

# TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

## CABINET

26 January 2021

### 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 respond and adapt to living with coronavirus.**

#### 1.1 Strategic Context

- 1.1.1 At the time of writing, we are in a changing environment, as Covid-19 levels have risen dramatically across the country, including Kent and Tonbridge & Malling. The South East of England has seen some of the highest levels on infection across the Country. Having mover through various Tiers of restrictions, the whole of England is now in “national lockdown restrictions”. It is not the purpose of this report to set out the current restrictions as these are widely documented for all.
- 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 and control structure and also in a range of themed cells focussing on aspects including vulnerable persons and community support, outbreak management planning, compliance and enforcement and recovery.
- 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, Public Health, NHS and Police colleagues. Public Heath are leading on all aspects of testing and track and trace, but we are active partners in this forum. NHS are the lead partners on the vaccination programme as this is progressed in various phases commencing with the priority vaccination programme implemented via the Primary Care Networks (PCNs).
- 1.1.4 It is particularly important that we continue to allocate senior resources to this multi-agency activity, impact assessment activity and horizon scanning, as the national picture continues to change at significant pace.
- 1.1.5 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

1.1.6 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

## **1.2 Situation Update**

1.2.1 At the time of writing the country is in a “national lockdown” following rapidly rising rates across the country and the impact of the new covid variant which has an increased transmission rate. The national restrictions place the emphasis on “stay at home” other than for prescribed activities.

1.2.2 The NHS is under extreme pressure and at a local level elective treatments have been greatly reduced to provide capacity for covid treatment and bed space. It is no secret that patients have been sent out of County for treatment as capacity is at stretch. The ambulance service, SECamb, has also been severely stretched. Various datasets are available for those wishing to monitor covid related activity [Interactive Map | Coronavirus in the UK \(data.gov.uk\)](#) and [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) - Kent Public Health Observatory \(kpho.org.uk\)](#)

1.2.3 There is the national programme of symptomatic testing, booked via the national portal. This is now supplemented in Kent by a programme of asymptomatic testing sites (AST's), led by Kent Public Health. There are two ATS in the borough (Larkfield Library and the Hop Farm). Anyone wishing to book a non symptomatic test must book an appointment via the Kent Portal (insert link). Non symptomatic tests should be repeated fortnightly.

1.2.4 The national vaccine programme has also now been commenced led by the NHS. The first phase of vaccinations are being delivered in Hospital and some care home settings, with the community programme initially being delivered via PCNs. Residents in the priority groups will be invited for an appointment by their GP /PCN. Vaccination appointments are not available on demand. A programme of mass vaccination sites is being developed and further details will be published in the coming weeks. Further information on Kent Vaccination programme can be found [Covid-19 vaccination :: Kent and Medway Clinical Commissioning Group \(kentandmedwayccg.nhs.uk\)](#)

### **1.3 Staffing**

1.3.1 We are following the national restrictions and all staff who can work from home are now doing so. Our IT capabilities allow the vast majority of tasks to be undertaken remotely with no impact on service delivery. We do have staff who need to attend the offices to deal with post, scanning and access to records. 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. In addition we have Covid Enforcement responsibilities which necessitate staff undertaking visits to premises across the Borough. We do not have any enforcement powers in respect of individual behaviours including the wearing of face masks, with these powers resting with the police.

### **1.4 Community Issues**

1.4.1 Our Community Hub has continued to operate since March 2020. Incoming call levels remain low. Our staff continue to ensure that any residents with real difficulties are connected to the most appropriate support networks.

1.4.2 The shielding programme has been re-introduced albeit in a different format. As part of this programme we do make periodic contact to approximately 4,000 residents on our Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) dataset. The CEV list is updated daily as new people are added by their GP. We make contact with new additions to the CEV list on a daily basis. This is to check that all are coping and remind them of the community hub helpline. We also provide online support to any CEV resident without internet access, to help them register for priority supermarket delivery slots via the National Shielding Support System. We also provide contact details for organisations who can provide support for a range of issues including isolation, mental wellbeing and bereavement support as well as signposting people to local volunteer support networks if required.

1.4.3 We have provided two tranches of funding to voluntary organisations. As previously reported to Cabinet, the first tranche was the Local Emergency Assistance Grants totalling £43,607. The second tranche was reported to the meeting of Finance, Innovation and Property Advisory Board (06/01/2021) where a total of £52,417 was distributed to agencies with the specific remit of supporting households experiencing food and/or fuel poverty.

1.4.4 In addition we are responsible for the assessment and distribution of Self-Isolation Support Payments. There are two elements to the Scheme, a mandatory strand and a separate discretionary one. So far we have distributed £125,500 of government funding. At the time of writing we are distributing approximately £40,000 per week in payments of £500 to individuals. Supporting those who are in work, and on certain benefits, or have low incomes while they must stay at home isolating is an important aspect in reducing the risk of spreading Covid-19. This

Scheme was reported to the Finance, Property and Innovation Board on 6 January 2021.

## **1.5 Members and Democratic Process**

- 1.5.1 All Advisory Boards, Committees, Cabinet and Council continue to be held virtually by Microsoft Teams. Where permitted public speaking has also been facilitated. All meetings are live streamed on YouTube.
- 1.5.2 The legislation permitting virtual meetings remains in place until 7 May 2021.
- 1.5.3 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee (03/12/2020) agreed the scoping report to consider Virtual Meetings & Homeworking. A full report will be reported to a future meeting, within the context of any clarification of the legislative position on virtual meetings.

## **1.6 Business Sector**

- 1.6.1 Since November onwards, in order to ensure that business grants continued to be distributed as swiftly as possible, a number of emergency decisions were made:
- D200014EM – approval of the LRSG (Closed) Scheme on 11 November
  - D200015EM – approval of Additional Restrictions Grant Scheme on 18 November
  - D200017EM – approval of the Christmas Support package for wet-led pubs on 30 December
  - D200018EM – approval of the LRSG (Open) Scheme on 31 December.

This was subsequently reported to the Finance, Innovation and Property Advisory Board on 06 January 2021.

- 1.6.2 At the time of writing this report, for the period relating to the November 2020 lockdown, 467 businesses have accessed the Local Restrictions Support Grant (Closed) Scheme, amounting to over £785,000, and over 300 businesses have accessed the Additional Restrictions Grant Scheme, amounting to over £460,000.
- 1.6.3 In addition, funding has started to be distributed for the period when the Borough was under Tier 3 and 4 restrictions. So far, 153 businesses have received Tier 3 payments (amounting to £141,000) and 464 businesses have received Tier 4 payments (amounting to £391,594).
- 1.6.4 The Local Restrictions Support Grant (Open) Scheme, which also relates to the Tier 3 period and is available to businesses that are ineligible for the closed scheme, has so far received 140 applications and closes on 21 January 2021.

- 1.6.5 The Christmas Support Package for wet-led pubs is also currently open for applications, and has seen 35 applications to date.
- 1.6.6 Preparations are now being put in place for further funding schemes to cover the current lockdown period.

## **1.7 TMBC Services**

- 1.7.1 Customer Services – The offices at both Kings Hill and Tonbridge remain open on an appointment only basis. Demand remains very low with one or two appointments per week at most. The Customer Services Team continue to handle a high level of telephone calls, including calls on behalf of an increasing number of services. This has supported capacity in back offices allowing great efficiency in services.
- 1.7.2 Housing - the housing service continue to receive an increased number of complex homelessness and housing needs enquiries as well as applications for the housing register.

All the rough sleepers who were accommodated under the Government “Everyone In” policy at the start of the pandemic either have moved onto permanent accommodation with the support of the housing team or continue to be accommodated and have a move on plan in place. Although the recent lockdown has not prompted the Government to reintroduce the “Everyone In” policy, we will verify and properly assess the vulnerability of any identified rough sleeper and support where necessary. At this time of year our Severe Weather Emergency Protocol is also active whereby accommodation will be provided in periods of cold or inclement weather. A current priority for the rough sleeper cohort is to work closely with our health colleagues to ensure all are registered with a GP and can therefore take up any vaccination programme according to the priority criteria. Various sources of funding have been provided by central Government or successfully bid for by the team to support the work around rough sleepers.

The numbers in temporary accommodation continue to remain high however proactive work with local housing providers especially Clarion Housing is enabling some move on. In addition working with local private landlords through improving our landlord offer is a key current focus to enable further opportunities for move on accommodation.

- 1.7.3 Regulatory Functions and Enforcement – The Licensing and Environmental Health teams continue to work jointly with colleagues from the Community Safety Team and Kent County Council’s Trading Standards team to enforce the provisions of the Coronavirus legislation. Targeted, intelligent led enforcement visits have been carried out both during office hours and out of hours to respond to concerns raised. In the main businesses are largely compliant but where needed advice and support is provided and enforcement action will be considered where necessary. On average the teams are responding to 20-25 complaints per week. The main areas for concern around enforcement have been congregating

of public around take away premises eg public house/café, premises not enforcing social distancing and premises operating that are not permitted at that time. The teams will continue with a pro-active enforcement presence in the various towns/village High St areas and will work alongside the Covid marshals to provide support where necessary.

- 1.7.4 Test & Trace – the Kent Local Tracing Partnership was established by Kent County Council and the districts at the end of November 2020 to help improve the test and trace process. Local districts are searching their databases e.g. housing, council tax etc to obtain any telephone numbers for residents where they have tested positive for Covid-19 and they have not been contactable through details already provided. This is to ensure that they are self-isolating and that their close contacts are identified and also advised to self-isolate to reduce the spread of the virus. If the resident cannot be contacted by telephone they will be visited by a member of the Environmental Health team (door knock) to attempt to get the close contact form completed. In December we had 37 requests for resident contact details and were successful in finding new telephone contact details for 10 of these cases. We completed 11 door knocking visits and from these we completed 5 close contact questionnaire forms.
- 1.7.5 Leisure – The provision of Indoor Leisure facilities, operated by the Tonbridge and Malling Leisure Trust on the Council's behalf, have been significantly impacted by government restrictions and guidance. In response to the first national lockdown all facilities were closed and whilst this service area was recovering to a certain extent the most recent lockdown has enforced their full closure once again. The Council has been working with the Trust to ensure its sustainability though this time and Cabinet will be aware from previous reports of the Council's financial support. An application has recently been made to the Government's National Leisure Facilities Fund and it is hoped this will be successful. The Council continues to meet weekly with the Trust to ensure a prompt response can be made to reinstating services when restrictions allow.

With regard to Outdoor Leisure, the Council's parks and open spaces remain open following announcement of the most recent lockdown alongside takeaway catering services that operate within our two Country Parks. Service provision has been reviewed in accordance with guidance and specific facilities have been closed that include, ball courts, tennis courts and outdoor gyms. Parks and open spaces have seen a significant increase in usage and this has placed additional pressure on regular maintenance tasks, especially the cleansing of sites and emptying of litter bins. This is being continually reviewed and frequency increased where appropriate. Tonbridge Cemetery remains open for funerals in accordance with government guidance though the Council has taken the decision to close the Chapel.

The authorisation of events on Council land has been suspended though applications are already being received for 2021. These will need to be considered in the context of national restrictions and guidance.

Updates on service provision are being taken to the Communities and Housing Advisory Board with the next update due in February 2020.

- 1.7.6 Parking – The Council’s car parks remain fully operational and open to the public .Due to the pandemic usage of the car parks is understandably low with the exception of the car parks at the two Country Parks .Regular update reports are made to the Street Scene and Environment Advisory Board .
- 1.7.7 Waste – Cabinet will be aware of the previous implications that Covid-19 has had on the delivery of core services within the Council’s Waste Contract. Through the period of the first lockdown this was most evident with around 50% of contractor staff either on sick leave, self-isolating or “shielding” at some point. This was combined with significantly increased tonnages across all waste streams, a situation that was replicated across Kent and nationwide. As such, service provision was prioritised to focus on key kerbside collections and resulted in a number of other service suspensions including garden waste collections, new garden waste subscriptions, bulky collections (charged doorstep collection service) and the Saturday Freighter Service. In addition resources were also temporarily directed away from Street Cleansing.

As the Covid-19 staffing pressures eased for Urbaser all services were reintroduced with the exception of the Saturday Freighter Service that still remains suspended. Service performance significantly improved following the re-introduction of services and is being reflected in increased round completions, a reduction in missed collections and reduced customer comments/complaints.

With a national lockdown re-introduced on the 5 January 2021 and cases of Covid 19 increasing locally, due consideration has been given to current and future service delivery. The Council is monitoring impacts in liaison with all other Local Authorities in the County through weekly briefings of the Kent Resource Partnership Forum. Of greatest concern is staffing levels and some Authorities have already taken steps to prioritise service provision in their area. Officers at Tonbridge and Malling are monitoring staffing levels on a daily basis in liaison with Urbaser and if required may have to prioritise key services in accordance with our Business Continuity Plan. As with the first national lockdown kerbside collections of general refuse and food waste, and the collection of clinical waste will be the highest priority.

Regular updates on performance and the impacts and response to the Covid 19 are being taken to the Street Scene and Environment Advisory Board and this also includes updates on key projects such as the roll-out to communal properties/flats, the reduction of the Council’s Bring Bank/Recycling Sites and the Transfer of Public Conveniences to Parish/Town Councils.

## **1.8 Next Step & Corporate Strategy**

- 1.8.1 In this rapidly changing environment it is still difficult to anticipate what the next steps are in relation to Covid-19. The commencement of both Asymptomatic

testing programmes and the vaccination programme bring positive news for the future, but the longer term stability will not be felt for many months.

- 1.8.2 At its meeting on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2020, Cabinet adopted a one year Addendum to the Corporate Plan. Various reports have been submitted to a range of Committees and Advisory Boards, and continue to be reported further over the coming months. At the end of the 1 year Addendum, it would seem sensible to review progress and reflect on the potential need for a further Addendum, in the light of the prevailing scenario later in summer 2021.

## **1.9 Legal Implications**

- 1.9.1 The statutory framework governing the response to the pandemic continues to evolve in response to the restrictions placed on both individuals and Local Authorities. It is an absolute requirement that we implement any new responsibilities and restrictions in a timely fashion. This must continue to be a corporate priority.
- 1.9.2 The legal implications for any proposals emerging from the Corporate plan Addendum, will be assessed at the time of individual reports to Members.

## **1.10 Financial and Value for Money Considerations**

- 1.10.1 The recent report to Finance Innovation and Property Advisory Board (06/01/2021), and subsequent report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee (19/01/2021), set out the Council's financial position including the impact of the pandemic. At the time of writing there is nothing further to advise on.

## **1.11 Risk Assessment**

- 1.11.1 The Council's Strategic Risk Register is regularly updates and is on the agenda for Audit Committee on Monday 18 January 2021.

## **1.12 Equality Impact Assessment**

- 1.12.1 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 users.

## **1.13 Policy Considerations**

- 1.13.1 Community
- 1.13.2 Business Continuity/Resilience
- 1.13.3 Healthy Lifestyles
- 1.13.4 Climate Change
- 1.13.5 Customer Contact

1.13.6 Health and Safety

1.13.7 Human Resources

**1.14 Recommendations**

1.14.1 That the Council's ongoing response in respect of the response to Covid-19 be endorsed

1.14.2 That the Corporate Plan Addendum be reviewed at the end of the first year, summer 2021

Background papers:

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Nil