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**COVID 19 UPDATE**

Committee: Council

Date: 21 May 2020

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1.0 **ISSUE**

1.1 Update on the Council's response to COVID 19.

2.0 **RECOMMENDATIONS**

2.1 Members are requested to note the report and further instruct officers to provide July Council further updates, specifically:

- (i) Impact of COVID 19 on the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy including specific recommendations arising from the revisions to the ECTC and ECSS Business Plans 2020/21.
- (ii) Implementation of the Council's recovery plans in line with Government guidance.
- (iii) Revisions to the agreed 2019/2023 Corporate Plan in light of the impact of COVID 19.

3.0 **BACKGROUND/OPTIONS**

3.1 The Council has amended, in response to the COVID 19 crisis, to:

- To support the local community to respond and ameliorate the impact of COVID 19.
- To support businesses to ameliorate the economic impact of COVID 19.
- To work effectively with Government, our partners and the Local Resilience Forum to meet our obligations.
- To maintain 'business as usual' as practicably possible and consistent with public health guidelines to protect staff and customers.
- To provide support to maintain the well-being of staff and ensure the ongoing resilience of the organisation.
- To adopt appropriate governance processes and procedures to ensure open and effective decision making.

3.2 The Council acted promptly and effectively to respond to the COVID 19 crisis; adopting new ways of working, reorganising the Council to focus on the objectives outlined in paragraph 3.1 and making necessary governance and financial decisions consistent with our constitutional obligations.

#### 4.0 EAST CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL RESPONSE

##### 4.1 **BUSINESS CONTINUITY**

All Service Leads, including ECTC and ECSS, together with the Corporate Management Team (CMT) have come together to establish the Business Continuity COVID-19 Group and this work is led by the Chief Executive.

The primary aim of the Group is to oversee the continuation, adaption and if appropriate cessation of Council services during the crisis, in light of Government Public Health Guidance.

It also oversees the implementation of the 'working from home' arrangements and the necessary IT infrastructure to achieve remote and agile working.

The Group maintains a decision log of variations to prescribed level of service, which is reported to Members on a weekly basis and informs the Councils communication response to COVID 19.

An updated Business Continuity Statement of the current status of Council Services together with a decision log will be tabled at the meeting. The Business Continuity Group will lead the Councils COVID 19 Recovery Plan.

##### 4.2 **COMMUNITY**

From the outset the Council wanted to ensure that everything was being done that could be done to assist all of the different work streams that were happening across the district to reach the vulnerable community.

In response to the crisis the Council set up the Community Group which is led by the Director Commercial with support from the Housing & Community Safety Manager, Environmental Services Manager, Markets Officer, Customer Services Manager and the Communities & Partnership Manager. These Officers also represent the Council on various external groups that support partner agencies and the community.

The key aim of this group is to ensure that everyone in the community has access to the support they need. Officers have worked extensively with partner agencies, parish councils, community groups and the third sector to ensure that every settlement in the district has access to help and advice.

Key areas of work:

- Assessing which communities had an established support network
- Working with the Community Reference group to assist Community Groups that needed support and advice
- Written to over 8,100 residents that were identified as vulnerable
- Ensuring the website provided sufficient information to assist those who were in need of help and those who wanted to help
- Setting up specific COVID inbox, monitored by the Housing Team, to ensure that people received support during this crisis

The majority of calls and emails to the Council were from residents who required assistance with shopping and collection of medication.

The Council acted as a link between those needing help and those wanting to help. Where assistance could not be provided by a Community Support Group or where there was an emergency, the Council deployed its resources accordingly to support those in need. The level of queries has reduced over time which was expected as people became more aware of the support that was available outside of the Council.

Looking forward Officers will continue to provide the assistance needed and will work with the relevant bodies to ensure that support is ongoing particularly when the recovery phase commences.

#### 4.3 **BUSINESS**

The Council received £15,808,000 from Government to distribute to the approximately 1,360 businesses in the district eligible for a Small Business Grant or a Retail, hospitality and Leisure Grant. The Council set up a Business Group to ensure timely payment of the grants comprising ECDC Officers and representatives from Ely Markets and ARP.

An updated schedule of payments will be reported at Annual Council.

On 1<sup>st</sup> May 2020 the Government announced that it would provide Local Authorities with additional funding to support businesses that are not eligible for the current grant schemes. At the time of writing, the exact amount of funding the Council will receive and guidance for administering the funding had not been published. Although Local Authorities will have some discretion in how this funding is allocated, Government has requested that grants to the follow types of business be prioritised:

- Small businesses in shared offices and other flexible workspaces
- Regular market traders who do not have their own business rates assessment
- Bed and Breakfasts
- Charity properties in receipt of charitable business rates

The Group is also working with the Combined Authority and other partners to develop a strategy for business recovery to help the local economy as the lockdown restrictions are eased.

#### 4.4 GOVERNANCE

Due to the introduction of restrictions on gatherings of people by the Government due to the Covid-19 outbreak, s78 Coronavirus Act 2020 provided that regulations could be made relating to requirements for local authorities in relation to holding 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 came into force on 4<sup>th</sup> April 2020 and these were the regulations flowing from s78 and apply to meetings taking place before 7<sup>th</sup> May 2021.

New legislation was necessary as the existing primary legislation requires local authorities to hold annual meetings in the period March to May and that meetings must be in person, requiring attendance of all members at a place together. This is not currently possible in the light of the recent lockdown. Key changes under the Regulations include the “place” where the meeting is held is not confined to the Council building, document “open to inspection” include posting on the Council’s website, Members are considered as attending a meeting if they can hear, and where practicable see, and be heard, and where practicable, be seen by other members of the public, meetings can be held by remote means including via telephone conferencing, video conferencing, live webchat and live streaming, local authorities may make standing orders about remote meetings in relation to voting, access to information etc. and remote attendance to members counts for other purposes, such as the 6 month rule and allowances.

The Council’s Monitoring Officer set up a Remote Meetings Group to implement the Regulations and held its first meeting on Monday 6<sup>th</sup> April. The Group’s main aim was to ensure provisions were put in place to hold Committee meetings remotely as soon as possible, with its first focus being the setup of a remote Planning Committee meeting on 20<sup>th</sup> April 2020.

In addition to the Monitoring Officer, the group consists of the Deputy Monitoring Officer, colleagues from ICT, Democratic Service and the Information Officer to ensure procedures were GDPR compliant. Outcomes of the first meeting highlighted a need for ICT to test Zoom as a chosen platform for the remote meetings with the Lead Officer to act as host for the meeting. The host can then control the meeting and ensure Zoom will focus on who is speaking at any one time. The ICT Manager and Information Officer formulated guidance on the use of Zoom for remote meetings, together with undertaking a Data Impact Assessment for GDPR purposes.

ICT contacted all Planning Committee members to check both their ICT and training needs in relation to Zoom and training was provided where needed. The Monitoring Officer and Deputy Monitoring Officer produced a

supplementary Council Procedure Rule 30 to cover Remote Meetings, which was circulated and agreed on 16<sup>th</sup> April 2020 under the Chief Executive's urgency powers in the Constitution. These include, for example, that voting will be via recorded votes. At the time of writing, further supplementary Council Procedure Rules are being produced in relation to Annual Council, testing has been carried out in relation to the "Polling" function on Zoom to facilitate a secret ballot in relation to election of Chairman/Vice Chairman and any members not on Planning will be contacted to ascertain their ICT and training needs ahead of Annual Council shortly.

#### **4.5 STRATEGIC ROLE AND LIAISON**

The Council has statutory duties under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 as a Category One responder to the crisis. In order to fulfil this obligation, the Council works with partners in statutory and non-statutory forums, represented by key Officers.

The Council, through its Leader and Chief Executive, represents the Council on a number of liaison forums organised by Government, Local Government Association, District Councils Network and the Combined Authority.

Appendix 1 summarises the internal and external arrangements in operation during the crisis.

#### **4.6 BUDGET IMPACT**

As with many district councils the pandemic is not having a significant impact on the costs of the Council, but is having a major impact on the income we collect. To date the Council has incurred around £35,000 of additional cost, much of this in relation to IT to enable more / the majority of staff to work from home. In relation to income, fees and charges are reducing as a consequence of reduced requests in Planning, Building Control, Land Charges and Licencing. Car parking income has reduced by 90% and we expect that the management fee we get from GLL for the Leisure Centre to also be reduced. It is hard at this point to say the full cost of these, as the length of the "lockdown" is unclear.

In relation to Council Tax and Business Rates, it is again too early to say how these will be impacted over the coming months, but they are expected to be significantly reduced. For 2020-21 we are required to pay our preceptors (including ourselves) the full value agreed in the budget, regardless of what is collected, so in revenue terms this will not impact this year. However any shortfalls in the Collection Funds will cause us short-term cashflow issues in 2020-21 and will need to be covered by reduced precept payments in 2021-22. This is particularly true on Business Rates, where the additional relief awarded by Government after the budget was set, for retail, hospitality and leisure will make a significant dent in the amount collected. It is expected that Government will cover this cost, but at the time of writing, the exact process behind this was not clear.

Also with regard to cashflow, ECTC has stopped building on two of its sites, which is having an impact on its cashflow and subsequently will impact on when the Company will be able to repay the loans it has received from the Council. Originally these were due to be fully repaid by March 2021, but this is now considered unlikely, with work continuing to determine a more likely repayment schedule.

This will be reported directly to July Council together with an assessment of other financial impacts on ECTC and ECSS.

The Government has awarded two tranches of £1.6 billion to Local Government to assist the sector through the pandemic, the Council's share of these was £43,432 in the first tranche and £894,826 in the second.

The Finance & Assets Committee will monitor the ongoing financial impact of the crisis and make recommendations to Council, where appropriate.

#### **4.7 NEXT STEPS – RECOVERY AND EVALUATION**

There has been a shift from the Government and other statutory arrangements, which enables the nation to move to the recovery stage. In anticipation of further Government guidance the Council, and its Officers, are already preparing and considering what the next steps may be.

Whilst the Business Continuity Group will continue to ensure that services operate smoothly they will now also consider what recovery measures are required for the medium to long term. Service Leads have been asked to carry out an evaluation of current working practices that were put in place at the start of the pandemic to consider whether they have been successful and therefore should be kept. For example video conferencing has cut back on unnecessary travel, officers and Members have benefited and welcomed weekly updates and formal Committee meetings have been able to continue via video conferencing. This started with the highly successful Planning Committee which was transmitted via video conferencing and was streamed on YouTube.

Officers continue to engage daily with external partners and meetings are now being set for the foreseeable future to discuss the recovery process in the short, medium and long term across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough following steer from Government.

Many agencies including East of England Local Government Association, Community groups, District Council Network, District and County Councils' and emergency planning groups including the Local Resilience Forum are in regular contact with Corporate Management Team, all with one purpose in mind; to discuss the next steps.

At the Council, Officers are also considering how to get staff back into the workplace safely and to progress work on recovery plans, in line with Government Public Health Guidelines, that will be introduced to ensure that our

staff, communities, residents and businesses are supported and can thrive once more.

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The financial implications are outlined above and Members will be updated on a regular basis

6.0 APPENDICES

6.1 Appendix 1- COVID 19 Revised Arrangements (Internal/External)

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**Background Documents**

**Location**

Room 103  
The Grange  
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