

WAVERLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE

12 MAY 2020

Title:

Waverley Borough Council's response to coronavirus to date

Author: Tom Horwood, Chief Executive

Key decision: No

Access: Public

1. Purpose and summary

1.1 This report summarises Waverley Borough Council's response so far to the coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19) and highlights some critical risks that will shape the Council's plan and actions to help the borough recover.

2. Recommendation

2.1 It is recommended that this report be noted.

3. Reason for the recommendation

3.1 The report provides an account, for the record, of Waverley Borough Council's response to the unprecedented medical and social crisis of coronavirus as at the end of April 2020. It includes early notice of potential financial risks facing the council.

4. Background

4.1 An international crisis

While this report will not duplicate the many and learned commentaries elsewhere, it is worth noting that the coronavirus pandemic is unprecedented in living memory, and unprecedented international, national and local responses have resulted.

4.2 Support to the Surrey-wide response

Surrey Local Resilience Forum (LRF) is the statutory partnership including the county and borough councils, other public services, utility and infrastructure providers and other services.¹ The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 sets out the

¹ <https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/people-and-community/emergency-planning-and-community-safety/emergency-planning/surreys-local-resilience-forum>

legislative framework for responding to emergencies. The LRF declared a 'Major Incident' on 19 March 2020, which meant that public services moved into the formal command structure for mobilising and diverting resources together to tackle the coronavirus crisis. The structures of the LRF in a major incident have the authority to direct partners. In practice, the partners work in a consensual and formal manner, with a clear set of objectives and daily 'battle rhythm'.

For this pandemic, the rhythm has included daily (i.e. 7 days/week) Strategic Coordinating Group meetings attended by the chief executive or a director, daily Tactical Coordinating Group meetings attended by relevant officers, and several 'cells' or work streams focusing on specific projects. Waverley officers are particularly closely involved in the death management cell (as was the Town Clerk of Godalming), the testing cell and the welfare cell. The Communications and Engagement Manager is a member of the multi-agency information group, which provides oversight for consistent and accurate information across Surrey, through various printed and online updates to residents and businesses. Waverley's Chief Executive has chaired the Surrey-wide local infrastructure cell, with a focus on providing extra provision for homelessness, utilities support and the waste stream.

4.3 **Waverley BC response**

From the start of the coronavirus alert, Waverley Borough Council employed emergency planning protocols and established a daily 'Covid Response Group' meeting initially at its offices and then via tele- and video-conferencing. On 19 March, the Chief Executive set out the council's operational objective: "Waverley Borough Council will arrange its resources to support the immediate health, wellbeing and safety of local residents, particularly the vulnerable. This includes Covid- and non-Covid-related issues." This objective continues. In support of the objective, the offices at The Burys closed to the public at the end of 20 March.

The council has prioritised its resources into the themes below. In addition, local councillors play key and diverse roles in their local communities, supporting residents, and the many local voluntary initiatives that have arisen, signposting to available services, and flagging local issues, while dealing with the consequences of the virus and the lockdown in their own lives. They have worked with parish and town councils, many of which have provided rapid local response and organisation in supporting vulnerable residents and struggling local businesses. The quality of this local response by councillors and communities continues to be a hallmark of the vibrant community spirit that exists across the borough and should be a source of great pride for all involved.

The council's political leadership is briefed in person weekly via tele- and then video-conferencing. These briefings involve the Executive, the Leader of the Opposition group and Cllr Gale as the Independent councillor who is not on the Executive. Email updates have been sent to councillors regularly, and some of these were sent to parish clerks, county councillors and Members of Parliament. An all-councillor tele-conference was also held.

Formal councillor meetings were suspended, but, now that the law has changed to allow remote meetings via technology, necessary meetings are being prepared, with appropriate systems and support.

4.4 Supporting the vulnerable and local voluntary organisations

Waverley has seen a tremendous community response to the pandemic. Community groups formed across the borough bringing together local volunteers to provide vital services to residents, such as shopping, collecting prescriptions and walking residents' dogs. Foodbanks have seen an increase in demand, with some working with local supermarkets to provide fresh produce. The Communities team collated information on all the groups and services to enable other council services to signpost as required.

To meet the requirements of the Local Resilience Forum, an officer from the Communities Team was deployed to each of the borough's four geographical areas to connect with the local community offer and provide support and guidance in relation to safeguarding and recruitment of volunteer processes. They have been able to keep communities connected to council services and assist with coordination.

A Waverley helpline was set up by the Housing Customer Services Team to signpost residents to their local offer. By the end of April, they were receiving up to 60 calls on a weekday and 15 per day at the weekend. This work complemented the support provided by Voluntary Action South West Surrey.

Over 2,000 vulnerable 'shielded' residents were called multiple times to check in and offer support. 1,200 tenants have been contacted by telephone. Tenants in our senior living teams were also contacted directly. This calling process has enabled direct visits to those who did not answer to ensure that they are safe.

The Communities Team works closely with the centres that provide services for older people to increase the Community Meals Service Provision across the borough. Each service saw a large increase in meals being requested, delivering just under 1,000 meals per week. Personal protective equipment was arranged for community meals services and other appropriate staff.

The council found accommodation for 14 households who would otherwise be rough sleeping. This is in hotels as we and the applicant could not source any other accommodation, as the usual hostel options were not available. Eighty-nine households so far have come to us under threat of homelessness. We advised them on the range of housing options open to them and continue working with these households to find suitable and affordable accommodation.

For the economically vulnerable, such as those suddenly with reduced income, our Revenues team was strengthened to deal with the increasing volume of calls, including a five-fold increase in claims for council tax support.

4.5 Environmental Services

The Environmental Health team was involved in the early stages of the pandemic when one of the first cases in the country was identified in the Haslemere area and contact tracing was required. The team has been offering advice to businesses on setting up food delivery and takeaway services in response to the restrictions, and advising on social distancing guidance to ensure that work activities are carried out safely. They have also responded to an increase in

complaints about noise and smoke from bonfires. A media campaign and investigations have resulted in some improvement in the situation.

In terms of waste management, the team has worked hard with our contractor, Biffa, to maintain all kerbside collections services, in the face of significantly higher sickness absence levels. The team at Biffa has worked very hard and has been flexible in taking on different roles, including assigning personnel from the street cleaning operation to emptying bins. In the wake of the suspension by local county councils of community recycling centres as a result of the national restrictions, the borough has witnessed an increase in fly-tipping, particularly at bring sites.

Following the Government's decision that councils were to make parking in our car parks free to key workers, and in the wake of very low amounts of parking in any case, parking enforcement and charges ceased temporarily. We will continue to monitor the Government restrictions and the general national approach to the lockdown before taking the decision to restore normal charging. We are also discussing this with the Chambers of Commerce. A permit scheme for key workers has been agreed across Surrey for councils that continued to charge and those that decide to restore charges. The team at NSL, our parking enforcement contractor, has been flexible, providing assistance elsewhere within priority services, including community meals and fly tip investigation. Following the requests from Surrey County Council and Surrey Police via the Local Resilience Forum, countryside car parks were closed across the borough and the county, (where they physically can be closed), to discourage non-essential travel and reduce incidents on the roads that would divert the emergency services.

Various changes were made to our licensing regime and procedures. For example, suspension of new drivers, vehicle licences and vehicle tests, extension of existing licences, and deferral of renewals.

4.6 Support to local businesses

The Government announced funded schemes for small businesses for both rate relief and grants. Waverley Borough Council had processed about £20 million of rate relief and £18 million of grants by the end of April. The council also provided advice and support to hundreds of local businesses, circulated e-newsletters and compiled a business impact survey. The new 'Stay at Home Business Directory' highlights over 200 businesses providing contactless services and good news case studies were published online. An online Waverley 'film map' was published to encourage people to enjoy a virtual visit to the borough through movies such as *War Horse*, *Howards End* and *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*. Regular contact was maintained with the four Chambers of Commerce.

4.7 Support services infrastructure

The massive overnight shift to working at home, from 20 people per day to more than 350, created immediate pressure on system capacity. Phone line and IT bandwidth capacity were increased as soon as possible and dramatically improved home working and communications capabilities. A demand for video-conferencing led to the installation of Zoom facilities and new hardware in Committee Room 1. Up to 10% of employees continued to work within The Burys

on any weekday, observing appropriate social distancing. A regular regime of disinfectant cleaning during the day was put into action, and continued after the council's offices closed to the public. Work on the Business Transformation programme decelerated with some team members redeployed to other activities. This programme will soon restore its pace, incorporating lessons from the lockdown period, as it will be critical to our future plans for customer service improvements and financial sustainability. Data suggests that the number of phone calls into the council switchboard has diminished significantly and web traffic has increased, supporting the channel shift aims of the customer service project.

4.8 Communications

The Communications and Engagement team has supported all of the work streams to ensure local residents and staff were provided with clear advice and information. A coronavirus hub was set up on the council's website,² with clear and comprehensive messaging on public health advice, impacts to council services, financial advice, volunteering, support for the vulnerable and support for businesses. An online staff hub collated important information for the workforce in one place. By the end of April, the team had issued more than 360 posts on social media, with a reach of 2.2 million.

4.9 Staff wellbeing

Briefings for managers took place prior to the lockdown commencing. These have been supplemented with the publication of 'frequently asked questions' and managers' guidance, which were updated regularly. Special leave was extended to include 5 days of paid dependents' leave. Recruitment processes were frozen and decisions taken on temporary and casual contracts, based on whether these roles were strictly necessary. The Government's furloughed leave was investigated and it was decided that it would not be applied at the council because staff were still needed to carry out essential services and some were redeployed to support the coronavirus response. Temporary protocols were agreed on annual leave carry-over, critical worker support (including letters to support travel and school attendance if required), mutual aid with other local authorities, home working, and redeployment. The increased sickness and wellbeing cases are managed individually with appropriate support and advice, and an online mental health survey was distributed. Volunteer opportunities were advertised. The council's recognised trade union, Unison, was involved throughout and invited to the daily Covid Response Group meetings. The Chief Executive conducted the latest round of his regular staff briefings, albeit via video- and tele-conferencing.

4.10 Legal

From the start of the pandemic, the Council's Legal Services have reorganised and prioritised work to support the other work streams. In addition, legal work was required to support the Planning functions and other decision-making and governance processes, including the democratic function and the constitutional framework to support the changes in law allowing remote/virtual formal meetings. Advice was provided following requests from contractors for advance payments

² <https://www.waverley.gov.uk/coronavirus>

and a suspension of contractual performance indicators, which were handled on a case-by-case basis; these discussions with contractors continue. Support was provided to the council's regulatory, landlord and bereavement functions on matters that arose from the coronavirus situation.

4.11 Non-Covid emergencies

The swift, significant and sustained diversion of staff, activity and senior management focus and attention away from business-as-usual onto responding to the coronavirus pandemic created a risk that any other emergencies arising during this time would go either undetected or insufficiently resourced. A 'non-Covid emergencies' work stream was established from the outset to keep a watching brief on any other emergencies that arose. In the event of any non-Covid emergencies arising, the Head of Service leading that work stream takes responsibility for co-ordinating the Council's response to it and leading on the process of re-allocating time, attention and resources to ensure it was dealt with. On 30 April, this work stream was activated to support Thames Water and partners in dealing with a water outage at Netley Mills. As the organisation makes the transition into the 'recovery' phase and the organisational capacity to deal with any non-Covid emergencies that may arise increases, it is expected that this work stream will be decommissioned. Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, the Council's usual out-of-hours customer support line and the senior management team duty phone rota have continued to function. Our rest centre preparation was reviewed to be ready for non-virus civil emergencies, incorporating social distancing into triage procedures.

4.12 Other council services and Planning functions

Most council services have been maintained, albeit with modifications to allow for remote working. Our support services continued to provide the full range of support to colleagues. To support the response to coronavirus and help relieve the pressure on the National Health Service, staff were redeployed as necessary, particularly in the first four weeks. Leisure centres were obliged to close by Government regulations. Various public events were cancelled. Housing maintenance services have prioritised urgent welfare issues and non-essential work was suspended. Our grounds maintenance contractor, Continental, has been able to fulfil its contractual requirements while following the social distancing regulations, with the exception of playground checks, as these have been closed. Continental staff have also been available for redeployment when required by the council.

Once the Government confirmed that it expected councils to continue to deliver a Planning service and thereby removed the ability to deploy many staff members to coronavirus response, the Council worked with legal advisers on ensuring that a service could be provided, while still prioritising the safety of the public and of staff members. The Head of Planning and Economic Development issued detailed advice on what levels of service could be expected, and protocols for a temporary reconfiguring of Planning Committees were circulated to councillors and parish/town councils. The Farnham Neighbourhood Plan was made, the authority monitoring report published, and delegated Planning applications continue to be determined.

4.13 Recovery

From the start of the process, we established a work stream on recovery to gather data and plan for community and organisational recovery. This critical strand of work is escalating rapidly and will inform a refreshed Corporate Strategy, as well as influence our lobbying of Government for appropriate funding and powers to support Waverley's communities. Many challenges have been experienced during this period; there have also been positive changes that need to be harnessed as we enter recovery and support our climate change objective. This programme of work seeks to draw the lessons from this period and assist with the creation of a 'new normal', working with the ongoing business transformation programme.

- 4.14 The council's response so far to the coronavirus crisis has demonstrated excellence in public service commitment and ability by the whole council team of officers and councillors. This unprecedented situation has entailed massive hard work and impressive dedication in a short space of time in support of our Waverley community and of our NHS and social care colleagues. The crisis will require a sustained effort to continue the response and prepare for recovery.

5. Relationship to the Corporate Strategy and Service Plan

- 5.1 The *Corporate Strategy 2019-23*³ sets out the council's priorities in normal times, including key aims for supporting the borough's communities and social and economic wellbeing. These priorities are still relevant. However, the UK will undoubtedly be faced with a 'new normal' as it recovers from the deep impacts of coronavirus and the lockdown period. It is, therefore, proposed to revisit the Corporate Strategy and make any amendments that are necessary to redirect the council's resources and activities to support community recovery. Further proposals will come to the Executive and, as necessary, Full Council in due course.
- 5.2 The council declared a climate emergency in September 2019 and initiated an action plan to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030, subject to Government support.⁴ As the climate emergency remains, our aims and action plan remain of critical importance. Indeed, there ought to be opportunities to learn from the lockdown period to support the carbon target, and this will be a key priority in our recovery plans and actions.

6. Implications of decision

6.1 Resources (including S151 Officer commentary)

The council's response to coronavirus has necessarily entailed substantial expenditure and income reduction. We are closely monitoring the impact on our own finances. We have reported to the Government that, based on best estimates, the additional one-off costs alone could be £280,000 in April and more than £1 million over this financial year if the impact continues for the remainder of

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https://www.waverley.gov.uk/download/downloads/id/6351/waverley_borough_council_corporate_strategy_2019-2023.pdf

⁴ <https://modgov.waverley.gov.uk/documents/g3214/Printed%20minutes%2018th-Sep-2019%2019.00%20Council.pdf?T=1>

the financial year. Moreover, the income loss in financial year 2020/21 compared to budget from council tax, business rates and rent non-payment, and other income reductions from car parks etc., could amount to between £3 million and £9 million depending on how long the impact continues for. This is on top of the adverse impact the crisis has had on our pre-existing 2020/21 budget assumptions and bases. We will only be in a position to estimate reliably the longer term financial impact beyond 2021 once its effects on matters outside of our control – economic, social and political – become clearer. Other district/borough councils face a similar situation or worse.

The Government has announced £3.2 billion of funding towards local authority coronavirus-related costs nationally. By the end of April, the Government had stated that Waverley Borough Council will receive £1,281,000. While this is a welcome early payment, there is as yet no indication that further funding will be made available.

The 2020/21 quarter 1 net impact on the **General Fund** budget is estimated to be £2.3m. After allowing for the Government grant of £1.3m, this leaves a potential shortfall against budget of £1m in this period. In the absence of clarity from the Government about further funding, and in the light of the ongoing uncertainty about the extent and duration of the impact of the continuing coronavirus crisis on the council's budget, urgent interim measures have had to be identified now to underwrite this expected budget shortfall. These are necessary to continue to provide council services and functions during April-June 2020, including paying staff and contractors. The S151 Officer, in consultation with the Finance Portfolio Holder and the Senior Management Team, has agreed the following emergency measures:

1. That £1m of the General Fund working balance will be earmarked to underwrite the estimated budget impact in quarter 1 of 2020/21;⁵
2. The position will be monitored closely during May and June and a further report will be considered by the Executive, and Council if necessary, if additional action is required;
3. By the end of July, the S151 Officer, in consultation with the Finance Portfolio Holder, will prepare a plan to reinstate the £1m of General Fund working balance which will set out a range of options for councillors to consider;
4. As part of the 'recovery' work stream, officers will re-evaluate the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP).

Turning to the **Housing Revenue Account** (HRA), it is estimated that there will be some impact against budget in 2020/21, albeit less severe than on the General Fund. Reduced income and additional costs will arise from higher numbers of void properties as contractors are not able to undertake the works necessary to relet properties quickly when they become vacant. There could be additional pressures on rent collection over the course of the year as some tenants' household income could be affected by the coronavirus impact. This is being monitored closely by the housing team. The Head of Housing Operations expects the overall net impact on the HRA budget to be met from within existing budgets over the year so no action is required at this stage.

⁵ As identified in the Medium Term Financial Plan, the General Fund working balance is part of the approved budget and one of its main purposes is to meet unexpected loss of income if offsetting savings cannot be found. The fund current stands at £3.2m.

Whilst the above comments refer to the council's budgets, its cash flow is also being monitored closely. This is different from the council's budgets and funding and, as identified in the MTFP, Waverley BC handles over £200m of cash in a year. The main areas impacted by coronavirus are council tax and business rate collection and income from fees and charges, such as car parks. At this stage, it is expected that overall cash flow in quarter 1 can be managed without taking drastic action as the Government has deferred some major payments and officers have retained sufficient liquidity in treasury activity.

The combination of an already-challenging financial outlook, the immediate costs associated with supporting the community through the current coronavirus crisis, and the longer-term social and economic impacts, present substantial financial risks to the council, which will be actively monitored and reported. If necessary, formal reports will be made by the appropriate statutory officers.

Council services and leadership will be more vital than ever in driving national recovery if the Government chooses to recognise this in future funding decisions.

6.2 Risk management

The likely social and economic fallout of the virus will mean a greater demand on our services. We and other councils have started discussing this and our 'recovery' work stream will continue to assess the impact in order to make recommendations about future strategies, policies and operations. These will be accompanied by appropriate risk assessments.

6.3 Legal

The Coronavirus Act came into force on 25 March 2020, introducing a number of significant changes to the council's statutory powers and duties, and to those of Surrey County Council. Subsequent Regulations have made further major amendments to powers and duties, with the aim of enabling and supporting the response to the crisis, while other provisions of the Act introduced changes in other sectors that indirectly affect our business. These all include:

- the ability to hold council and committee meetings remotely within a virtual space;
- rescheduling local authority elections and referendums to May 2021;
- additional powers to close premises that are not complying with closure directions under the Act and Regulations;
- 'furloughing' arrangements for employers, including our contractors;
- amendments to statutory sick pay in relation to Covid-19;
- relaxation of registration of deaths and still-births;
- regulation of disposal of bodies.

In addition to the Act and Regulations, Procurement Policy Notes have been issued by the Cabinet Office detailing when the provisions of the Public Contracts Regulations can be relaxed, and providing policy guidance in relation to payments to contractors.

6.4 Equality, diversity and inclusion

Equality impact assessments are carried out when necessary to ensure service delivery meets the requirements of the Public Sector Equality Duty under the Equality Act 2010. Appropriate assessments will be carried out for any policy changes or service changes that are proposed as we develop our recovery plans. At this stage, there are no direct equality, diversity or inclusion issues identified in this report.

6.5 Climate emergency declaration

See section 5.2.

7. Governance journey

7.1 This is a report to the Executive and does not require reporting elsewhere.

Background Papers

There are no background papers, as defined by Section 100D(5) of the Local Government Act 1972).

CONTACT OFFICERS:

Name:	Tom Horwood	Graeme Clark
Position:	Chief Executive	Strategic Director
Telephone:	01483 523238	01483 523099
Email:	tom.horwood @waverley.gov.uk	graeme.clark @waverley.gov.uk

Agreed and signed off by:

Legal Services: 30 April 2020

Strategic Director: 30 April 2020

Portfolio Holders (Leader and Finance): 1 May 2020