

INFORMATION SHEET

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Subject: Strategic Update on response to COVID-19 Outbreak
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Summary

The purpose of this briefing report is to provide a summary of the main responses from the Council since the onset of the emergency caused by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 At the last meeting of The Cabinet that was held on 9 March 2020, an update was provided to members of The Cabinet, the Leader of the Opposition, the Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny and the Chairman of Council on the initial steps that the Council was taking in response to the emerging threat from the COVID-19 outbreak. At that point there were 321 confirmed cases in the UK (Warwickshire 4) and no deaths. As of 7 April 2020 there are now 55,242 (Warwickshire 400) confirmed cases and 6,159 deaths in the UK.
 - 1.2 Since 16 March 2020 Councillors have been receiving daily updates on the actions which have been necessary since this crisis began in order to keep the Council operating. There have also been daily updates for the press during this period. A decision log has been maintained since 5 March 2020 and now runs to 282 specific actions.
 - 1.3 The priorities for the Council are shown below. This briefing note will summarise the actions that have been taken in response over this period in relation to these priorities:
 - Protecting our staff, councillors and residents from coronavirus;
 - Maintain the business critical services for the Council, including our Council Tax Reduction Scheme;
 - Maintaining the decision making capability of the Council;
 - Support to businesses through the rapid processing of the reliefs and grants to business;
 - Support to the vulnerable, we have supported throughout a coordinated approach across the County, this will be a vital service to help protect the "shielded" within our communities.
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2. Protection to Staff, Councillors and Residents

2.1 Throughout the crisis the Council has been adhering to the guidance which is issued nationally by Government. As well as increasing the frequency and requirements of cleaning within Elizabeth House the following decisions have been made:

2.2 Homeworking has been a key priority for the Council in order to maintain social distancing. On 16 March the Council had 44 officers working from home, today the figure was 209. The actions that have been taken to support this include:

- IT working with service managers and staff to ensure that the critical homeworkers are supported, fantastic team effort which is continuing;
- Increasing the number of licences for the remote desktop from 100 to 400;
- Accelerating the procurement and deployment of the new laptops. As was reported on 9 March the decision was made to accelerate the procurement of the laptops to support the Digital Transformation process;
- Following the address by the Prime Minister on 23 March 2020, any member of staff on the "vulnerable list", have been instructed to stay at home;
- Deployment of Microsoft Teams – licences have increased from 20 to 147 since early March and we are investigating the costs for rolling this out further across all staff and Members;

David Platts and his team are leading in this area.

2.3 The Environmental Health Team have had a very important role in relation to keeping residents safe through enforcement. Since 21 March their actions include:

- Working in partnership with the Police, Warwickshire Trading Standards and other Warwickshire EH teams to agree a common protocol on information sharing, lead agency and enforcement. Environmental Health is public health lead on enforcing the regulations at businesses. Police lead on enforcing government guidance on individuals and groups.
 - In the first week the Food Safety team contacted over 400 food businesses by telephone, email and leaflet drop to advise them of the new business closure rules.
 - A press release prepared repeating social distancing advice to all businesses and also setting out which businesses are required to close.
 - Area surveys have been carried out daytime and evening by officers in key commercial areas; Stratford-upon-Avon town, Southam, Shipston-on-Stour, Alcester, Studley, Bidford-on-Avon to identify any business that were open illegally.
 - Investigated 31 reports of complaints about businesses either not complying with the law and opening illegally, or concerns about social distancing amongst employees or customers. The complaint type varies considerably: allegations that non-essential goods are being sold in a 'permitted' shop (eg compost), driving instructor still giving lessons, poor social distancing in shops, takeaways and offices, members of staff exhibiting symptoms whilst working, antique shop/art gallery being open to customers, pubs continuing to serve customers. Each has been investigated and either enforcement action taken, advice given or found to be unsubstantiated.
 - Served two Prohibition Notices on businesses that had remained open in contravention of the regulations (s garden centre and a gym).
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- Issued posters for display on practical measures on social distancing to smaller food retailers on customer social distancing.
 - The Office of Product Safety and Standards requires daily reporting of new complaints and investigations, so that they can assess whether the new regulations and guidance are effective, and consequently the impact on spread of the disease.
- 2.4 Addressing Rough Sleepers – this have been a priority area for Government and they have allocated £3.2m nationally to support local authorities. The Housing team have performed exceptionally in endeavouring to find suitable accommodation for our homeless, this was not helped by the closure of the Travel Lodge. These remain a challenging sector of our communities to deal with and the behaviour of a minority is causing significant issues for landlords in the B&Bs who are working with the Council. For a temporary period, and again to support social distancing, the Council is providing full board to such tenants rather than just B&B.
- 2.5 Cancellation of all elections. On 6 May 2020 the Council was scheduled to undertake the Police and Crime Commissioner elections and a Neighbourhood Plan referendum. In line with the instruction from Government all such elections have been cancelled.
- 2.6 Closure of Elizabeth House to the public, whilst this was not an easy decision on 24 March the decision was taken to close Elizabeth House to the public. The Council however is very much open for business and continues to receive above average call volumes through the contact centre.

3. Maintaining Business Critical Services

- 3.1 As was reported at the meeting of The Cabinet on 25 March 2020, the Council has business continuity plans in place which identify at the time of emergency which services are critical to the operation of the Council and should be maintained. These services are:
- Finance/Payroll;
 - Building Control emergency staff;
 - Communications;
 - Community Support including those redeployed to support Hubs;
 - Customer Services including contact centre;
 - Emergency Planning;
 - Environmental Protection;
 - Food Safety;
 - Benefits – Housing and Council Tax (significant increase in demand already);
 - Homelessness/Rough Sleepers/housing need officers;
 - ICT;
 - Legal;
 - Licensing;
 - Refuse and Recycling; and
 - Premises and Safety.
- 3.2 All of the services shown above have been maintained, the Council is also endeavouring to maintain as much business as usual as well. However, due in the main to the need to comply with social distancing arrangements, the following services have been temporarily suspended:
- UBUS
 - The Link
 - Shopmobility
 - Leisure Centres
 - Health walks
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- SCAN meetings
 - Visitor Information Centre
 - Easter Holiday activities
 - Main Reception
 - Children's Play Areas
 - Venture House
 - Public Toilets
 - Land Charge Searches.
- 3.3 Currently the Council is able to maintain all of the refuse and recycling activities, however both North Warwickshire and Warwick have had to suspend their garden waste service. Whilst this is being maintained by BIFFA as they have redeployed staff from their commercial waste collections, if staffing levels continue to drop then this service may also need to be suspended by Stratford-on-Avon District Council. Government guidance was published yesterday in relation to the priority of waste services this can be found on this link
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-to-local-authorities-on-prioritising-waste-collections/guidance-on-prioritising-waste-collection-services-during-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic>.
- 3.4 The government's priorities in relation to waste services are as follows:
- i. Residual Waste – High – Maintain
 - ii. Food Waste – High (including where mixed with Garden Waste)
 - iii. Dry recyclables – Medium – Maintain
 - iv. Garden Waste – Low
 - v. Household Waste Recycling Centres - Medium
 - vi. Bring sites – Low/Medium
 - vii. Flytipping – High
 - viii. Trade Waste – Medium
 - ix. Care Homes – High
 - x. Assisted Collections – High
 - xi. Bulky Waste – Low.
- 3.5 Since the closure of the Household Waste Recycling Centres across the County there has been a noticeable increase in the amount of waste which is being presented for collection. The districts are in dialogue with the County Council in relation to this and the issues surrounding garden waste collections.
- 3.6 In maintaining service delivery the Council is being significantly financially adversely affected by the crisis. To date the Government has provided £43,508 of financial support, however, the estimated cost through increased expenditure and reduced revenue is estimated to be in the region of £4-5m. It is estimated that the Council will lose a significant proportion of the following income streams:
- Off Street parking
 - Planning
 - Building Control
 - Leisure
 - Leases, licences & concessions.
- 3.7 The estimated loss of income could be as much as £3m in Q.1 of 2020/21 and £2m in Q.2, should the restrictions continue. In relation to additional emergency related expenditure the Council has incurred costs of around £100,000.
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3.8 This week the Local Government Minister when speaking to both the District Councils Network and in an address to all local authorities acknowledged that this was a significant issue and that Government was working on a package to support Councils. This is being informed by a data collection exercise that George Hill is responding to.

4. Maintaining the Decision Making Capacity of the Council

4.1 It was identified that it would be necessary for the Council to review its decision making approach during the emergency as it would be impossible to hold regular meetings of The Cabinet, Regulatory and Council meetings.

4.2 Although Government regulations had been promised these had not been published and therefore it was decided that an Extraordinary Meeting of Council was required in order to amend the Council's Constitution during the crisis, this meeting was held on 25 March 2020. The measures which were approved included:

- Providing the necessary delegations to allow for Planning and Licencing Decisions to be made;
- A revised Leader's Statement that provided authority to the Leader to make decisions following consultation with The Cabinet, Leader of the Opposition and the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, which would have previously been made by The Cabinet;
- Authority to the Chief Executive to make decisions outside of the approved budget, again following the necessary consultations during the period of the emergency.

4.3 It is recognised that the use of such delegations will be done sparingly, and in particular contentious decisions will be deferred until the committee system is back in operation.

4.4 In relation to the holding of virtual meetings the [Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels \(Coronavirus\) \(Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings\) \(England and Wales\) Regulations 2020 No. 392](#) were approved by parliament and came into force on Saturday 4 April 2020.

4.5 This is a key area of activity for the Council to implement these as soon as possible and allow for such meetings. A project team headed by Phil Grafton has been established and solutions are being investigated following the LGA guidance which has also been released. An option is being considered in relation to a countywide approach to such meetings.

5. Support to Businesses

5.1 The Government have announced a range of measures which are designed to help support business throughout the period of the restrictions caused by the COVID-19 outbreak, these include emergency loans, and the furlough scheme.

5.2 An area where the Council is supporting Government is through the allocation of Business Rate Reliefs and also the allocation of the Business Rate Grants. All of the Business Rate Reliefs were immediately issued, and in the majority of cases no bills have been sent. In relation to the Business Rate Grants there are two schemes, summarised below:

5.2.1 *Scheme 1 – Business Support Grants Fund – est 2,413 businesses*

This scheme is the scheme originally announced in the budget on the 11 March, albeit the level of grant has increased from £3,000 to £10,000.

The current proposal is that all properties in receipt of rural rate relief or small business rates relief on 11 March, including those in receipt of tapered relief, will be eligible for a grant payment of £10,000.

Properties whose liability is calculated using the small business multiplier but not in receipt of small business rates relief will not qualify for this grant and neither will properties which are occupied for personal use, e.g. private stables, beach huts and moorings even if they are in receipt of relief.

5.2.2 **Scheme 2 – Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Business Grants Fund – est 321 businesses**

Announced by the Chancellor on the 17 March the current proposal is that properties which would have qualified for retail discount on 11 March will be entitled to either, £10,000 where the RV is £15,000 or less or £25,000 where the RV is greater than £15,000 and less than £51,000.

The guidance will make clear the situation with regard retrospective changes both in terms of ratepayer changes and changes to the rating list. The expectation is that, subject to an exceptional discretion held by the local authority, subsequent retrospective changes will be ignored.

5.3 In order to make payments to these businesses there are a number of checks that the Council is required to make, and such payments are being made by bank transfer. However, in many cases the Council does not hold bank account details to be able to make such payments. Therefore an online form was developed which went live on 31 March 2020 of the c 2,500 businesses for which we need information as of 7 April 2020 the form had been completed by 1,088 businesses. The online form can be found at: <https://www.stratford.gov.uk/online-forms/business-rates-grant-form.cfm>.

5.4 The Council received £35.5m from central government on 1 April in order to make the grants to business. So far there have been three payments runs and as of 8 April 2020 the Council has already processes payments of £6.035m to 414 businesses. Further staff are being deployed to the Business Rates team in order to process the remaining payments and also to encourage those businesses who have not yet completed the online form to do so as a matter of urgency. This exercise is being led by David Platts.

6. Support to the Vulnerable

6.1 Probably the most significant priority for the Council has been the support to the most vulnerable in our communities, to ensure that they remain safe and well during the outbreak.

6.2 This has been an area of outstanding partnership working across the three tiers of Local Government. The establishment of so many local volunteers to support individuals within communities has been a vital lifeline for many of our residents. The Council has been working with the County Council to identify and signpost individuals to such groups.

6.3 In addition and the last couple of weeks has seen the development and implementation of the Shielded Hubs in partnership with the County Council. Those who have been identified as the “extremely vulnerable” (those who have specific medical conditions) within our communities have been/are being contacted by the NHS, they must not leave their homes for 12 week period. Nationally, there were 900,000 individuals, each of which are being asked to identify whether they have arrangements in place for essentials such as food and medicines.

6.4 Those individuals with no current arrangements in place will receive food deliveries directly from food wholesalers and supermarkets. However, before these arrangements are implemented the Council has been undertaking food

deliveries, from the newly established distribution hub which has been set up at Stratford Leisure and Visitor Centre. This operation is being led by Robert Weeks. To date nearly 300 food deliveries have been made by the Council by the staff who have been redeployed to this area.

6.5 Further work is also ongoing to ensure that other vulnerable individuals who need other help are also identified and assisted, this is happening in a few different ways:

- Working with County Council we are reviewing our records to identify those vulnerable individuals that we are aware of and checking that they have arrangements in place;
- The County have established a helpline which is open 24/7 for individuals to call if they need support, this number is 0800 4081447;
- Financial Support – the Council has seen a significant increase in the number of individuals requiring support for areas such as Housing rents and Council Tax. The Council is working with every individual and where necessary rescheduling payments for Council Tax;
- Hardship fund – the Council has received just over £600,000 by way of support for those experiencing significant financial hardship. The majority of this funding will be allocated to the 3,000 working age Council Tax Support households at the rate of £150 per household. The balance will be available for future claimants and for emergency payments to individuals in desperate financial need.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Over the last month the Council has been extremely stretched by the impacts of the COVID outbreak. This update report provides an overview of the most significant actions that the Council has taken over this period.
