

Agenda Item 10.

TITLE	Covid-19 Pandemic – the Council's Response
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee on 24 June 2020
WARD	None Specific
DIRECTOR	Susan Parsonage, Chief Executive

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

The Covid-19 pandemic has had an enormous impact on every aspect of our residents' lives, including health (physical and mental) and social care, education, travel, communication, entertainment and leisure, finance and work. The Council has played a significant role in supporting individuals and businesses and has maintained essential services that underpin community life.

RECOMMENDATION

The Committee is requested to:

- 1) Consider the report and identify issues for discussion at the meeting with the Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive;
- 2) Consider the process and timeline for carrying out further detailed Scrutiny of specific issues set out in the report;
- 3) Consider the issues to be scrutinised by the Management Committee and issues to be addressed by the other Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on the lives of every resident in the Borough. The Council has played a key role in supporting and implementing the Government's response in areas such as health and social care (for example by supporting vulnerable people and local care homes), children's services (by safeguarding vulnerable children and supporting home learning) and the provision of advice and support for local businesses.

Whilst the Council's response to the pandemic continues with ongoing significant workloads for officers, the reduction in community transmission and loosening of some lockdown measures provides some opportunity to take stock, assess the scale of the challenge and the way in which the Council has worked with a wide range of partners to respond.

The report sets out a brief timeline of key events relating to the pandemic and the Council's strategic response, summarises the Council's emergency planning arrangements and details the way the Council mobilised resources in conjunction with other key players such as health, police, community and voluntary sector and Town and Parish Councils.

In section 2, the report then sets out details of actions relating to key service areas and the data/feedback available to measure the effectiveness of the Council's plans.

Finally, in section 3, the report considers some of the initial learning from the handling of the pandemic and suggests how the Committee may choose to scrutinise in detail key aspects of the response over an agreed timeline.

SECTION 1 – INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Pandemics are amongst the greatest risks facing any society. The Covid-19 pandemic has presented the greatest challenge to the UK since World War II. Local authorities have played a significant role in supporting the Government's response to the pandemic.

This report provides an initial summary of the challenges faced by the Council and the measures it has put in place to work in partnership to protect residents, support businesses and maintain the delivery of key services.

The report draws on information provided for answers to questions considered at the Executive meeting on 28 May 2020.

1.2 Timeline of Events

- 31 December 2019 – China contacts the World Health Organisation (WHO) to report “cases of pneumonia of unknown etiology” detected in Wuhan.
- 20 January 2020 – first confirmed cases of Covid-19 outside mainland China in Japan, South Korea and Thailand.
- 29 January – first positive tests in the UK after two Chinese nationals fall ill whilst staying at a hotel in York.
- 30 January – WHO declares a global health emergency.
- 4 March – Chancellor announces £12bn package of emergency support to tackle the impact of Covid-19.
- 5 March – first death from Covid-19 in the UK announced (a patient at the Royal Berkshire Hospital). Government moves to “Delay” phase in Covid-19 response.
- Government raises risk to the UK from moderate to high. Public Health England stops contact tracing in view of the wide spread of the infection in the population.
- 13 March – UK elections, scheduled for May 2020 are postponed for a year.
- 16 March – Boris Johnson begins daily press briefings, advising residents to avoid non-essential travel, work from home if possible and avoid visiting social venues.
- 17 March – NHS England announces that, from 15 April, all non-urgent operations in England will be postponed, to free up beds to tackle the pandemic;
- 18 March – Government announces that most schools across England will be closed, except for those looking after the children of key workers and vulnerable children.
- 19 March – publication of hospital discharge guidance. Government announces £1.6bn for local authorities and £1.3bn to NHS and social care to allow up to 15,000 people to be discharged from hospital.
- 20 March – Government orders pubs, restaurants, gyms and social venues to close.

- 21 March – guidance issued on shielding and protecting people defined on medical grounds as extremely vulnerable.
- 23 March - Boris Johnson addresses the nation to outline “lockdown measures”, with police powers to enforce the measures.
- 14 April – WBC and CCG raise concerns about care homes in the Borough.
- 15 April – Government launches a new network to provide personal protective equipment (PPE) to care home staff. NHS England and the Care Quality Commission roll out tests for care home staff and residents.
- 22 April – WBC maps out new protocol and Task Force model for care homes.
- 15 May – Government announces that every resident and staff member in care homes in England will be tested by early June.
- 5 June – details of the national PPE portal published.

1.3 The Council’s Strategic Approach

At the heart of and throughout the response, the following general principles have been applied:

- Acting in response to and in accordance with Government Policy and Legislative announcements – notwithstanding the Council regularly received little or no pre-notification;
- Adhering to guidance from Public Health England;
- Co-coordinating and collaborating with partners to harness resources efficiently and effectively;
- Being outward-facing, linking with national, regional, sub-regional bodies, participating in Ministerial briefings.

The overall approach can be summarised as follows:

- Utilising the Council’s existing emergency planning processes to enact a coordinated, managed, and timely response to the crisis (see para 1.4 below);
- Seeking to protect residents in Care Homes by taking action locally (see para 2.1 below);
- Maintaining critical services for the most vulnerable residents including Children and Young People (see para 2.2) and the wider community (para 2.3);
- Maintaining universal services such as, for example, waste collection, recycling, and highways (para 2.4);
- Providing financial support to local businesses and the local economy (para 2.5);
- Utilising the Council’s workforce through redeployment of staff to those services and activities of greatest need to the community (para 2.6);
- Maintaining local democracy through “virtual” Council meetings, accessible by the public (para 2.7);
- Communicating regularly and clearly with residents, businesses, partners, elected Members and staff (para 2.8);
- Considering the impacts on particular parts of the community e.g. Black & Minority Ethic (BAME) (para 2.9);
- Identifying opportunities to positively impact the Council’s Climate Emergency agenda (para 2.10);
- Identifying and monitoring the financial impacts of Covid-19 (para 2.11);
- Taking a risk based approach to decision-making (para 2.12);
- Planning ahead for the “Restart” and “Recovery” phases of the emergency (para 2.13).

The Council has been just one organisation in the overall response to the crisis. There is a complex matrix of public and private organisations, at both national and local levels, tasked with responding to the Government's overall strategy and policy. This has been an unprecedented crisis and the Council has worked in partnership with many others. It is recommended that the approach to scrutinising the Council's response calls for evidence and feedback from as many of these key partners as possible.

1.4 WBC Emergency Plans and Mobilisation

The initial Emergency Planning group was mobilised on the 28th February 2020, led by the Director of Adult Services, Public Health, and the Emergency Planning Team. This was in response to the rising concerns related to Covid-19 in the UK as set out in the timeline above. The Council had a tested, clear, understood, Emergency Response Plan that was found to be effective. As the Covid-19 situation developed, this group transitioned into Gold and Silver senior leadership groups, led by the Chief Executive, as is best practice in a Major Incident scenario.

The Gold/Silver groups led the strategic and tactical organisational response. They are made up of Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) members (and deputies) and key representatives from Human Resources/Communications/Emergency Planning/IT.

These core groups were meeting 3 times daily through March and April to ensure the organisational and community impacts and needs were understood and responded to rapidly. Each Directorate identified where pressures were being experienced and/or expected. This information was fed into the daily strategic and tactical groups to ensure adequate action plans and mitigating steps were in place.

Response plans to Covid-19 covered the following areas:

- Public Health updates and guidance
- Updates from the Local Resilience Forum (LRF)
- Individual Directorate impacts
- Communications
- Resourcing and redeployment
- Human Resources
- Finance and Economy
- Public Events

In tandem with Response, the Council commenced the Recovery phase of the Major Incident. This dual approach is recommended by the Local Resilience Forum (LRF) and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) as Recovery is an integral part of the emergency management process and is distinct from, but will usually overlap with the response phase.

The elements are defined as follows:

- Response – the immediate activity to support an emergency or Major Incident;
- Recovery - the process of rebuilding, restoring and rehabilitating the community following an emergency.

The Council's Recovery programme is made up of a number of core workstreams, which are led by Extended CLT (ECLT) and governed by CLT.

- Business and Economy
- Community Wellbeing
- Community Engagement
- Communications
- Our People and Accommodation
- Finance and Legal
- Impact and Assessment

The recovery process comprises the following overlapping activities:

- Consequence management, taking steps to prevent the escalation of the impacts of the Major Incident;
- Restoring the well-being of individuals, communities and the infrastructure which supports them.

Wokingham Borough's local Response and Recovery plans have been connected to the Thames Valley strategic groups. This wider, strategic structure ensures the Council is linked into the national picture and able to feed into and escalate to the Local Resilience groups and ultimately to MHCLG.

1.5 Outbreak Control Plan

The Council is developing an Outbreak Control Plan which will ultimately ensure the Borough is prepared to support the community with any local outbreak, in line with Public Health England guidance. The Outbreak Control plan will create an operating model that has key links to Public Health Berkshire, Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum and the Health and Wellbeing Board

The Wokingham Borough Outbreak Control Plan is built upon core activity within the seven elements below:

- i. Local Outbreaks:
 - Mapping of detailed workflows for children's services, educational settings, social care/providers, sheltered housing and developing protocols to ensure cases identified by local intelligence are captured;
 - There will be a 7 day week process for dealing with cases, outbreaks and complex cases via a front door route established with PPP.
- ii. High risk places:
 - Detailed plans for high risk areas where people can find compliance, distancing and quarantine difficult in order to prevent, monitor and react. These plans will include control measures, protocols, communication and the response mobilisation process.
- iii. Testing capacity:
 - Identification is in progress of suitable locations/WBC sites depending on the location of an outbreak with criteria for mobile testing.
- iv. Contact tracing:
 - Proposed joint management of outbreaks with Public Health England (PHE)/Local Authority on procedures and local arrangements in review to support outbreaks.
- v. Data integration:

- The flow of information from local intelligence and the national system is being mapped to process including the monitoring and tracking of data with dashboard oversight.
- vi. Vulnerable people:
- A robust, operation is currently in place via a local community support hub. Processes are being mapped for out of hours arrangements and review of requirements.
- vii. Local Boards:
- Pan Berkshire governance structures and terms of reference are in review and set up;
 - Members/Leaders will be involved to engage with the public.

SECTION 2 – SPECIFIC UPDATES BY THEME/SERVICE

2.1 Care Homes

The Borough's care homes have worked tirelessly through this extremely difficult period to protect and support their residents. Local care homes are usually run by private or voluntary sector service providers. Private care homes are run for profit by private organisations and individual proprietors. Voluntary sector homes are not-for-profit and are run by registered charities, religious organisations and housing associations, sometimes for specific groups of people.

There are 53 Care Quality Commission (CQC) registered care home settings within Wokingham Borough. This is a broad definition and includes both older people care homes (residential and nursing) and learning disability care homes.

95% of the care homes in the Borough, inspected by the CQC, were rated as 'good' or 'outstanding' prior to the outbreak of the virus (February 2020).

As Councillors and Council Officers became increasingly concerned about the situation in care homes locally, we lobbied our MPs, the Local Resilience Forum, Public Health England and the NHS for testing of those being discharged to our care homes. We also lobbied for improved supplies of PPE, more testing in care homes and more infection control nursing support. We increased our support to local care homes, including providing emergency supplies of PPE and sending staff teams into homes to support with specific issues.

Despite this lobbying and support, Government guidelines continued to allow the potential discharge of patients with coronavirus into our care homes, so we took the decision on 21st April to suspend hospital discharge into our care homes. Discharges could only occur if the patient had been tested or the care home had the correct infection control procedures in place and could confidently isolate the resident if needed.

Locally, we established a protocol and task force with health and social care colleagues. This process works proactively with our care homes to prevent the spread of COVID-19, assess and support their readiness to take and manage positive cases and ensure they receive all the support they need. It also supports the Council's safeguarding function.

The task force is just one way the Borough Council has supported care homes during the pandemic crisis. Other initiatives include:

- An improved funding deal for care homes we contract with, prepayments to support with cash flow plus ability to apply for additional temporary funding;
- Help with supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) – over 386,000 pieces of PPE have been supplied to our care homes;
- Regular advice and guidance including financial sustainability and infection control - over 400 calls to registered care homes;
- Testing for staff with symptoms – more than 250 staff tested, plus others who have self-referred for testing via the government website (we are unable to quantify how many have self-referred, as we do not receive this data);
- Offer of access to staff in an emergency Infection control hotline established.

Adult Social Care has been working with our local providers to facilitate mutual aid across the sector. This has included:

- Wokingham Provider Portal; online access to relevant guidance and supporting information;
- Establishing the Care Workers Support Team; pool of care worker staff and facilitated central recruitment programme;
- 7 day working across social care and commissioning to facilitate hospital discharge and support providers;
- Spiritual and emotional support is available through the Community Hub.

Comparative Number of Deaths in Care Homes

Any local death is an extremely important issue for Wokingham Borough Council. Officers have been working hard to support local care homes during the pandemic since March, as evidenced above.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) publishes data on COVID19-related deaths within all care homes across the country. This ONS data shows the following:

- Between the 1st January and 29th May 2020, 73 (Covid19 related) deaths occurred within Wokingham Borough care homes – this equates to a rate of 54 Covid-19 deaths per 1,000 care home beds in Wokingham;
- Despite having the second highest number of care home beds in Berkshire, the COVID19 death rate in Wokingham is not the worst death rate in comparison to neighbouring boroughs.

However, the public are advised to take extra caution when comparing Covid-19 deaths between neighbouring authorities. This is because different boroughs have different population sizes, with different age structures – some with more elderly residents than others. Therefore, in order to make fairer comparisons, it is crucial that we standardise the ONS data to take account of the number of residents, their ages, their vulnerabilities, and the number of care homes across each borough. We are publishing this data on our website – a copy of the latest situation report dated 10 June 2020 is appended to this report for information.

2.2 Children's Services and Schools

In response to Covid-19, Children's Social Care has adapted and amended how we deliver our services. This is to ensure that both workers and children are safe, and risks are mitigated. Our changes have been informed by Government advice and guidance on social distancing, good hygiene and not undertaking unnecessary journeys. In summary, the changes to practice and service delivery are:

- Risk assessments and mitigation of risks;
- Family visits, ensuring the provision and correct use of PPE;
- Adapting our service offer and supporting families differently;
- Digital Tech supporting engagement with families;
- Remote working – ensuring good practice and procedures.

We are focused on keeping children safe, staff safety and our statutory duties. This is a delicate balancing process.

Most workers are now working from home. This has been supported by the roll out of IT equipment and some changes to our recording system to ensure we are accurately recording how visits take place (either virtually by phone, video call or face to face). Workers currently based at home are undertaking work, for example any community activity i.e. visits.

All Child Protection visits in Borough are ongoing and are face-to-face using all safety precautions as required. Child Protection Conferences and Looked After Reviews are taking place remotely via conference calls.

All 'Looked After Children' cases have been reviewed and, where possible, visit timeframes amended, in line with the statutory requirement relating to each case. The availability of new Apps and software has supported the use of video calling to communicate with children regularly. The Bridges Resource Centre is continuing to offer a residential respite service, although this has been slightly reduced.

All court applications for Public Law (where we need to protect a child) and Youth Justice are being completed remotely via video link. The number of contacts made to our 'front door' (Duty, Triage and Assessment) has reduced and we are using some of the capacity created to support pressures and gaps in other teams and to assist with visits.

We are meeting weekly with the Berkshire West Safeguarding Children Partnership (health and Police) to identify and address any issues or themes as they arise.

We have been working with our schools and learning community, to continue to provide students at home work packages and/or on-line learning materials to support their continuing education during this period.

For our Looked After Children (for whom we are the Corporate Parent), we have provided a range of additional resources to assist with home learning such as on line encyclopaedia, and are providing online 1:1 tutoring to support children's engagement with their work packages. Feedback from carers and young people is that this support has been welcomed and we have seen some of our Looked after Children re-engage with schools-based learning as a result.

We have continued to deliver our Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings, to support children's learning development and will soon be moving to an online PEP system to make this smoother and easier for Looked after Children and their carers to engage.

2.3 Community Response

In terms of shielding and support to vulnerable adults the Council has gone from helping 1,850 people to 5,000 almost overnight.

The Wokingham Borough Community Response (WBCR) provides a single point of contact for residents to access support during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Citizens Advice Wokingham provides "One Front Door" for residents. Council staff and Citizens Advice staff and volunteers take phone calls and respond to emails requesting support. They work together to assess residents' needs, providing advice and getting people the right support, including referring to other services such as:

- the Link Visiting Scheme's "Talking Buddies" programme for people feeling isolated and lonely;
- the Wokingham Foodbank for those struggling financially to access food;
- Wokingham Volunteer Centre have supported collecting and delivering pharmacy prescriptions;
- First Days Children's Charity have supported the Food hub to deliver food parcels.

Wokingham Volunteer Centre and The Link Visiting Scheme have supported the recruitment of over 600 additional volunteers. Age UK have expanded their Home from Hospital Scheme to provide additional support to those returning home from a stay in an acute hospital.

The community engagement team are also making sure they are keeping in contact with the families in their areas they know and support regularly and key information has been shared on our 'Your community' Facebook page.

All sheltered tenants (245) were contacted within 3 days (week commencing 16th March) and an assessment was completed with them to ascertain the level of service they need during the pandemic. From doing this, we moved the majority of homes to an electronic 'I'm ok system'. This means we have reduced unnecessary direct contact with the residents who do not need it daily. The others have received either a daily telephone call or a daily visit if assessed, as needed.

Each of the tenants in sheltered accommodation has also received information with all of the floating support and the manager's telephone numbers, so if they need anything they can contact someone directly. A daily presence from floating support or housing officers has been maintained on each of the schemes and regular follow up calls put in place.

Officers called all our tenants who have someone in their household who is over 65 years of age. If they needed further assistance they were scheduled for a further call each week. If there was an immediate need for assistance they were referred to the CAB Front Door via the website directly by the person making the call.

As of 09 June 2020, the Wokingham Borough Community Response (WBCR) has:

- Assisted over 2,000 residents through the Front Door Scheme;
- Delivered food parcels to around 680 older people, across the borough (aged 70+); Nearly 500 children are living in households also receiving food parcels;
- The distribution hub are delivering to over 800 households and have done over 4,000 deliveries to date;
- Helped 15 independent community led volunteer groups, including weekly check-ins with Black And Minority Ethnic (BAME) community groups;
- Picked up and delivered 791 prescriptions;
- Provided fortnightly telephone checks for over 1,600 people;
- Supported 50 people through the home from hospital scheme;
- Worked with Adult Social Care to contact 5,000 (currently around 4,700) vulnerable people to check on their health and welfare;
- All sheltered housing tenants (around 260) have been contacted;
- Council has contacted around 800 housing tenants;
- Contacted all general need housing tenants who have someone in their household aged over 65.

2.4 Universal Services

The impact of Covid-19 on Council services has been profound. It has affected all aspects of the Council's business. Whilst the Council's focus has been on critical matters such as supporting care homes and working with partners on the community response, the Council has also sought to deliver universal services in the same way as far as possible. At the same time, staff have been redeployed extensively throughout the organisation to ensure there was staff capacity in the right places which can be flexed and adapted as required.

The Council has tried to maintain those services that affect most, if not all of our residents going, such as highways maintenance, waste collection and recycling (see case study below). We have not only achieved this in most services, we have also escalated improvement and repair work to the Borough's highways, taking advantage of the opportunity of far fewer cars on the road network. This has included 'hard to do' works including the Showcase Roundabout. Works started on a programme of 17 accelerated carriageway resurfacing schemes on 6th April 2020, which should be completed by mid-June. At the same time, we suspended Civil Parking Enforcement.

We decided to continue to collect garden waste, and as a result, whilst the RE3 Partnership were forced to close the Household Waste Recycling Centres (which have now re-opened) we have not seen the exceptional increases in fly-tipping that have been reported elsewhere in the country. Our Localities Enforcement Team have continued working and dealing with a full range of issues throughout.

We have kept our Country Parks open, allowing residents to enjoy open space and, whilst we had to close the car parks for the early weeks of the crisis, we have now re-opened them and provided additional staffing resources to ensure that visitors are aware of the social distancing guidance.

Despite most of our staff working from home, we've managed to maintain a full front-line service to residents contacting the Borough through our Customer Delivery service, with staff dealing with online and telephone requests. We are largely paperless and can access most of the information we need electronically. We have only stopped those services such as weddings, citizenship ceremonies and birth registrations where the Government has requested that we do so.

We acted quickly to provide safe emergency accommodation for homeless households, rough sleepers, children in care and repatriated residents as well as temporary accommodation for essential key workers. And we have liaised with local bus operators to ensure that the much reduced levels of service still meet the essential needs of residents and key workers.

Whilst we had to close our libraries in line with Government restrictions we have expanded and promoted our range of online services to include electronic books and magazines, added free music streaming and a whole series of online virtual events. A large proportion of the library staff were rapidly re-deployed to provide additional assistance to the most vulnerable.

Using staff re-deployed from services which have had to scale down we've provided advice, support and funding to local businesses impacted by the lockdown. This has meant that funding crucial for their survival has been allocated quickly and efficiently.

Case Study – Waste and Recycling

The Council's waste collection service is delivered by Veolia who have worked with the Council throughout the crisis in an adaptable, flexible and pragmatic way to ensure that the best possible service is delivered to our residents, whilst following government guidelines to ensure the safety of the workforce and the public. Veolia has provided a full service without disruption throughout this period, a feat achieved by only 38% of Councils in England.

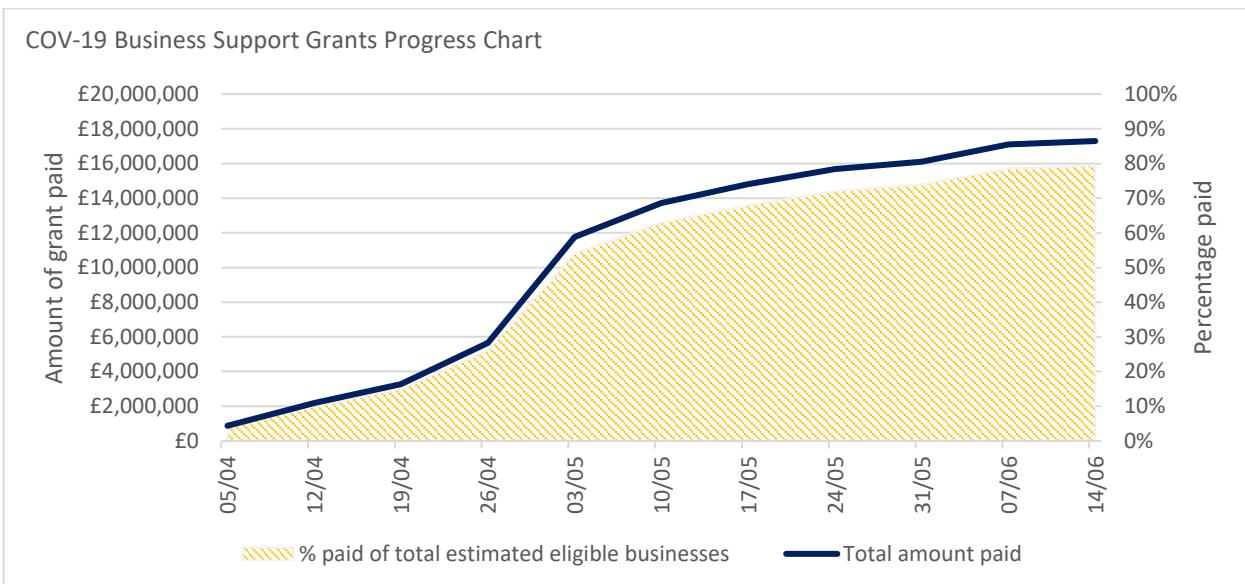
A range of alternative operational practices have been implemented by Veolia to reduce staff contact and secure social distancing. Appropriate PPE and testing have been made available to Veolia's staff. Where staff have self-isolated, additional agency staff have been employed to maintain collections within the Borough. Fortunately, Veolia's absence levels have remained below 20% and service levels have been maintained.

In terms of the amount of waste and recycling collected, April and May saw a 17% increase in general waste collected and a 13% increase in dry recycling. Food waste increased by 50% over the same period. There was also a 50% increase in garden waste tonnages. This reflected the closure of the re3 recycling centres, the warm weather and more residents being able/willing to work in the garden due to the lockdown.

In previous years, the Council has delivered around 900 garden waste bins to residents in April. This year the number increased to 1,800.

2.5 Support for Businesses

Local authorities have received funding from central government to distribute to, and support, small and medium businesses (SMEs) in England during coronavirus. The Council was allocated £20.5million to support up to 1,721 SMEs in the borough who were considered eligible for this funding. Currently, 1,320 SMEs have claimed and are receiving this funding; a total of £17.3million. Hence 84% of the government funding received has been allocated to SMEs as at 11 June 2020 as shown in the chart below.

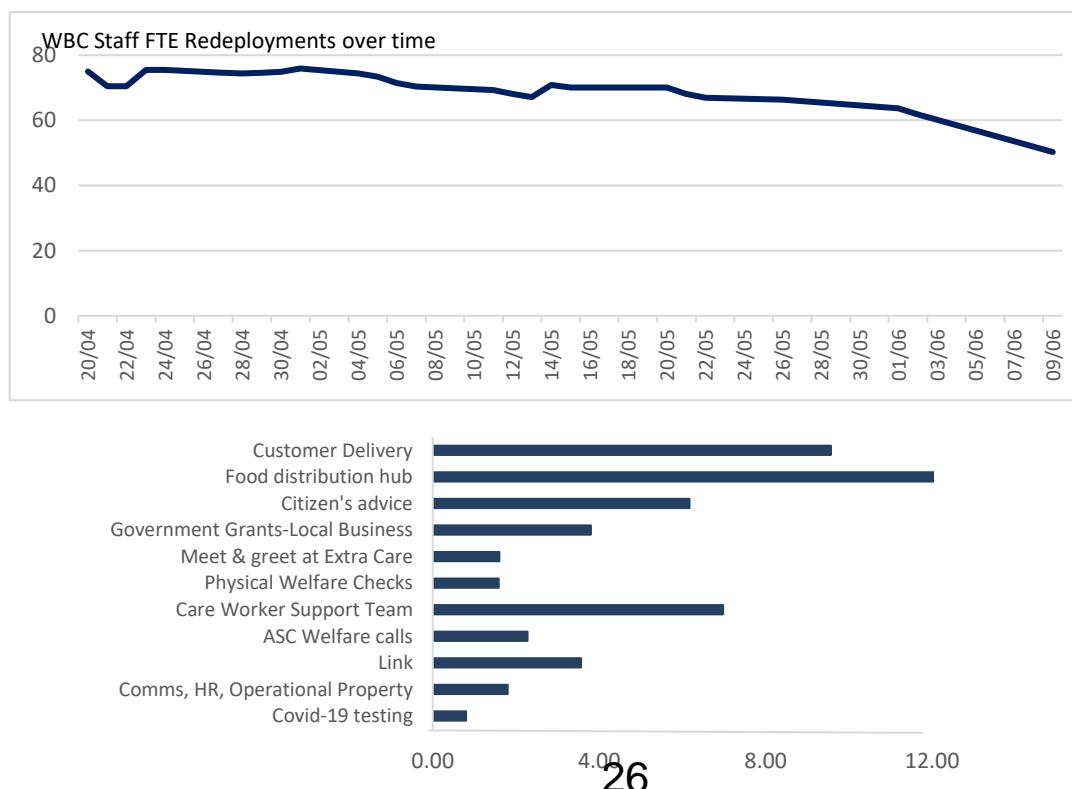


2.6 Support for Council Staff

As well as creating a dedicated area of the Intranet that provides signposting and information with regard to Physical and Mental wellbeing, we have ensured that individual risk assessments are conducted for staff who are clinically vulnerable or clinically extremely vulnerable and the appropriate mitigations put in place. Until further guidance is forthcoming from the government, we are including following clinically vulnerable guidance when assessing risk for BAME employees.

All staff have also been encouraged to ensure they have the correct equipment for home working and the Council has supplied screens, chairs and peripherals when these have been required.

The Council has used its workforce flexibly over the past three months with significant numbers redeployed to areas of greatest need as shown in the charts below.



2.7 Maintaining Local Democracy

In April 2020, the Government put new regulations in place which enabled local authority meetings to be held remotely, including allowing remote access by members of the public. Working together, the Democratic Services, People Development and IT teams enabled a remote meeting solution using Microsoft Teams to allow the normal Council meeting calendar to continue. IT focussed on technical implementation, whilst People Development focused on training Members and Officers to use the new technology. Democratic Services focussed on producing a practical meeting template whilst adhering to government legislation and the practicalities of running a Council meeting. In addition, a remote streaming software was enabled to allow simultaneous broadcasting of the meeting for public viewing whilst maintaining a good level of security for each meeting to take place.

2.8 Communication and Engagement

Communication and engagement during WBC's response to Covid-19 has followed the objectives of providing:

- Clear advice to residents on health issues;
- Social distancing messages;
- Updates on WBC services, (including those temporarily suspended, altered and ongoing);
- Guidance on how residents can get help (including Wokingham Borough Community Response);
- Appeal for Personal Protection Equipment;
- Information for businesses on support available;
- Advice and support on mental health issues;
- Links to useful information for home educating and coping with family life in lockdown;
- Advice for domestic abuse victims;
- Warnings on potential scams;
- Celebration of social care work;
- Thanks to key workers (including in ongoing services such as waste and recycling);
- Explanation of closure decisions such as play areas, country park car parks libraries, leisure centres and Council reception;
- Promotion of WBC response including staff redeployment, support for voluntary sector, flexible service delivery (online library offer and exercise videos).

These messages have been delivered through:

- Leaflet drops across Borough;
- Social media;
- Print and broadcast media;
- Town and Parish Councils;
- WBC Leader's update;
- Direct email (Wokingham Borough Connect) – a bulletin sent directly to signed-up residents. During Covid-19 crisis this is being sent to approximately 40,000 people to provide updates on WBC services and health information.

Communication and engagement activity has been reported daily to the Covid-19 Daily Meeting.

2.9 Impact of Covid-19 on the Community (including the Black and Minority Ethnic Community)

A report by Public Health England titled “Disparities in the risk and outcomes of Covid-19”, published on 2 June 2020, found that the largest disparity found was by age. Among people already diagnosed with Covid-19, people who were 80 or older were seventy times more likely to die than those under 40. Risk of dying among those diagnosed with Covid-19 was also higher in males than females; higher in those living in the more deprived areas than those living in the least deprived; and higher in those in Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups than in White ethnic groups.

These inequalities largely replicate existing inequalities in mortality rates in previous years, except for BAME groups, as mortality was previously higher in White ethnic groups. These analyses take into account age, sex, deprivation, region and ethnicity, but they do not take into account the existence of comorbidities, which are strongly associated with the risk of death from Covid-19 and are likely to explain some of the differences.

When compared to previous years, the report also found a particularly high increase in all cause deaths among those born outside the UK and Ireland; those in a range of caring occupations including social care and nursing auxiliaries and assistants; those who drive passengers in road vehicles for a living including taxi and minicab drivers and chauffeurs; those working as security guards and related occupations; and those in care homes. These analyses do not take into account the existence of comorbidities, which are strongly associated with the risk of death from Covid-19 and could explain some of these differences.

The Government is considering its response to the report but it is recommended that the Committee refer to this report as key evidence when formulating its response to the emergency – a copy is appended.

2.10 Climate Emergency

Members will be aware of the impact of the pandemic on carbon emissions across the world with the shutdown of industry and a huge reduction in travel. The International Energy Agency expects global industrial greenhouse gas emissions to be about 8% lower in 2020 than 2019, the largest annual reduction since World War II. However, this reduction will have no real impact if countries return to a pre-pandemic level of emissions. China, for example, has announced that it will loosen environmental regulations in order to boost the post-pandemic recovery. Global warming depends on the level of cumulative emissions to date, so a brief pause will not affect the long-term trend.

Experts believe that the pandemic provides an opportunity to implement new policies and practices which result in a reduced carbon impact. For example, the Council, along with many businesses, has been able to maintain operations and services with the vast majority of staff working from home. Many organisations will be looking at the future potential for similar arrangements which may produce positive environmental, productivity, welfare and cost benefits.

The Executive Member for Climate Emergency will be assessing the impact of the pandemic on the Council’s Climate Emergency Action Plan. The Committee has also

established a Climate Emergency Task and Finish Group which has started work on reviewing the Action Plan.

2.11 Financial Impact

The Council's 2019/20 Budget outturn report, presented already, accounts for the impact on the Council's accounts of the Covid-19 pandemic for that financial year. The direct costs for 2019/20 were £104k. These costs were offset by the first tranche of grant funding from the Government which was received before the year end. Indirect costs were absorbed by the services as these were minimal for the final weeks in March and these figures are already in the outturn figures.

The main impact of Covid-19 on the Council will be in the current financial year (2020/21). Grant funding, less that used in 2019/20, has been carried forward into the current year. Even with this and the second Government allocation from, the Council will still face a pressure on its 2020/21 budgets as a result of the response to the pandemic. Although the Council's Financial Management arrangements remain sound we have unprecedented challenges as a result of this crisis and must, therefore, continue to ensure that resources are targeted to those in our community who are most in need.

In relation to the Capital Programme, it is likely that there will be some delays in the capital projects within the programme, as the Covid-19 pandemic will undoubtedly affect the supply chain for the Council's various contractors. However, the early signs are that the economy is starting to move again and the construction industry is returning to work, in accordance with the Government guidance on social distancing. Officers are currently reviewing the Capital Programme with a view to considering any impact of Covid-19 on resourcing and potential changes to service requirements. Proposed changes to the Capital Programme will be reported back to Executive.

With regard to Scrutiny's involvement in budget setting and understanding the financial impact of Covid-19, it is suggested that the process used last year (i.e. Community & Corporate O&S detailed scrutiny) is replicated starting in autumn 2020 to consider proposals for the Council's 2021/22 budget.

2.12 Risk Management

Throughout the Covid-19 emergency, the Council has taken a proactive approach to managing the many risks associated with the situation. This is on a number of different levels including:

- Maintaining an operational Covid-19 risk register since March 2020 to help manage the immediate operational response;
- Reviewing the Council's Corporate Risk Register for the impact of Covid-19 (reviewed by the Audit Committee on 3 June 2020);
- Producing a Covid-19 risk-based Community Impact Assessment for the local resilience forum;
- Producing a risk register to manage the risks associated with the Recovery Programme.

The Audit Committee will continue to monitor the risk management process and assure itself of the effectiveness of risk management governance at its future meetings.

2.13 Restart and Recovery

As the Council's response to the crisis stabilised, officers began planning for Restart between May and September and Recovery over the next 12-18 months.

The Restart phase will focus on reviewing projects and activities which have been paused and the reopening of services. The pace and detail of this will be determined by the lifting of the Government's restrictions. It seems clear at this stage however that increased home working and virtual meetings will become the norm for many staff.

The Recovery exercise is more strategic and outward focussed, and will be framed both by the Corporate Plan priorities and available financial resources. It will be influenced by the ongoing legacy of the crisis, but the opportunity will be taken to explore radical approaches to services facilitated by the evolving 'new normal'.

Running across all work-streams is "insight and opportunity" ensuring the Council captures and takes forward the learning from the last few months. Other work-streams included in the Recovery programme include:

- support for the local economy and businesses;
- community recovery and engagement;
- environment and planning;
- member engagement and development
- staffing and accommodation;
- contracts;
- finance and legal;
- communications;
- debrief, i.e. lessons learned from the "major incident."

As plans are developed, stakeholders will be consulted as appropriate and further reports will be brought forward in due course.

SECTION 3 – SUGGESTED SCRUTINY APPROACH

3.1 Principles

Given the widespread impact of Covid-19, the complexity of responses in that the Council was only one of a number of agencies and organisations involved, the fact officers remain heavily focused on resetting services, and the need to learn lessons in a relatively short timescale should a second wave occur, it will be important for the Committee to focus on those subjects that offer the largest benefit to the community both in terms of improvement but equally ensuring the things that have served us well are maintained.

It is suggested that the overall approach should combine each of the following three objectives:

- To educate and inform – e.g. each piece of Scrutiny should commence with a session for Members to be provided with an overview of the Council's statutory duties, other agencies' responsibilities, etc.;
- To learn lessons with regards to both things we can improve/do differently and things that worked well;
- To inform the Restart and Recovery programme of work.

3.2 Indicative Timetable

Theme	Educative Session	O&S Committee
Care Homes	Early July (tbc)	HOSC (date tbc)
Schools & Children's Services	Early September (tbc)	Children's Services
Finance & Business	N/A	Community & Corporate
Community response	August (tbc)	Community & Corporate
Recovery	September	Management Committee

3.3 Conclusion and Lessons Learned So Far

Fundamentally, the Council has learned that our resilience and Business Continuity plans are sound, and have worked well. The Council's investment in digital technology to enable staff to work from home has also proved its worth beyond doubt.

We have also learned that, as an organisation, we are able to flex and adapt quickly, and that our vital relationships with key contractors, such as our waste and highways contractors are strong. This has enabled us to keep delivering when some other authorities have struggled.

Learning from our early experience of social distancing within reception points and libraries will be built into future arrangements when they are allowed to re-open. We will strengthen our understanding of risk to ensure that our residents and our staff are able to interact safely and effectively.

We hope to continue to build on and expand our range of online and telephone assisted services and continue to offer organised telephone/video appointments going forward, for the convenience of our customers.

Going forward we will develop our relationship with local businesses further, particularly regarding promoting and accessing grants, and assisting with health checks, and explore how we can build on any benefits and opportunities.

Similarly, the partnership that we have built with the voluntary and community sector will be strengthened as we move forward. At the same time because our contact with vulnerable people in the Borough has been extensive, using many extra staff, we now know much more about the needs of this this community, which can be fed into future thinking about service provision.

Officers are committed to capturing lessons learnt from the last few months as resources permit. It is proposed that feedback will be sought from stakeholders including Councillors, the Voluntary Sector, Partners, residents and staff in order to see not only what can be learnt from this unprecedented emergency but also to identify the many strengths that have been demonstrated.

Notwithstanding the many positive aspects of the Council's response to date, the Committee should note that it is not sustainable to flex the workforce and other resources indefinitely over a prolonged period of time – the impact on the Council, its workforce, and its finances over the past three months of intensive activity has been severe and the Committee is asked to consider this as part of its approach to scrutinising the Council's response.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe financial challenges over the coming years as a result of the austerity measures implemented by the Government and subsequent reductions to public sector funding. It is estimated that Wokingham Borough Council will be required to make budget reductions in excess of £20m over the next three years and all Executive decisions should be made in this context.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	0	NA	NA
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	0	NA	NA
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	0	NA	NA

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

Although there are no specific financial implications associated with this report, it must be noted that the Council's financial response to the emergency has had a huge impact and is not sustainable without additional Government funding.

Cross-Council Implications

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted on every part of the Council's operations, as set out in the report. Staff and financial resources have been redeployed to ensure that residents, community organisations and businesses have been supported and protected during over the past few months.

Public Sector Equality Duty

Scrutiny of any aspects of the response should consider the way the Council discharged its equality duties.

List of Background Papers

None

Contact Andrew Moulton	Service Corporate Services
Telephone No 0118 974	Email andrew.moulton@wokingham.gov.uk
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