

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET

14 October 2020

Report of the Chief Executive and Management Team

Part 1- Public

Executive Non Key Decisions

1 CORONAVIRUS UPDATE

This report provides an overview of a range of aspects as the Council and our communities continue to adapt to living with coronavirus.

1.1 Strategic Context

1.1.1 At the time of writing, we are still in a changing environment as Covid-19 levels begin to rise across the Country. Levels in Tonbridge & Malling and across Kent remain low at this time, but all areas are the subject of close scrutiny and this position could change.

1.1.2 We continue to operate in the Emergency Structure in accordance with the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. This continues to be led by the Kent Resilience Forum (KRF), within which we are active partners. We continue to participate in the command / control structure and also in a range of themed cells, focussing on aspects including recovery, and outbreak management planning.

1.1.3 As Members would expect, we also continue to be actively involved in a wide range of conference calls with various Government departments and other partners including those in the public health sector. It is particularly important that we continue to allocate senior resource to this horizon scanning and impact assessment activity, as the national picture and guidance continues to change at a significant pace.

1.1.4 It is perhaps helpful to remind Members of the key themes used as a framework for previous reports.

- Situation Update
- Staff
- Members and Democratic Process
- TMBC Services / Financial Position
- Business Sector
- Community Issues
- Communications

- 1.1.5 It is not the intention to set out every action and activity, but it may be helpful to set out some key updates and issues under each of the themes above
- 1.1.6 We have new roles and responsibilities which have to be resourced from our existing staff. These include participation in the Countywide Recovery Strategy as referenced earlier; shared responsibilities for enforcement in relation to various hospitality venues and businesses; ongoing risk assessments relating to our own staff, and events on our land through the Safety Advisory Group.

1.2 Situation Update

- 1.2.1 To re-iterate at the time of writing, Covid-19 levels remain low across Kent, including Tonbridge and Malling. There are no local restrictions in place in the County. It is not the purpose of this report to set out the national laws and guidance as Members will be aware of these from national coverage.

1.3 Staffing

- 1.3.1 Our staff are now working in a variety of ways. A high percentage continue to work from home, with full remote access to all systems. There are now between 20-35 staff working in the offices on any given day. These include staff who cannot work from home either due to the nature of their role, or for practical/personal reasons. In addition, there are staff working from other locations including car parks and country parks, with a further cohort who are working around the borough undertaking regulatory inspections on site. This pattern of working will continue throughout the winter to ensure we keep our staff well and working productively in their roles.
- 1.3.2 Our staff continue to respond to every challenge presented to them and continue to be our biggest asset in providing services and supporting our community. Management Team are working closely with staff to ensure that there is clear communication and engagement, with opportunity for staff to give input and feedback.

1.4 Members and democratic process

- 1.4.1 All Advisory Boards, Committees, Cabinet and Council continue to be held virtually by Microsoft Teams. Where permitted, public speaking has also been facilitated. These meetings are also live streamed on YouTube. The legislation allowing this remains in place until 7 May 2021.

1.5 Community Issues

- 1.5.1 The Shielded Programme has now ended. Our Community Hub helpline continues to be in operation, albeit that the call levels are very low. Our staff continue to ensure that any residents with real difficulties are connected to the most appropriate support network.

- 1.5.2 Members will have seen the report to Finance Innovation & Property Advisory Board in which Local Emergency Assistance Grant totalling £43,607 was allocated to 11 organisations providing support to residents facing severe difficulty.
- 1.5.3 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee will shortly consider the scoping report “Recovery of the Voluntary and Community Sector”.

1.6 Business Sector

- 1.6.1 The Covid-19 Helpline, run by the Kent and Medway Growth Hub, in partnership with KCC and all Kent Districts continues to operate, and is currently scheduled to do so until the end of December 2021. The hub provides access to local advisers that are able to support businesses through any difficulties they face, answer any questions they may have, help them with funding applications and, where required, signpost them to specialist advice. Since opening at the end of March 2020, the Covid-19 Helpline has received 781 enquiries from Tonbridge & Malling businesses, covering a wide range of topics.
- 1.6.2 Although the Covid-19 Helpline has fielded a lot of calls, the Borough Council has also received a large number of calls to both the Business Rates and Economic Regeneration Teams when dealing with grants or signposting to information. Although these have slowed down, regular business enquiries are still being received, especially from businesses that are struggling to re-open or that we have assisted in the recent past.
- 1.6.3 The initial Government support schemes for the Small Business Grants and Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grants closed on 28 August 2020 we distributed a total of £19.2 million. Our own discretionary business support scheme was fully subscribed and a further £1.006m million was distributed.

1.7 TMBC Services

- 1.7.1 This report is not intended to be an update on all services provided by the Council as relevant matters are being reported to Members via various Advisory Boards and Committees. This report will only focus on operational issues relevant to the pandemic.
- 1.7.2 Customer Services –The offices at both Kings Hill and Tonbridge are open on an appointment basis only. This is in accordance with a full risk assessment to ensure the safety of staff and visitors. Appointments are made via telephone and at that point staff will help customers to find a way to resolve their matter without the need for an appointment. Where it is necessary an appointment will be offered. On average only 2 appointments are required a week. The customer services team have taken on additional call handling services for a number of departments. This has been very successful and greatly supported capacity in back office functions including Council Tax and Benefits. In order to maximise capacity and best respond to peak demand times, it proposed to trial opening of the switchboard from 0900 as

opposed to the current 0830. This will be kept under review and reported to Members before a final recommendation is considered by Members.

- 1.7.3 Regulatory Functions – We have been given new COVID-19 roles and responsibilities which have to be resourced from our existing staff, including a number of shared new responsibilities for enforcement in relation to various hospitality venues and businesses (e.g. enforcement of the ‘Rule of 6’ in certain premises, collection of contact data); ongoing risk assessments relating to our own staff, and events on our land through the Safety Advisory Group in respect of Borough. In addition, government has recently given responsibility for managing the covid-19 self-isolation payments to district councils and we are presently gearing up to provide this service through our benefits team.
- 1.7.4 Housing – We continue to provide accommodation for homeless households. The Council has been awarded £125,000 from the national Next Steps Accommodation Programme to specifically support those at risk of Rough Sleeping or homelessness during the winter months to remain in accommodation. A further report on this funding will be submitted to the next meeting of the Communities & Housing Advisory Board. Housing demand continues to be high and with only a very limited supply chain this is a very difficult scenario.
- 1.7.5 Leisure – All outdoor facilities are now open to the public, The Leisure Centres and Poulton Wood Golf Course have also been opened by the Leisure Trust, albeit with limited services and capacity in order to comply with specific risk assessments. There have been 2 events at Tonbridge Castle, run by other agencies, and in accordance with Covid-19 regulations.
- 1.7.6 Parking – Members will have seen in the report to the Street Scene and Environment Advisory Board on 05 October 2020 revised timescales with regards to a number of parking matters.
- 1.7.7 Waste – planning for Christmas and New Year collection arrangements is underway. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic and the associated restrictions on expenditure, bin hangars will not be issued this year. Instead, our website and social media channels will be used to promote a downloadable leaflet, and hard copies will be made available on request. A similar decision was taken for the new annual recycling calendar earlier this year, with no complaints from residents received, and only a small number of requests for hard copies being received.

1.8 Next Steps

- 1.8.1 In this still changing environment it is difficult to anticipate what next steps are needed in relation to Covid-19. However, our engagement with partner agencies, and keeping abreast of national guidance means we are well placed to respond. There are some areas we can plan for, including how any local restrictions would be implemented and communicated. There is active consideration of these issues via a KRF cell in which we are participants.

1.9 Corporate Strategy – One-year Addendum

1.9.1 At its meeting on 3rd June 2020, Cabinet agreed an Addendum to the Corporate Plan, and received a further update at its meeting on 30th June 2020. As referenced in earlier sections of this report, the actions in relation to Review, Re-orientate and Recovery are now feeding into the relevant Advisory Boards and Committees. Some have already been considered including a new consultation draft of the Economic Recovery Strategy, The Climate Change Strategy, The Medium Term Financial Strategy and Savings and Transformation Strategy, support for the Leisure Trust, and the Air Quality Action Plan. A number of actions have a longer time frame and will be the subject of reports over the coming months.

1.10 Legal Implications

1.10.1 The statutory framework governing the response to the pandemic is evolving and changing on a frequent basis, both the restrictions placed on individuals and Local Authorities. It is an absolute requirement that we implement any new responsibilities and restrictions in a timely fashion.

1.10.2 The legal implications for any proposals emerging from the Corporate Plan Addendum, will be assessed at the time of individual reports to Members.

1.11 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

1.11.1 A separate report on this agenda sets out the latest update to the Medium Term Financial Strategy and the Savings and Transformation Strategy. Members will note from that report the latest “funding gap” which has increased as a result of the pandemic.

1.11.2 Cabinet previously agreed to the establishment of a Reorientation/ Post Emergency Reserve in the sum of £200,000 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

1.12 Risk Assessment

1.12.1 Then Council’s Strategic Risk Register has been regularly update and was last reported to Audit Committee on 28th September 2020

1.13 Equality Impact Assessment

1.13.1 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.

1.14 Policy Considerations

- Community
- Business Continuity/Resilience
- Healthy Lifestyles
- Climate Change

- Asset Management
- Customer Contact
- Health and Safety
- Human Resources

1.15 Recommendations

1.15.1 That the Council's ongoing response to the evolving scenario regarding Covid-19 be **ENDORSED**

1.15.2 That progress in respect of the Corporate Plan Addendum be **NOTED**.

Background papers:

Nil

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