

Report to: Council 21 May 2020

**Lead Cabinet
Member:** Cllr Bridget Smith, Leader of the Council

Lead Officer: Liz Watts, Chief Executive

The Council's Response to COVID-19

Executive Summary

1. The impact of COVID-19 is well documented and this report is designed to provide a very brief summary of the Council's response, touching on three main areas: support to our communities, support to our businesses and support to our employees and members.

Key Decision

2. No

Recommendations

3. It is recommended that Council note the report.

Details

Work in Communities

4. Following the announcements that those over 70 and those who are clinically vulnerable and therefore 'shielded' should not leave home, it was quickly apparent that the Council had an important role to play in supporting these communities. Uniquely, South Cambridgeshire is the only district in the county without one or more large towns – we have 106 villages and the small town of Cambourne. Communities quickly began self organising. Within days some places had tens (in some cases hundreds) of volunteers ready to help. We quickly took the decision that a distributed response was best suited to our district. Local people and leaders in communities were best placed to respond in their own communities, but their response would be enhanced with support and guidance provided by the Council.

5. Our Sustainable Communities team stopped all other work and we split the district into patches, with a Patch Officer for each of the ten areas. The first few days were spent assessing each community's preparedness, and providing appropriate back up where necessary – often this was simply joining groups up, putting ward members in touch with individuals, or helping to create clear structures and pathways. Using data generated from a number of sources within the council, we were able to create lists of vulnerable residents who were likely to need support. These lists were shared with carefully selected data controllers (usually the ward member) and the data was an invaluable source of information in each community being able to focus its efforts. The response from communities has been nothing but extraordinary – at least 4,500 volunteers have been involved in intricate and often complex logistical operations to ensure that all residents who need support with their shopping/prescriptions/dog walking/befriending receive it. Each group has also shared their learning and through the Council's Patch Officers we have been able to create and spread best practice.
6. In the early days, when not all villages were organised, we decided to establish an emergency 'hub of last resort', where food and baby supplies could be delivered on request within a matter of hours. This is run by staff volunteers, and provides a 7 day/week service in cases of crisis where no other help is available.

Work to Support Businesses

7. A virtual team was established with officers from across the Council and colleagues from Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP) to enable us to respond quickly to the issues affecting businesses. Initially the work was focused on processing the government's business rates relief and grants schemes for business in the Hospitality, Leisure and Retail sectors. This has been a collective effort with members becoming involved in the 'hard to reach' businesses and at the time of writing, we had paid out 84% of grants to eligible businesses.
8. GCP have created a business database for us which now includes just over 9,000 businesses registered in the district (when we started we only had those businesses registered with the Business Rates team which was about 5,000) and this will be an invaluable tool in taking our business support work forward. Our website is regularly updated with support/advice for businesses, and a weekly newsletter has been sent out since the crisis started to signpost businesses to the myriad of support available. The Communications team have also been active on social media and data analytics (summarised in the infomatics attachment) show that our website and social media platforms have been a significant source of information for businesses and residents.
9. We have agreed to collaborate on all of our business support work with Cambridge City Council, and a member task and finish group with members from both councils has been established to lead the recovery work.
10. Our first (joint) business virtual meeting was held on 6 May, with over 30 businesses in attendance. This was a new experience for all of us, and a real opportunity to hear first hand from businesses what issues they are facing and what sort of support we may be able to provide.

11. In the meantime, all colleagues have been providing either 'business as usual' or 'COVID-19 adapted' delivery across all services.

Support to Employees and Members

12. During the third week in March we asked the majority of colleagues to work from home, and closed South Cambs Hall to the public. Almost overnight we moved to running a virtual council the vast majority of our services. This was not without its challenges, as many colleagues have juggled caring responsibilities with often significant increases in workload. We have put in place extensive mechanisms to support colleagues, including extending our flexible working arrangements for parents and carers, launching a new Employee Assistance online programme (also extended to members), twice weekly video blogs by the Chief Executive and Leadership Team to ensure everyone is kept up to date on a vast range of issues, two staff surveys to collect statistically valid data on how people are responding and where we can improve, a mental health HR 'Tip of the Day', a number of webinars and online training sessions on how to cope with the change.
13. We have put staff safety at the heart of our plans, including the provision of PPE where appropriate, safe working practices in the Shared Waste service and advice on staff testing. Occasionally this has meant that we have had to reduce service for a period of time (for example we paused the green waste service for a few weeks because we moved to the safe working practice of two in the cab (one driver one loader) rather than three (we usually have two loaders). We had strong support from members and the unions for this change, and it is a testament to our Waste operatives that when the service started up again and we could only guarantee 50% collection rates (ie., a monthly not fortnightly service) , during the first week the crews actually collected 84% of their rounds.
14. On the member front, we hold a weekly all member briefing, weekly group leader meetings, a daily member e-mail posted every evening with extensive (but focused) news and updates from within the Council and externally, and support by patch officers to every ward member.
15. Feedback from all of these support mechanisms has been overwhelmingly positive and it is a testament to our people that the levels of energy and enthusiasm across the Council continue to be very high. People have regularly stepped up to volunteer, or to support their colleagues who have caring responsibilities.
16. We have been active members of the Cambridge and Peterborough Local Resilience Forum, the District Councils' Network, and the East of England and national LGA fora, and have used intelligence from these networks to focus our efforts, for example in areas such as supporting traveller communities.

Implications

17. In the writing of this report, taking into account financial, legal, staffing, risk, equality and diversity, climate change, and any other key issues, the following implications have been considered:-

Financial

18. The Council has faced challenges in income since the crisis began. Council tax collection rates were 1% down in April (May figures not available at the time of writing) and Business Rates collection was 16% down in April and 19% down in May. Commercial rental income is down in some of the smaller properties (but so far the loss is not significant to the overall budget). The cashflow implications of these drops have been somewhat compensated for by the government announcement that the 50% share of business rates that we pass on to government could be delayed until June, and the loss of income (which will not all be recovered) has been somewhat compensated for by two government grants, one of £46k and one of £1.56m. However, it is still too early to tell what the overall financial picture will look like for 2020/21 but further information will be reported through the budget quarterly reports to Cabinet unless there is a need to bring a report earlier.