

# TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

27 August 2020

### Report of the Chief Executive

#### Part 1- Public

#### Matters for Recommendation to Cabinet

#### **1 COMMUNITY AND BUSINESS SUPPORT, FOCUSING ON REVIEW, REORIENTATION AND RECOVERY**

**To provide an opportunity for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to review the support to the community and business sector, during the Covid-19 pandemic and shape our ongoing response.**

#### **1.1 Background**

- 1.1.1 In order to support residents and in line with Government guidance, the Borough Council set up a Community Hub in the early stages of the Covid-19 lockdown. The focus for the support was for those on the NHS extremely vulnerable “shielded” list and also others who may be considered vulnerable and in need of additional support.
- 1.1.2 Initially a limited supply of food was provided by Government for all Hubs to assist with food parcels. It was suggested that warehouse space with 24 hour security and access for HGV delivery vehicles would be advisable. The Council was grateful to the RBLI at Aylesford, who were able to assist with this initial set up at very short notice.
- 1.1.3 It was evident that the initial supply of food provided, was inadequate to make up basic food parcels and additional food would be required. The RBLI were also able to support with the food supply issues, using their existing contacts with wholesalers. The Council commissioned the RBLI for the first 6 weeks of the lockdown to support the food parcel element of the operation. After this period, it was evident that most people in need of supplies who were on the shielded list were now in receipt of their weekly food parcel from central Government. For many other vulnerable people, the Community Hub team at the Council had successfully managed to link those in need with the many parish, church and community volunteers who were able to support residents with shopping, medication collection and other requirements. The decision was made to move the food parcel operation to the Council Office at Kings Hill, purchasing initially ready made food “care boxes” then basic food supplies direct from Tesco in West Malling. For vulnerable residents with specific dietary needs an arrangement to

shop for and deliver essential food supplies was also established as part of the Community Hub response.

- 1.1.4 In order to deliver our Community Hub support, staff from a variety of services had to quickly adapt to different job roles. Staff from within the Elections Team were primarily involved in calling all residents on the shielded list and linking vulnerable residents with local community volunteers. They were supported by the Mayors Office and Leisure Services. The delivery of food parcels has also been undertaken by a variety of teams, including Civil Enforcement Officers, Park Rangers, Environmental Health Officers, Community Safety, Print Room and Technical Service staff. Our Customer Service Team have worked hard taking Community Hub calls and signposting callers to appropriate support. The teams have adapted quickly as Government guidance has been issued, in a rapidly changing landscape.
- 1.1.5 In order to establish long term support the Community Hub team worked with the many volunteer groups, parishes and churches to link those in need with their nearest volunteer. At the outset, this was a fast moving situation and every group made their own arrangements based on the number of volunteers and the likely demand in their area. In a limited number of cases there were initial communication difficulties, particularly in relation to prescriptions and medication deliveries. Many pharmacists were not able to offer a delivery service, which caused some confusion as this was the expectation and guidance from Government. In addition the NHS Volunteer arrangements which also covered prescription collections took a while to establish itself. Hopefully lessons have been learnt from this and they will be able to rise to the challenge in future, if required. The Hub team will also undertake checks early on with all groups to help iron out difficulties in the future (should the need arise).
- 1.1.6 In addition to volunteer support, we have also been fortunate to receive generous donations from local people and local businesses. One Tonbridge and Malling resident and shareholder at COOK wished to provide 500 COOK frozen ready meals, which he specifically asked to be distributed to the most vulnerable people. These have been allocated to frail elderly residents or those with disabilities who struggle to cook meals for themselves. In addition, 500 meals were also supplied as a gift from COOK as part of their commitment to helping local communities during the pandemic, again these have been allocated to those most in need. Albion Foods donated £1,000 to go towards the costs of food parcels, we have also received 2000 Easter eggs, boxes of crisps from a local pub and punnets of strawberries and potatoes from local farms. All donations have been either sent out with food parcels or passed on to the local food banks. Cabot Financial (based at Kings Hill) continue to offer support in the form of access to their large walk in freezer. The caretaker at Cabot has been extremely helpful, allowing us to store bread and ready meals at the site and opening up the building on a daily basis, to enable the team to access the frozen goods prior to delivery.

- 1.1.7 The Community Hub team have also made contact with everyone on the NHS shielded list (to date this is over 4800 residents). Anyone who indicated that they were struggling with social isolation and loneliness has been offered regular telephone befriending support, which was provided by the Council's One You health team. A Community Hub information leaflet, providing information such as the Hub telephone support line and the help available, was sent to a targeted list of over 5500 residents (for example to those over 70, those in receipt of disability benefits, those registered for the bin pull out service).
- 1.1.8 As the lockdown measures eased and the guidance to those shielding changed, the Community Hub has been naturally winding down. Government support to the shielded ends on 30 July, but we have taken the decision to keep the Community Hub phone line going beyond this date. At the time of writing this report, it is not known if the end of the government support, could possibly increase demand for support locally, so it is prudent to maintain the offer, just in case.
- 1.1.9 In terms of business support activity undertaken or supported by the Borough Council, this effectively covered three key strands:
- a) The Establishment of a Kent-wide Covid-19 Helpline: this was set up very early on in the crisis as a response to the fact that local businesses were struggling to get through to the national helpline due to the huge level of demand for advice and support. Launching on 26 March 2020, the helpline was part-funded by the Borough Council and was run by the Kent and Medway Growth Hub. By the end of June 2020, the helpline had dealt with 659 enquiries from businesses within the borough, the fourth highest in Kent and Medway (behind Medway, Maidstone and Ashford)
  - b) Grant Support to Local Businesses: following the announcement in March 2020 of the 'Small Business Grant' and the 'Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grant', the Borough Council set about distributing nearly £20m of grant funding to eligible local businesses with a Business Rates Liability. This work was led by the Revenue Team with support from the Economic Regeneration Team along with a number of other staff across the council that helped to track down eligible businesses. A huge amount of work was required to get hold of eligible businesses (many of whom had closed down temporarily), explain the availability of grants and to encourage them to use the Borough Council website to apply for their grants. By the end of June 2020 £18m had been distributed to 1,403 businesses. It was announced at the end of July 2020 that the scheme would be closing down on 28 August 2020, and at the time of writing this report, Council Officers are attempting to make contact with the remaining 150-200 businesses that might be eligible for the fund.

Following government guidance received on 13 May 2020, a further grant scheme – the Small Business Discretionary Grant Scheme – was launched on 26 May 2020 and focussed on supporting businesses that were ineligible for the other grant support. This scheme was led by the Economic Regeneration Team

and all funding was allocated by 26 June 2020, with just over £1m distributed to around 150 businesses in the space of six weeks. In total, only 4 businesses appealed the funding decisions made by the Borough Council, with only 1 going to a final appeal, which was ultimately turned down.

- c) Information Sharing: through the use of the Council webpages, social media activity and a regular e-newsletter, useful information on wider government support (such as the Job Retention Scheme, Bounce Back Loan Scheme and Self-Employment Income Support Scheme) and practical advice from business representative organisations, such as the Federation of Small Businesses, Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce and Visit Kent.

## **1.2 Local Outbreak Planning or Second Wave preparedness**

- 1.2.1 As mentioned earlier, the Community Hub phone line (along with details on our website) will remain live and available to offer support and advice to anyone who needs it. The Community Hub team have made strong connections with Parish, church groups and volunteers in the community, who have been invaluable throughout the pandemic. The Covid-19 Tonbridge Support Group (a large group of local volunteers and local Councillors) have also been instrumental in the response for Tonbridge residents. The Hub Team will be able to reinstate these connections quickly if needed in the future.
- 1.2.2 Although it is anticipated that with the easing of the lockdown measures, people can return to their usual shopping arrangements, we have retained a number of emergency food parcels at the Council Office and also have good links with the local supermarket. The Community Hub team have mostly returned to their normal duties, however the operation can be reinstated if required.
- 1.2.3 At the time of writing this report, it is a little unclear exactly what interventions would be required or could be provided by Central Government to support our local businesses should there be a local outbreak or second wave, however the following should enable a swift response should it happen:
  - a) The Covid-19 Helpline was originally going to be closed down at the end of June 2020, however this has now been extended to at least the end of September 2020, in order to deal with enquiries that are still coming in (albeit at a lower level than during the height of lockdown). This means that should there be a local outbreak or second wave soon, the helpline will still be in place to provide support. Obviously this helpline cannot continue indefinitely, but if it has been closed down and is required to set up again, this will be done quite quickly as most of the set-up costs (especially promotion and marketing) have already been dealt with.
  - b) The Borough Council has agreed with Kent County Council that we can use Business Rates Pool and Retention Pilot funding to support the local economy during the covid-19 pandemic, so with that agreement in place, we will be able to implement support more quickly.

## 1.3 Recovery

1.3.1 The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the local economy has undoubtedly been considerable. Although it will likely be some time before the full extent of this impact is understood, there are some key statistics that provide a telling insight. They include:

- Nationally, economic activity in April 2020 shrunk by 20.4%, the biggest monthly fall ever recorded. It is estimated the GDP growth for 2020 will be between -8% and -12%.
- A survey of 2,124 businesses across Kent and Medway has highlighted that 94.1% have seen a negative impact on sales, 3.5% have seen no impact and 0.8% have seen a positive impact (1.6% did not answer). In addition, 87.3% of respondents felt the impact would be negative on future sales.
- Local unemployment figures for May 2020 show that there were 3,565 claimants (4.5%). This figure has increased by 289.6% since May 2019. The number of claimants will very likely increase sharply in October 2020 when local businesses have to consider whether or not to retain staff that had been subsidised through the Job Retention Scheme.

1.3.2 In addition, the creation of a Kent & Medway Covid-19 Economic Recovery Dashboard by Kent County Council in July 2020 has also started to illustrate the impact, and will also provide a useful tool for understanding where any future economic support might be needed most. Some key statistics from the dashboard highlight:

- At the end of May 2020, there were 14,700 staff furloughed (many in the retail and tourism sectors) and 5,300 people on Self-Employment Income Support (many of them in the construction industry) in Tonbridge and Malling.
- At the end of June 2020 there were still around 35,000 people working from home in Tonbridge and Malling.
- The dashboard perceives that two key areas of vulnerability in the local economy are – the high number of self-employed people (18% compared to 10% nationally), and the high number of people working in the following sectors: motor trades; construction; and quarrying.

1.3.3 The Council's One You team will play a key role as part of the recovery process for our residents. We are all acutely aware of the impact the Covid-19 pandemic has had on mental health and general wellbeing. Moving forwards it is important that we support our residents with healthy lifestyle advice and programmes, information on wellbeing including facilitating discussions to aid positive mental health and opportunities to reduce loneliness and social isolation. The One You

team with their skills, enthusiasm, local knowledge and local established partnerships are perfectly placed to drive this agenda forward across Tonbridge & Malling. Work has already began on providing assessments and programmes virtually and the team continue to work alongside other agencies and partners including local GPs to provide expertise in the public health recovery.

- 1.3.4 The Vulnerable Persons and Community Cell was established on 23 March and Chaired by the Chief Executive of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council with representation from all Kent local authorities and other Kent Resilience Forum partners. The aim was to support organisations in identifying vulnerable people and co-ordinating support for communities throughout the Covid-19 response. The Cell initially met three times a week to identify challenges and to share best practice and proved invaluable in promoting a high and consistent public service across the Borough and County. The Cell's meeting frequency was reduced as support practices and mechanisms were refined and have now been suspended but will be re-established if required.
- 1.3.5 A Recovery Coordinating Group (RCG) has been established by the Kent Resilience Forum to identify and mitigate any wider and longer term impacts upon Kent and Medway and seek to achieve a return to a "new normality" at the earliest opportunity. The RCG is informed by seven subject specific cells, these are: Economy, Infrastructure, Children & Young People, Health & Social Care, District & Community Cell, Voluntary Sector and Finance. The recommendations from each of the cells are currently available for consultation for all resilience partners, prior to their implementation.
- 1.3.6 As the economy has started to open up again, the Borough Council has seen first-hand some of the challenges that local businesses face. During traders meetings in the build up to re-opening, it was obvious that some businesses were struggling to accommodate some of the social distancing requirements within their establishments, and had concerns about the implications of not interpreting Central Government guidance correctly. The Licensing and Environmental Health teams have been actively supporting our businesses through this process.
- 1.3.7 As we tentatively move towards recovery, it is clear that the plans in place to support the local economy that were included in the current Economic Regeneration Strategy 2019-2023 will need to be reviewed to ensure that we focus our resources in the areas most in need, and not simply revert back to how things were. Whilst this still needs to be considered in more depth, the indications at this stage are that the following could be areas of focus:
- A focus on Upskilling and Employment - especially tackling youth unemployment.
  - Supporting Green Growth and Investment – in support of the Climate Change Strategy.

- The Future of the High Street – the pandemic has pushed this issue even further up the agenda.

## 1.4 Legal Implications

1.4.1 None

## 1.5 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

1.5.1 As at mid-July 2020, total cost of Community Hub set up and food purchases are as follows (based on invoices received and paid to date):

- RBLI costs (warehouse, facilities, staff and food supply for first 6 weeks): £39,473.12
- Food costs (from week 7- mid July): £4,077.42
- Postage costs for targeted Community Hub information leaflet: £1,852.03
- Donations received: Albion Foods £1000, residents: £90.50

1.5.2 As of the end of June 2020, a total of £19,040,000 had been allocated to 1,553 local businesses through the various Covid-19 grant schemes. In addition, the Borough Council has also contributed £8,000 towards the running of the Covid-19 Helpline from March to October 2020.

## 1.6 Risk Assessment

1.6.1 N/A

## 1.7 Equality Impact Assessment

1.7.1 The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

## 1.8 Policy Considerations

1.8.1 Business Continuity/Resilience

1.8.2 Community

1.8.3 Healthy Lifestyles

## 1.9 Recommendations

1.9.1 Members to **ENDORSE** the reinstatement of all Community Hub support in the event of a second wave or regional/local lockdown.

1.9.2 Members to **ENDORSE** the reinstatement of business support in the event of a second wave or regional/local lockdown.

- 1.9.3 Members to **ENDORSE** the ongoing commitment to the District & Community Recovery Cell, to aid support to the local community.
- 1.9.4 Members to **ENDORSE** the suggested amendments highlighted in 1.3.7 regarding revisions to the Economic Regeneration Strategy, to support businesses and the local economy.

Background papers:

Nil

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