into the second Recovery phase, 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.
- 17.5 There is a focus on the two sets of risks faced as the Prime Minister's roadmap enables the easing of lockdown. The first area of focus is the recovery of Medway as a whole, which is being led by the Assistant Director for Culture and Communities. The second area of focus is the re-opening of Council services, which is being managed through the Silver Command process, with the establishment of Bronze Cells to deliver specific elements such as the re-opening of High Streets. The Council's broader Recovery planning for the community is 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 2021/22 and beyond.

18. Recommendations

18.1 The Committee is asked to note the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

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Appendices

None.

Background papers

None.