

Rother District Council

Report to	-	Cabinet
Date	-	8 June 2020
Report of the	-	Executive Directors
Subject	-	COVID-19 – The Council’s Response – Update

Recommendation: It be **RESOLVED:** That the Council’s response to the COVID-19 emergency to date, be noted.

Lead Cabinet Member: Councillor Oliver

Introduction / background to the crisis

1. On 31 December 2019, Chinese authorities notified the World Health Organisation (WHO) of an outbreak of pneumonia in Wuhan City, which was later classified as a new disease, COVID-19. The main symptoms are a cough, high temperature, loss of smell and taste and in severe cases, shortness of breath. As this was a new disease, there was no immunity in the population and no vaccine or anti-viral medication. As a result, the potential existed for the disease to spread extensively. This rapid spread has been witnessed in recent times. As of 27 May 2020, there were 267,240 cases across the UK, and sadly 37,460 people have now died from the disease. There have been 700 confirmed cases of the coronavirus in East Sussex, 95 of which were in Rother.
2. Evidence indicates that most people who become infected will experience a mild self-limiting illness, similar to seasonal flu. Some will show no symptoms at all. A proportion of those infected will develop complications and require hospital treatment, most often pneumonia. In a small proportion of these cases, the illness may be severe enough to lead to death.
3. The risk of death increases in older people and people with an underlying health risk condition or those who are immuno-compromised. Illness is less common and usually less severe in young people. Children can be affected but illness is rare in people under 20 years of age. All the above facts have been highly publicised in recent months.

The National Response

4. The UK action plan (Coronavirus: Action Plan – a Guide to what you can expect across the UK) published on the 3 March 2020 sets out what the UK has already done, and plans to do further to tackle the outbreak. The objectives of the action plan are to contain, delay and mitigate the outbreak, using research to inform policy. The overall phases of the plan are:
 - **Contain:** detect early cases, follow up close contacts and prevent the disease spreading for as long as is reasonably possible.
 - **Delay:** slow the spread, lowering the peak impact.

- **Research:** better understand the virus to plan and act to lessen its effect on the UK.
 - **Mitigate:** care for those who are ill, support hospitals and support people in the community to minimise the overall impact of the disease.
5. On 12 March 2020, the UK Government officially moved from the Containment Phase into the Delay Phase, the intention being to slow the spread of the virus and lowering the peak impact. Key decisions taken as a result of moving into the Delay Phase included the need for any person exhibiting a new cough or new high temperature to self-isolate, initially for seven days and subsequently as of 17 March 2020 for 14 days and that isolation should extend to all household members, even if others within the same household are not displaying symptoms.
 6. On 18 March 2020, the Government announced the closure of most schools and this was followed on 20 March 2020 by the closure of all pubs, restaurants, gyms and other social venues across the country.
 7. These closures remain in place at the time of writing this report but plans are being made for re-opening in the near future (assuming Phase 1 of the national programme goes to plan).

The Council's Response

8. In responding to the pandemic crisis the Council needed to respond in three ways:
 - a) Support to the vulnerable
 - b) Support to local businesses
 - c) Redesign of the Council's operations and functions to respond to Government measures

a) Support to the Vulnerable

Community Hub

9. At a national level, the Government worked with county and unitary councils on getting support (such as food supplies and medicines) to those on the NHS 'shielded' list. At a more local level it was left to district and borough councils, along with Parish and Town Councils (P&TCs) and voluntary organisations, to support those vulnerable groups falling outside the 'shielded' category.
10. A number of P&TCs and local volunteer groups mobilised themselves in the early days to identify and support those in need within their communities. This included local ward Members who acted as valuable and useful conduit, or in some cases led, on the coordination of activity.
11. The Rother Community Hub (RCH) was mobilised and went live on Wednesday 25 March 2020 offering a dedicated telephone line (01424 787000, option 4), a triage and signposting function, and an online self-referral form. The purpose of the hub is to support those residents who are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and not picked up by the 'shielded' list.

12. The RCH operated by matching an identified need with an existing local volunteer group who can help with shopping, collecting prescriptions, a friendly call and other needs such as dog walking. In addition, the RCH, signposts to statutory support services should the requirement be identified and assists with government registrations for the 'shielded' group.
13. With the support of Rother Voluntary Action (RVA) a directory of local community and volunteer sources of help was developed. These are the groups to whom the RCH makes referrals to support residents. RVA has been assisting the Voluntary Sector in their response, initially providing information and guidance on contact protocol and safeguarding as well as daily updates answering questions.
14. In early weeks, RCH provided a direct support service for those in urgent need. This was also at a time when food supplies were restricted and limited at local supermarkets. The Council has supported the foodbanks within the district, as well as Hastings, with purchasing stock on their behalf and established a stock of 'emergency food parcels' and distribution mechanism with The Pelham, Bexhill should the need arise.
15. The RCH received over 700 calls to the end of May, 369 online forms completed and in each case a call has been made to the resident to discuss their needs and the appropriate support required. For each online form completed, a welfare call has also been made a week later by the RCH to check the resident has the support in place before being signed off. Positive feedback has been made by many of those who have used the service, welcoming the support. Currently there are a few people being supported with food parcels and this will be kept under review. The Council will continue to support households but an exit strategy will need to be formulated to release staff currently dedicated to the RCH.

Council Tax Hardship Fund

16. The Government provided funding for councils to grant further relief to those Council Tax payers in receipt of Council Tax Reduction support (CTR). This was capped at £150 per household and will help a significant number of Rother households who are on low incomes. This extra help is also available to new claimants. The Council received specific funding of £650,000 to support this initiative. At the time of writing, the Council was still waiting for Capita to issue the necessary software update to enable this relief to be granted. It is not possible to implement the scheme without the software changes. As a result of this delay, the Council is not seeking recovery of the normal balance of Council Tax for CTR claimants.

b) Support to Local Businesses

17. As part of the Government's response to the economic impact of COVID-19, it was announced on 11 March 2020 that the Government would pay grants to businesses entitled to small business rates relief and rural rate relief. The Government also extended 100% rate relief to the retail, hospitality and leisure sector which then gave access to the business grants. Depending on rateable value of the business property the grant would be either £10,000 or £25,000. The Government allocated £34.8m to Rother. Based on an analysis

of the Council's business rates database, this would support 2,609 businesses.

18. The grants were widely publicised through social media and the Council's website, plus all eligible businesses that had not applied by 17 April 2020 were contacted in writing to encourage them to submit their details. Members also got involved with this process and used their local knowledge to contact business owners.
19. As of 22 May 2020, the Council had paid out £23.2m helping some 2,027 businesses. This represents 80% of those believed to be eligible. Officers are attempting to contact the remaining businesses and organisations by phone to encourage them to apply. For the voluntary sector, awareness of eligibility is an issues and anecdotally some businesses are responding saying they do not require the funding.
20. On the 2 May 2020, the Government announced a further discretionary fund to be administered by Councils to provide grants to help businesses not supported under the scheme described above. Initial guidance for the new scheme was received from the Government on 13 May 2020 with updated guidance on the 23 May 2020. The Council, along with its neighbouring authorities, are looking to deliver a consistent approach to using this new funding to support local businesses and organisations who have been unable to access other Government financial support schemes. The total funding the Council received for this grant scheme is only £1.476m. It is expected that an agreed criteria will be adopted by the Council under the emergency procedures and published by the beginning of June for applications to start.

c) Redesign of the Council's operations and functions to respond to Government measures

Decision making

21. Given that the Government had introduced measures to restrict travel, adhere to social distancing rules and for people to work from home unless otherwise unavoidable, the Council held an extraordinary meeting on 23 March 2020 to agree emergency procedures to enable officers, in consultation with key Members, to make COVID-19 related critical executive or regulatory decisions that could not wait during the period of Government restrictions.
22. It was also agreed that as a result of the COVID-19 emergency, all scheduled meetings be suspended until further notice; Member non-attendance be considered as an absence approved by the Council until further notice and the Chairman of Council and all Committee Chairmen and Membership remain as currently constituted until such times as the Annual Council meeting could be held.
23. To date it has been necessary to use the emergency procedures on five occasions in respect of executive matters: one occasion in respect of Licensing matters and one in respect of Planning Committee. The officer decision sheets were published online and all Members notified in respect of the following matters:

Executive (Cabinet) Decisions:

OED001 - Temporary Deferral of Rent for Tenants in Council Owned Commercial Property
OED002 - Garden Waste Charge
OED003 - Freedom Leisure Financial Support
OED004 - Licences and Concessions
OED005 - Amendment to Constitution Part 4 - Remote Meetings of the Council

Licensing and General Purposes Committee:

OL&GPD001 - Taxi Licensing Matters

Planning Committee:

OPD001 - Temporary Amendment to the Public Speaking Scheme

Remote Meetings

24. On 4 April 2020, the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Police and Crime Panel Meetings (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 came into force. These regulations essentially permit local authorities to hold remote meetings, along with other considerations including there being no requirement to hold an Annual Council Meeting until May 2021.
25. Whilst initially during the first few weeks of the lockdown finding a solution for holding formal remote meetings was not a priority, as time passed and other authorities were beginning to hold remote meetings, the need to identify a solution became more pressing.
26. Officers worked to identify a short-term solution that could be met within current resources and technical capabilities, whilst satisfying security requirements. Several councils across the country had already held remote meetings and had been subject to unfortunate hackers and mishaps – whilst the Council's approach had seemed hesitant, we were keen to learn from others and tap into the many case studies and examples and avoid the pit falls that had befallen our colleagues in other councils.
27. In mid-April it was agreed to pursue Microsoft Teams as the favoured platform in the short-term for remote meetings. Microsoft Teams had been rolled out to staff just prior to the lockdown and rolled out to Members shortly thereafter.
28. The first formal meeting of the Council to use the Microsoft Teams platform was the Audit and Standards Committee on 18 May 2020 and Planning Committee on 28 May 2020.
29. It is clear from this experience and the benefits that remote meetings has brought (reduced costs, travel time, travel costs, carbon footprint etc.), that going forward, the use of remote meetings will continue in some form or another. A longer-term more robust and inclusive solution enabling a hybrid approach of Members being present in the Town Hall and others accessing meetings remotely, will be sought, but there are likely to be significant cost implications for this.

Staffing

30. The Council has a responsibility to its staff and implemented the Government's guidance that if staff could work from home then they should do so rather than come into the office. A number of staff, however, were still attending the offices as they did not have the equipment to work from home.
31. A decision was taken that unless attendance in the office was essential staff should remain at home. At the same time a roll-out of IT equipment was undertaken which meant that the majority of our office based staff can work from home. Those staff not office based e.g. the maintenance team, have been redirected into other duties where possible including supporting the RCH.
32. The customer contact centre was reconfigured so that the majority of staff could work from home. However, in order to take account of those members of the public unable to contact the council by email, telephone etc., and also due to need to restrict access into the Town Hall reception area, an intercom was installed outside the building which the public could use and staff could respond to.
33. The use of Microsoft Teams referred to previously has greatly facilitated the ability to communicate among staff along it is acknowledged that that use is still in its early days.

Members

34. Members across the Council have been actively and extensively involved in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, whether through P&TCs or local community groups. In the absence of local community groups Members have led in establishing such groups.
35. Members have also been able to use their local knowledge to assist with the RCH and also in identifying local businesses who may be eligible for business grants.
36. Although attendance at the Town Hall has been limited, Members have made use of new technology to hold discussions amongst themselves and with staff, therefore ensuring that work in the community could continue. This has included regular briefings for Cabinet Portfolio Holders from Heads of Service.
37. The use of remote meeting technology has meant that local issues can be discussed and any learning/good practice shared effectively. It has also facilitated and involved both Members and officers in the joint effort that made up the Council's response to the pandemic.

Information Technology

38. The Council's IT department has deployed over 100 new laptops since the pandemic began, along with remote working solutions. This enabled staff to take advantage of our new Microsoft 365 environment including Microsoft Teams and other back-office technologies such as SharePoint, which have been deployed to 261 devices. Members have also been able to access Microsoft Teams.

39. It quickly became obvious that the way the Council's IT infrastructure was configured was hampering home working so changes were rapidly made to numerous systems to make the most of the available bandwidth and ensure that working from home became a viable option for the majority of staff.
40. One important change referred to above was enabling Contact Centre use from home, along with access to the other council systems to enable staff to take and answer calls from home.
41. Development work is continuing in IT to ensure the Council can meet the demands of large numbers of staff working from home and to make the whole experience easier. One limiting factor outside of the Council's control is the quality and capacity of the local broadband network which ultimately impacts on the efficiency of working from home for some staff.

Communications

42. The COVID-19 pandemic has meant that the Council needed to focus on its communication – both internal and external. Several measures were introduced following the outbreak which included:

Internal

- Daily updates were introduced for staff from 12 March 2020.
- Daily Member updates were introduced from 17 March 2020 and the circulation was expanded from 24 March 2020 to include MPs and P&TCs.
- Daily conversations were commenced between the Leader of the Council and an Executive Director.
- The 'lockdown' coincided with the roll out of Microsoft Teams. The pace of roll out was increased to give all staff access to Microsoft Teams by 19 March 2020 – the date when all staff were working remotely unless it was absolutely necessary for them to be in their office.
- Microsoft Teams was rolled out to Members from 31 March 2020 to facilitate ongoing work and communication with Members while we all work in unusual circumstances.

External

- The Carousel on the website homepage was used to promote and link to Government/NHS information and guidance on COVID-19.
- Social media channels were used to share the latest information on COVID-19 and push Government messages.
- A COVID-19 latest page was set up on the Rother website on 13 March 2020 to provide a single point of reference for links to the latest guidance as well as the latest information on service disruption due to COVID-19. This page received over 16,000 hits.
- My Alerts was used to publicise Government guidance, latest information, service updates (throughout).
- Regular statements from the Leader of the Council were published on the website and shared on social media throughout the crisis.
- Social media was used to communicate about all service disruption including Community Help Point and Town Hall closures, waste and recycling, how our enforcement officers were working with local businesses, promotion of business grants, sharing the latest Government

guidance, particularly where it related to our own services such as public convenience closures, the use of parks and open spaces and the RCH.

- Weekly teleconferences have been held involving the Leader of the Council, the two local MPs and Senior Management Team.
- A single point of contact was provided for the P&TCs to contact the Council (which helped resolve some early communication issues).

Service Specific Issues

43. As well as the matters above, there were a number of service specific issues arising during and as a result of the pandemic. These are shown at Appendix A.

Financial Issues arising from COVID-19

44. As with the national economy, COVID-19 is having and will continue to have a financial impact on the Council. This is both additional expenditure and reductions in income. In addition, by directing Council staffing into responding to the pandemic, particularly the staff in the Acquisitions, Transformation and Regeneration Team, this has meant the delivery of savings and additional income as envisaged in the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP), have been delayed and are unlikely to be fully deliver in 2020/21.

45. Appendix B shows a financial estimate of the expected financial effects on the Council excluding the Collection Fund. There are a number of assumptions within these figures and it's likely that this will change as time progresses.

Reductions in Income

Collection Fund

46. The Council maintains a separate account of Council Tax and Business Rates in the Collection Fund. This includes money collected on behalf of the preceptors including P&TCs. The impact of COVID-19 will leave the fund in deficit for the year.

47. In terms of Council Tax, two factors will impact the amount of money collected. The first, is that many more households are claiming Council Tax Reduction. For each household this reduces the amount of Council Tax charged by up to 80%. The Government's hardship fund will meet the remaining 20% but without Government help, the Council and major preceptors will suffer a loss of income. It is difficult to assess the impact of this but for every 100 extra claims this would cost in the region of £160,000. At the point of writing, in excess of 1,000 new claims had been received, suggesting a cost high of £1.6m. Rother's share would be in the region of £160,000.

48. The second factor is the expected fall in collection rates from those households not claiming CTR. Normal collection rates in Rother are around 98.5% in year. Each 1% lost equates to approximately £700,000, with Rother's share being around £70,000. If collection rates fell to 95% then the predicted loss to Rother would be approximately £175,000.

49. In terms of business rates, the Government implemented a substantial extension of rate relief for the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors. This is estimated to have reduced the amount of business rates by £9m in Rother, approximately half of that normally collectable. This cost will be covered by the Government grant so should have no financial impact on the Council. However there is still expected to be a fall in collection rates as businesses struggle to pay their bills. Normal collection rates are again 98.5% in year and for every 1% not collected this equates to approximately £90,000 on the reduced amount collectable of around £9m. Therefore, if collection rates fell to 95% this would reduce income by £225,000 with Rother's share being £90,000.
50. Using these estimates, the Collection Fund could be in deficit by approximately £3.5m by financial year end. Rother's share of this would be £425,000. This is seen as a worst case scenario and will be monitored closely through the year. Due to the way the Collection Fund is accounted for, this deficit will be a charge to the General Fund in 2021/22 but the Council could suffer the interim cash flow impact. What is clear is that Government support is needed to replace the lost income.

General Fund

51. In response to COVID-19 two decisions were made that will impact the amount of income received this year: the suspension of car parking charges along with the closure of Camber car parks and the rent deferral scheme for tenants of Council owned commercial tenants. For the purposes of this report it is assumed that 50% of the rent deferrals are converted into actual relief from payment of rent. In addition income from the Council's treasury investments are expected to fall as Bank Base rate continues at near zero rates.
52. It is also expected that the Council will lose up to £150,000 of its housing benefit subsidy. Members will be aware of the substantial efforts of staff to improve the performance of the service but with COVID-19, workloads have increased and the Council's external support contract with Reigate and Bansted Council has had to be minimised due to reductions in their staffing levels. This will result in processing performance dropping which ultimately reduces the amount of subsidy the Council receives.
53. Planning fee income has reduced but this may recover once lockdown is eased further. It should be noted that the Government are reviewing Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and Section 106 contributions and this may impact on the Council's finances in the future.
54. Other fees and charges have also reduced. This is summarised in Appendix B and shows that overall fees and charges income may reduce by £1.48m.

Debt Recovery

55. Once the country went into lockdown, a very pragmatic approach was adopted to debt recovery in all areas of income for the Council (and the preceptors). Officers took the approach that they would still seek to recover amounts owing where a households or business financial circumstances had largely been unaffected by the crisis. However for Council Tax and business

rates, automatic recovery action was suspended and flexible payment arrangements put in place.

56. Some gentle recovery action has commenced in council tax for those households not paying and not claiming support through the Council Tax Reduction Scheme. This will help start to identify those entitled to help but who as yet have not claimed. Recovery action on businesses who are not paying will also need to recommence and again this may highlight those entitled to help who have not done so yet.
57. For other debts such as rents, Members will be aware of the rent deferral scheme that was put in place in April. It is intended that the deferral will be reviewed in June and if any rent relief is needed this can then be agreed. Also, it may be pragmatic where relief is not given, to make payment arrangements for an extended period to alleviate cash flow issues on our business tenants.

Expenditure

58. There continue to be several cost pressures as a result of COVID-19. Homelessness costs are rising through additional households needing emergency accommodation and the need to ensure all accommodation used is self-contained. The establishment and ongoing support for the RCH will cost the Council, albeit so far the actual costs are relatively low, although resource intensive.
59. Members agreed a support package to the Council's leisure contractor which realistically has no end date as will depend on their ability to establish a sound trading position post lockdown. There is also a potential need to support the De La Warr Pavilion Trust and discussions are ongoing to agree how they remain viable. In addition, the Council is supporting its main service contractors (waste/grounds maintenance etc) by continuing to pay them as if full service is being provided. This was at the request of Government. Whilst not an additional cost, it clearly is an opportunity cost to the Council and its residents.
60. There has also been investment and major changes in technology that have been implemented very quickly to ensure the Council could continue to operate and deliver services. This has come at a cost of approximately £57,000 and it is likely that there will be further costs following consolidation of this new technology and the need for remote attendance at meetings. This investment has however presented the Council with a significant opportunity to change the way it works in the future.
61. There are a number of other smaller areas of cost pressure which together with the above items are detailed in Appendix B.

MTFP Planned Savings and Income

62. The Council's MTFP included a number of savings and income generation in order to achieve a balanced budget. It is likely that due to the impact of COVID-19, in particular the diversion of staff resources, delivery of these will be largely delayed until 2021/22.

	Original Estimate 2020/21	Revised Estimate 2020/21	Variation
	£'000	£'000	£'000
(i) Increase income - Property Investment Strategy	(544)	(100)	444
(ii) Increase income (net) - other	(14)	0	14
(iii) Lean and Demand	(90)	(45)	45
(iv) Service Prioritisation	(100)	0	100
(vi) Reduced Staffing Structure	(500)	(350)	150
Total	(1,248)	(495)	753

63. Achieving the income from property investment is going to be challenging in what is likely to be a very different economic reliance. On the positive side, additional lean and demand savings may well arise from the new methods of working. The Council will need to review each of the above areas and make decisions as to where future financial savings will be made.

Summary of Financial Impact

64. The assessment of the potential impact of COVID-19 in 2020/21 is summarised in the following table:

	Impact on General Fund 2020/21 £'000
Collection Fund	425
General Fund Income	1,480
General Fund Expenditure	525
Non Delivery of Savings and Income	753
Less Government Grant	(1,003)
Total Estimated Cost	2,180

Government Financial Support

65. Members will be aware that to help meet the above cost, the Government has given specific additional financial support to councils of £3.2bn in two tranches. The Council has received so far just over £1m in grant but it is not known at this stage whether any further funding will be made available. Funding so far has been allocated on a per capita basis but the Government are continuing to request evidence of the financial effects which may influence any future allocations of funding.

Reserves

66. The following table summarises the possible impact on the Council's reserves due to COVID-19, taking into account an update of the expected use of reserves in 2019/20.

Potential Use of Reserves	2019/20 Revised £ (000)	2020/21 Budget £ (000)	2021/22 Budget £ (000)	2022/23 Budget £ (000)	2023/24 Budget £ (000)	2024/25 Budget £ (000)
Earmarked Reserves and General Reserves	17,362	14,237	9,781	7,989	6,715	5,393
Planned Use of Reserves	(2,427)	(2,276)	(1,792)	(1,275)	(1,321)	(1,179)
2019/20 estimated deficit	(698)					
COVID-19		(2,180)				
Total Reserves	14,237	9,781	7,989	6,715	5,393	4,215

67. The table shows that over the MTFP reserves may fall to £4.2m. The minimum level of reserves previously adopted by Members is £5m and therefore without Government financial support, this increases the pressure on the Council to deliver savings over the life of the current MTFP. At this point no immediate action is required, save for continuing to lobby Government for the support all local government undoubtedly needs.

The Future

68. There is no doubt that the speed at which both the country and the Council has had to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced changes that under normal circumstances would either not have been possible or at best have taken a considerable time to implement.

69. One such change for everyone has been the concept of social distancing and it is likely that this is going to be with us for some time.

70. A further change for the Council has been the avoidance of unnecessary travel, which has led to staff being forced into flexible working practices and the rapid rollout of IT within weeks rather than over the planned years programme.

71. With IT having mobilised themselves to redirect all their efforts into flexible working capability, officers have now experienced flexible working and have adapted well, albeit supplies of equipment did cause some immediate challenges. It is recognised that as we move back into some normality it will be critical that staff and the organisation avoid moving back to the old practices but maintains this momentum. We know that some staff have (and were able to) adapt and adopt the new working practices whereas there were others who found it more difficult (for a variety of reasons) to facilitate such working methods. These reasons have ranged from no capacity in the home to have a workstation; caring for relatives/children; through to no or poor internet connection. These factors will be considered as we return to some normality, particularly internet quality for those working regularly from home or using 'heavy' applications.

72. However, even where established flexible working arrangement are in place these are going to have to be reviewed as government guidance is likely to require office workers to maintain a 2m social distancing and a restriction on sharing workstations. This Council will undertake this exercise in consultation with its staff and trade union.

73. Looking outside the organisation, there is no doubt that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our residents and businesses is going to be felt for some time.
74. Although some businesses have received grants through the Council to cover the short term there will be an on-going need for dialogue and support with local businesses to assist with a longer term, sustainable recovery. This may involve new or different ways of engaging with business throughout the district and how we can encourage new businesses into the area. Elsewhere on the agenda for this Cabinet meeting is a report seeking to establish a steering group to look at economic recovery for this area. Work is already underway the help inform the agenda and discussions of that steering group.
75. The social and economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our residents is also likely to take some considerable time to resolve itself. As a result this Council will need to support those in need over the coming months and perhaps years. This may involve focusing our resources on those most in need and ensuring we are working closely with other agencies to cover all the issues impacting on residents.
76. The expectation is that we will not be returning to normality as we knew it previously, and certainly not in the short term. We also need to bear in mind that there may be further outbreaks of COVID-19 in the future. As the lockdown continues to be eased local authorities will need to adopt new working practices and arrangements to ensure it can respond to the challenges of the future and meet the demands of the new normality.

Conclusion

77. This report lays out the background to the COVID-19 pandemic and how the Council responded. As stated above, there is a report elsewhere on the agenda that looks forward and the role the Council will play in the economic and social recovery that needs to happen.

Malcolm Johnston
Executive Director

Dr Anthony Leonard
Executive Director

Risk Assessment Statement

Although there are no risks associated with this report itself, the risks to the community, businesses and the Council itself are highlighted in the report.

SERVICE SPECIFIC ISSUES**ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES, LICENSING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY**

1. Following the lockdown, the Business Continuity Plan was enacted, with only essential services being provided, including the investigation of other notifiable diseases, the provision of health certificates, foul drainage complaints and internal rat treatments.

Workload between 23/03/20 and 19/04/20

2. We received over 200 complaints about COVID-19 business compliance. As a result, 10 statutory notices were served. This year there has been a significant increase in complaints about bonfires (50 compared with 9) and noise. There was a reduction in activity on responding to planning applications, premises licence applications including temporary event notices. There was a reduction in complaints about waste. No routine food hygiene inspections were carried out and no food registrations received. Overall, the demands on the service, in terms of customer complaints did not reduce remaining at over 2,500 enquiries in these four weeks.

Bonfires

3. There was an increase in the number of complaints about bonfires, as the public are concerned about air pollution at this time. In response to this demand we increased our activity in this area. Weekend patrols were carried out to visit premises subject to complaints.

COVID-19 Enforcement (first four weeks)

4. Environmental Health and Trading Standards Officers were given joint responsibility to enforce the COVID-19 Business Restriction Regulations. An agreement was reached with Trading Standards in East and West Sussex as to which authority would enforce and advise on the regulations in which business sector. A single point of contact (SPOC) for each Council was identified. The police or public can complain to any authority and that Council will take responsibility to forward the complaint to the correct SPOC. A weekly conference call is held between East and West Trading Standards and Richard Parker-Harding (as Secretary of the Sussex CEHOs group).
5. When the COVID-19 Regulations were initially made on Saturday 21 March our focus of activity on Sunday 22 March and Monday 23 March was explaining to Take-Aways that they could not have tables and chairs outside their premises. Visits were made and Social Media information put out.
6. The next phase of enforcement centred on ensuring premises that should be closed were closed. This is sometimes not straightforward as there are exceptions to each category which have changed. See <https://www.rother.gov.uk/environmental-health/food-hygiene/safe-food-and-healthy-workplaces/coronavirus-covid-19-closure-regulations/>
7. We sought to use social media to explain to the public our role and encourage complaints that can be investigated.

8. Environmental Health Officers are also responsible under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 to enforce risk assessments (including social distancing rules) in care homes, retail premises and offices.
9. We contacted the larger employers and send out almost 1,000 advisory emails/letters and posters to care homes, public houses, take-aways and independent retailers.
10. We carried out thirty weekend patrols to observe business practise, address any concerns and offences by directly contacting the business by phone and/or by e-mail or letter. We sent out Tweets advising where and when these patrols are being carried out.
11. At short notice, we had printed Prohibition Notices, Fixed Penalty Notices and posters. These were designed in-house and produced by Rother Print. We shared these resources with other councils.

Licensing

12. Taxi drivers were still applying to renew their licences. Several actions were taken, including changing licensing conditions to allow medical and DBS checks to be deferred for six months for existing drivers. In addition, the option has been given for drivers to delay renewing their licence for three months.
13. We anticipate increased demand for driver licences in the summer from persons who have been made redundant. We may have to ration the service using a waiting list.

Noise

14. There has been an increase in residential noise complaints. We are currently only able to investigate noise if this can be carried out safely externally. We cannot install noise recording equipment inside properties as this would involve 2 visits a week apart. In addition, the equipment is difficult to disinfect.

Take-Aways

15. To provide a service to the public and support businesses an e-mail was sent to all registered food businesses, asking them to complete an on-line form listing what take-away services they were providing. If permission was granted to do so their details were included on a list published on our website, which automatically updates: <https://www.rother.gov.uk/environmental-health/food-hygiene/food-hygiene-for-residents/food-businesses-operating-during-coronavirus-restrictions/>
16. This web page was very popular with the public.
17. In addition, Environmental Health officers phoned businesses providing take-aways offering food and safety advice. The advice was published on both websites: <https://www.rother.gov.uk/environmental-health/food-hygiene/safe-food-and-healthy-workplaces/coronavirus-covid-19-closure-regulations/guidance-for-takeaway-and-delivery-of-food/>

Temporary Accommodation

18. In order to meet the needs of homeless persons and people in unsuitable shared accommodation environmental health staff assisted the Housing Needs team by inspecting temporary accommodation (including caravans) to check they were safe before occupation.

Recovery Phase

Accident Investigations

19. If an employee contracts COVID-19 during their employment and this is reported, then we will have a duty to investigate and check controls were adequate. This will be difficult and challenging work. A procedure to investigate these matters virtually has been developed. Given the high numbers of care homes in Bexhill RIDDOR reports are expected in due course.

Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) and Pollution Complaints

20. We anticipate an increase in ASB and pollution complaints as a result of the lockdown, which may be more acute because we have not been able to respond quickly.

Contact Tracing

21. We were not asked to assist Public Health England (South East) to conduct contact tracing of COVID-19 cases. This is the usual manner in which we investigate notifiable diseases including cases of Salmonella, E. coli and other food poisoning cases. It is the standard method used to control infectious diseases. Contact tracing allows individuals to be identified, tested for COVID-19 and all possible contacts isolated. The Government has decided to set up a national system for contract tracing. Discussions with the Director of Public Health have taken place. We may be requested to assist in local contact tracing if telephone calls and texts from the national system are not sufficient to control a localised outbreak.

Food Hygiene Inspections

22. We were advised by the Food Standards Agency to stop inspecting food premises for the last two weeks of the year 2019/20 and the Agency has requested that a limited food hygiene service be in place.
23. We aim to start a limited food inspection programme in June. We will initially only inspect high risks premises that were due to be inspected in the last two weeks of 2019/20 and first two quarters of 2020/21. Some businesses will be anxious to get a new Food Hygiene Rating Score.

Social Distancing

24. As premises are permitted to reopen then we will be required to ensure that social distancing rules in those premises are adhered to.

Environmental Health Service Summary

25. The service quickly responded to the enforcement of the COVID-19 regulations requiring the closure of certain businesses and the enforcement of social distancing in premises allowed to be open, using the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974. Staff responded well and enthusiastically to their new duties, grateful to be able to take action to reduce the risk of infection.
26. Although there was a reduction in certain areas of work, there was the new work on COVID-19 enforcement as well as increases in bonfire and noise complaints. The noise and bonfire complaints have been addressed by providing an enhanced service.
27. A concern as we eventually move into the recovery phase is the backlog of routine food hygiene inspections and an increase in anti-social behaviour and noise complaints.
28. The pandemic has demonstrated the great advantage of the shared environmental health service, which provided resilience and expertise in the face of the new challenges we faced and continue to face.

HOUSING AND COMMUNITY

Housing

29. Demand
 - The Housing Needs Service has seen a steady flow of households present as homeless throughout the crisis. The vast majority of presentations are from single people who are insecurely housed in sofa surfing arrangements which they have been unable to sustain during lockdown. We have also seen a slight rise in presentations from women and children fleeing domestic violence.
 - We are working with our partners in health, social care, criminal justice and the voluntary sector as part of the East Sussex Homelessness Cell and its temporary accommodation and rough sleeper sub-groups.
30. Temporary Accommodation (TA)
 - We presently have 88 households in TA up from approximately 50 households at the beginning of the crisis.
 - Reduced ability for the team to find permanent accommodation in the private and social housing sectors for those households accommodated in TA.
 - We have secured a number of additional TA units in recent weeks, including accommodation set-aside to accommodate those with COVID-19 symptoms that need to self-isolate. We have been assisted by a number of private sector landlords to secure additional TA units as well as utilising chalets at Crowhurst Park in Battle. We have also completed the first purchase of our own accommodation for use as TA in Bexhill.

- In March 2020, the Council set itself the target of accommodating in self-contained flats all households with children within Rother and Hastings. In April 2020, the Council achieved its target.
- The welfare of household accommodated in TA is being managed by a team of Council staff pulled together from a range of internal services. Welfare calls are made to each household three times a week and support provided to access essential food, services and facilities.

31. Rough sleeping

In March 2020, a request from the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government was received to ensure all rough sleepers were offered TA to enable them to be removed from the street. We continue to work with the East Sussex Rough Sleeping Initiative, health, social care and criminal justice partners to successfully accommodate 10 rough sleepers temporarily.

Neighbourhood Services

32. Staff

All able to home work with access to IT with exception of two compliance officers who are mainly based on location; parks team, compliance team and car park enforcement team have been variously working from home and out on location monitoring COVID-19 restrictions, supporting Environmental Health team with enforcement; identifying and resolving Health and Safety issues; erecting COVID-19 signs; supporting contractors in operational capacity.

33. Beaches, parks and open spaces

- While we have not restricted access to beaches during the pandemic we have erected signage to encourage social distancing. We have a permanent staff presence at both Bexhill and Camber beaches. We took the decision to close the car parks at Camber in response to significant numbers of visitors arriving during the first weekend of the lockdown. Since the first weekend, we have seen a significant decline in numbers visiting Camber, with only a handful of visitors each weekend. We are working closely with Sussex Police to manage the beaches and open spaces generally to ensure the public comply with social distancing.
- The RNLI has ceased its operations nationally. We are in regular contact with the RNLI to understand their contingency plans for when lockdown restrictions are lifted to enable a level of service to be provided on Bexhill and Camber beaches.
- Access to parks, open spaces and the cemeteries has been maintained throughout the pandemic and we have a regular staff presence monitoring the essential activity of our contractor Idverde.
- We have restricted access to all outside sports facilities and play parks. We have erected relevant signage deterring people from using these facilities.

- We have developed contingencies to increase the capacity for burials by 100% to complement the contingencies within East Sussex crematoria which is being managed by the Sussex Resilience Forum.
- We have worked closely with our contractor Idverde to sustain essential safety checks to parks and open spaces and recently they have begun to maintain some bowls greens and lawns to prevent these from going to seed.

34. Car parks and public conveniences

- With the exception of Camber Sands, all car parks have remained open during the pandemic. The decision was taken to make car parks free during the lockdown which will be reviewed as lockdown restrictions are lifted.
- In consultation with the other East Sussex local authorities we have taken the decision to close the public conveniences throughout Rother which will also be kept under review as lockdown restrictions are lifted.
- We have worked closely with Specialist Hygiene Services (SHS) to arrange deep cleaning of all district public conveniences and tidying of service areas; we have redeployed SHS staff to deep cleaning Rye and Bexhill Leisure centres.
- We have supported the establishing of a COVID-19 testing station in Wainwright Road car park.

35. Waste and recycling and street and beach cleansing

- We have been working closely with our contractor Biffa to ensure an uninterrupted provision of waste and recycling collections to date. Biffa has experienced staff absences due to sickness throughout the crisis which led to some disruption to garden and bulky waste collections in the initial weeks of the onset of the crisis. Those residents that have paid their garden waste subscriptions have been offered a reduced subscription fee for next year.
- We have a regular staff presence supporting the safe completion of rounds and ensuring that any fly tips are identified and cleared effectively.
- The Household Waste and Recycling Centres have been closed during the pandemic. We are working closely with East Sussex County Council to support the reopening of the sites as soon as possible while ensuring social distancing measures can be maintained.
- Biffa Camber Task Force, recruited as part of the core routine contract to clear litter and cleanse beaches during the summer season, has been redeployed to clearing sand from Central car park, overflow car park and Old Lydd Road ready for when the season may start.

36. Freedom Leisure

Freedom Leisure was required to close their doors and therefore their nil fee contract was no longer viable. This item was the subject of a decision under the emergency procedure rules.

37. Customer Services

The decision to close the Town Hall to the public and move services to online and telephone access was taken in response to the lockdown restrictions imposed by Government. The customer services team have retained a permanent presence in the Town Hall to manage the distribution of external post and to be on hand to manage urgent enquiries from members of the public presenting to the Town Hall for assistance. All such presentations are handled via our intercom.

STRATEGY AND PLANNING

38. Externally

- With regards to Local Plan Review and the evidence base (needed to support that) - Future forecasting relating to economic growth is likely to be out of date (our Housing & Economic Development Needs Assessment HEDNA is based on these but there is no quick fix.
- Housing delivery will have dropped significantly which will result in a worsened housing delivery test result for the district when it is next published later on the year.
- Housing land supply is likely to drop below two years.
- Drop in Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) monies being received based on new starts on housing sites.
- Pressure from the construction industry to defer CIL payments; the impact of which is likely to delay the delivery of key infrastructure projects.
- Central government may consider revising the standard methodology as baseline for housing numbers in the new Local Plan.
- Impact of COVID-19 on future working patterns and its impact on the demand for future employment/retail space.
- COVID-19 impact on household income and increased demand to deliver affordable housing (in its various forms).

39. Internally

- Number of applications submitted in the first five weeks after 23 March equate to a 43% drop over the same period last year, which crudely could amount to a similar reduction in income to the Council.
- Delays in processing Appeals due to “lockdown” on site visits at the Planning Inspectorate.

- Local Plan review “call for sites” and the Member visioning and objective setting workshops have both been postponed until later in the year. This will have a significant knock on in terms of the timetabling of the Local Plan public consultations and submission of Plan to the Planning Inspectorate.
- Reduced officer productivity (homeworking) due to several reasons including childcare/schooling, broadband strength, working environment and officer shielding.
- External consultee responses to planning applications are delayed due to COVID-19, which will delay the determination of applications.
- Six week postponement of site visits has now ended, and visits recommenced on 30 April (site notices) and 6 May (site assessment visits). However, this will create a significant bottleneck of workload in late June and July when these applications are due for determination.
- Recommencement of the enforcement function in late May is likely to led to significant increase in officer caseloads.
- Planning Service continues to carry several officer vacancies.

FINANCIAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

	Amount £'000	Comments
General Fund Expenditure		
Homelessness	250	Cost of increased households and locating in self- contained accommodation
Contractor Support	201	Reflects support to Leisure Services provider
ICT	57	New equipment and software upgrades
Community Hub	11	Costs to date of setting up and providing food parcels
Other	6	
Total Expenditure	525	
Income		
Car Parking	370	Estimate of lost income from 2 months plus loss of season tickets
Treasury Investments	350	Effect of continued reduced interest rates
Rental Income and public space concessions	233	Concession for quarter to June 2020
Planning fees and land charges	180	Assumes 20% reduction in fees
Housing Benefit Subsidy	150	Impact of processing delays due to increased workloads
Garden Waste	90	Impact of holding charge at 2019 rate
Licensing fees	45	Reduced Taxi, premises etc licences
Other fees and charges	62	
Total expected lost income	1,480	
Saving and Income target MTFP	753	see main report
Total General Fund	2,758	
Collection Fund		
Council Tax	335	see main report
Business Rates	90	see main report
Total Collection Fund	425	
Less: Government Grant	(1,003)	
Total Estimated Financial Impact	2,180	