

COVID-19 UPDATE

Cabinet - 16 April 2020

Report of	Chief Executive
Status	For consideration
Also considered by	Council - 21 April 2020
Key Decision	No

Portfolio Holder Cllr. Peter Fleming

Contact Officer Dr Pav Ramewal, Ext. 7298

Recommendation to Cabinet: That Members note the report.

Recommendation to Council: That Members note the report.

Reason for recommendation: To update Members on the measures the Council is taking surrounding the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19).

Introduction

- 1 The outbreak of Coronavirus / COVID-19 has had a significant impact nationally and globally. The Council has adapted quickly to continue delivering services that residents and local businesses rely upon, to provide additional services to support people in most need and respond to additional demands placed on it by Government.
- 2 A useful summary of some of the advice, guidance and support being provided to assist residents and businesses can be seen on a dedicated section of the Council's website at www.sevenoaks.gov.uk/coronavirus
- 3 Members will note the action already taken under urgency procedures which are included in a separate report.
- 4 This information in this report is correct as of Thursday 2 April. The coronavirus outbreak and the Council's response has been fast-moving and Members will be updated on any further development and actions at the meeting.

Staffing and Business Continuity

- 5 Business Impact Assessments have been reviewed for all services. This has enabled the Council to put in place detailed plans, on a service by service

basis, to seek to ensure they continue for as long as possible. The plans are specific to the coronavirus outbreak and focus on what the Council will do if, over time, more staff become unable to work, or if supply chains that support Council business begin to fail. The Business Impact Assessments are continuing to be reviewed using the experience gained in recent weeks.

- 6 The Strategic Management Team and Cabinet Members have worked together to establish a list of priority services provided by Argyle Road staff that are essential to the COVID-19 response. The functions provided by Direct Services at the Dunbrik Depot have also been prioritised so that it is clear which services will continue depending on the number of staff available.
- 7 Following the guidance issued by the Prime Minister on 23 March 2020, a significant number of staff based at the Argyle Road offices are now working from home. Prior to that, it was arranged for all staff at the highest risk of severe illness to work from home. Staff are continuing to work effectively and productively to continue to deliver our services. The Argyle Road reception was closed as of 25 March 2020 and public access to Dunbrik Depot was also stopped at the same time. These changes were effectively communicated to our residents and there have been no reports of customers arriving at reception expecting a service.
- 8 At Dunbrik Depot, staffing levels are continuing to hold up well. However, a small number of absences is having an impact on the delivery of services that are a lower priority in the current situation. Qualified and trained drivers are integral to our crews being able to be out and about in the District. As these staff have fallen unwell, drivers have been moved from lower priority services to ensure higher priority services are continued. As a result, this means that the bulky waste service has been withdrawn. All bookings that had been made were honoured, but no new bookings are being taken.
- 9 The green waste service is continuing. As it is likely this service will come under increased pressure from lack of resources, and with many shops closed which means customers can no longer buy garden waste sacks, the decision has been made to not accept new customers to buy garden waste bins. This will help to prolong this service for as long as possible for existing customers with the resources available to us.

Support for businesses

- 10 The Council has written to all 4,000 businesses in the District telling them about the business rate relief and business rate holidays that may be available to them.
- 11 The Council's website is also being kept up to date with the wider package of support that is available to businesses. A dedicated page can be seen at https://www.sevenoaks.gov.uk/info/20004/business/511/coronavirus_covid-19_advice_for_businesses

- 12 It has been an extremely busy time for the Business Rates team as the Government has continued to announce significant changes which impact on the vast majority of businesses. The team are continuing to process everything that is being sent to ensure that no bills are inadvertently sent to businesses that are no longer required to pay business rates this year.
- 13 Many businesses in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors will receive grants of £10,000 or £25,000 and the intention is to get these sent out as soon as possible.
- 14 As of Thursday 2 April more than £100,000 in grants had been paid, with substantially greater sums due to be paid to businesses in the days that followed.
- 15 In addition, working with colleagues across the County, a dedicated business support line for Coronavirus-related issues has been launched. The service is being delivered by the Kent & Medway Growth Hub and is available from Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 6pm.

Support for residents

- 16 As well as continuing to urge our residents to follow Government advice, Council services are adapting to ensure they are supportive of residents' needs as the coronavirus outbreak affects more families. Decisions have been taken to automatically extend discretionary housing payments, to those already in receipt, to help them stay in their homes. Those contacting us with issues about paying their council tax are being offered new flexibilities according to individual circumstances.
- 17 The Council has suspended all parking charges across the District. This is designed to support not only businesses that remain open, but keyworkers that still need to travel to work and to help those residents that need to go out for essential shopping or services.
- 18 The HERO team and the housing advice service are continuing to support as many residents as possible with advice. Although face to face contact has stopped, comprehensive support is still being provided over the telephone and by email where it is appropriate.
- 19 The Government has also made it clear that the Council must work with any rough sleepers in the District to find them temporary accommodation which the Council is continuing to do.
- 20 The Council has worked incredibly quickly to set up a scheme to safely register volunteers and match them with residents in need of support. Working closely with the Care for our Community group of volunteers, colleagues in the voluntary and community sector and Town & Parish Councils. In excess of 1,000 volunteers have been registered and more than 400 residents have been helped with their basic needs. This includes advice, befriending, mental health, family support and food deliveries.

- 21 A priority has been to put in place arrangements to support the proportion of the 1.5m people that the Government has identified as being at extreme risk of severe illness from coronavirus that live in our District. This group of people have been asked to stay in their homes for the next 12 weeks, and over the first four weeks of that period the Government will be scaling up its own door-to-door food deliveries. In the meantime the Council, working with its community and voluntary partners, is ensuring that residents receive the food and support they need.
- 22 Inside a day, Sevenoaks Leisure Centre was prepared to act as a distribution centre. The first food delivery from the Government was received on Saturday 28 March 2020 which provided sufficient supplies for 16 people. Council staff have worked incredibly hard, and resourcefully, to purchase its own food supply to ensure that residents do not go without.
- 23 As of 2 April 2020 there were 232 people across our District that had registered for support from the Government. The Council has contacted each of them to assess their immediate needs, ensured they have the food that they need, and where appropriate registered them with the Care for our Community volunteering scheme for additional support.

Key Implications

Financial

There are expected to be adverse financial implications of COVID-19 which are likely to consist of additional expenditure, reduced income and cash flow implications of Government decisions.

These will be closely monitored, and details will be provided in later reports.

Legal Implications and Risk Assessment Statement

None directly arising from this report.

Equality Assessment

The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

Conclusions

Members are asked to note this report. The Chief Executive will continue to provide regular email updates to Members.

