

**Maidstone Borough Council response to the Covid19 public health emergency**

<b>Final Decision-Maker</b>	Policy and Resources Committee
<b>Lead Director</b>	Chief Executive
<b>Lead Officer and Report Author</b>	Chief Executive
<b>Classification</b>	Public
<b>Wards affected</b>	All

**Executive Summary**

This report provides a summary of the council's response to the Covid19 public health emergency. It briefly sets out the council's arrangements for emergency response and business continuity and provides information about the support provided to residents and businesses through specific initiatives and new services as well as summarising the impacts managed through business continuity arrangements.

**Purpose of Report**

Noting

**This report makes the following recommendations to this Committee:**

1. To note the content of the report

**Timetable**

<b>Meeting</b>	<b>Date</b>
Policy and Resources Committee	24 <sup>th</sup> June 2020

## Maidstone Borough Council response to the Covid19 public health emergency

Issue	Implications	Sign-off
<b>Impact on Corporate Priorities</b>	<p><i>The four Strategic Plan objectives are:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Embracing Growth and Enabling Infrastructure</i></li> <li>• <i>Safe, Clean and Green</i></li> <li>• <i>Homes and Communities</i></li> <li>• <i>A Thriving Place</i></li> </ul> <p>This report demonstrates how the council has responded to residents' and businesses' needs in the short term during the Covid19 public health emergency to reduce and manage impact and therefore support the medium- and long-term objectives of the council.</p>	Chief Executive
<b>Cross Cutting Objectives</b>	<p><i>The four cross-cutting objectives are:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Heritage is Respected</i></li> <li>• <i>Health Inequalities are Addressed and Reduced</i></li> <li>• <i>Deprivation and Social Mobility is Improved</i></li> <li>• <i>Biodiversity and Environmental Sustainability is respected</i></li> </ul> <p>This report demonstrates how the council has responded to residents' and businesses' needs in the short term during the Covid19 public health emergency to reduce and manage impact and therefore support the medium- and long-term objectives of the council</p>	Chief Executive
<b>Risk Management</b>	Covered in the risk section of the report	Chief Executive

<b>Financial</b>	The financial impacts of the Covid19 public health emergency are substantial and covered in a separate report on the Policy and Resources Committee agenda	Section 151 Officer & Finance Team
<b>Staffing</b>	Response to the Covid19 public health emergency was achieved within the staffing resources of the council albeit that this required flexibility in temporary re-deployment, the introduction of temporarily amended HR policies and procedures in response to new requirements eg self-isolation and extensive working from home enabled by technology and associated IT support.	Chief Executive
<b>Legal</b>	<p>The actions taken by the Council in response to the Covid-19 pandemic are in accordance with the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984 and regulations introduced under the Act by the government.</p> <p>The Regulations were made in response to the serious and imminent threat to public health which is posed by the incidence and spread of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) in England - (The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020).</p> <p>The Regulations (as amended) specifically require the closure of businesses selling food or drink for consumption on the premises, and other businesses, to protect against the risks to public health arising from coronavirus, except for limited permitted uses. Various other businesses were permitted to remain open.</p>	Head of Mid Kent Legal Partnership

	<p>The Regulations also prohibit anyone leaving the place where they live without reasonable excuse; and banned public gatherings of more than two people. The closures and restrictions have been varied by further regulations, but the revised restrictions will last until they are terminated by a direction given by the Secretary of State.</p> <p>The actions taken by the Council are permitted under the above regulations, the Functions Regulations and the Local Government Act 1972, section 111(1) which empowers the Council to do anything (whether or not involving the expenditure, borrowing or lending of money or the acquisition or disposal of any property or rights) which is calculated to facilitate, or is conducive or incidental to, the discharge of any of their functions.</p> <p>The Responsibility for Functions outlined in part 2 of the Constitution enable decisions to be made by Committees and/or delegated authority.</p>	
<b>Privacy and Data Protection</b>	<p>The Council has complied with the requirements of data protection in relation to the data that has been shared by Government and other agencies to enable our response to the pandemic. We also updated our privacy notice to reflect this.</p>	<p>Policy and Information Team</p>
<b>Equalities</b>	<p>The recommendations do not propose a change in service therefore will not require an equalities impact assessment</p>	<p>Policy &amp; Information Manager</p>
<b>Public Health</b>	<p>The report highlights the Council's response to a public health crisis which has implications on the wider</p>	<p>Public Health Officer</p>

	determinants of health for both residents and staff.	
<b>Crime and Disorder</b>	The increase in the number of complaints relating to anti-social behaviour and nuisance have been satisfactorily dealt with through close liaison with the enforcement agencies and adaptations made to the service delivery.	Head of Housing and Community Services

## 2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 2.1. The purpose of this report is to summarise the response of Maidstone Borough Council to the Covid19 public health emergency. It covers information about the council's arrangements for business continuity and emergency planning and sets out the response including communications, additional support provided for residents and businesses and the changes to service delivery demands and performance during the response phase for the emergency.

### Emergency Planning and Business Continuity Arrangements

- 2.2. The council has emergency planning and business continuity arrangements in place; the lead Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) responsibility lies with the Chief Executive and responsibility for day to day development of policy, procedures and plans lies in the Commissioning and Business Improvement Team. Particular attention had been paid to business continuity planning in preparation for a No Deal Brexit scenario in 2019; this included desk top exercises and refinement of business continuity plans for high priority services and preparations for extensive home working.
- 2.3. In response to the emerging risk of Covid19 in February 2020 an officer response group was set up and their responsibilities included representing the council at the daily multi agency meetings set up via the Kent Resilience Forum, maintaining situational awareness, feeding into the common operating picture (COP) reports for the council and providing guidance to officers on emerging HR matters. After declaration of an emergency strategic leadership has been provided by CLT and response has been led by Heads of Service. During the first 4 weeks of response unit managers provided daily reports of issues, risks and implications for service delivery performance enabling CLT to review needs and pressures and redistribute resources as needed; a dashboard of Key Performance Indicators for key services was also established to enable evidence based oversight. Our emergency planning arrangements have also been developed so that we had a plan in place to manage any other emergency that may occur simultaneously with the Covid19

emergency response phase.

### Council Services

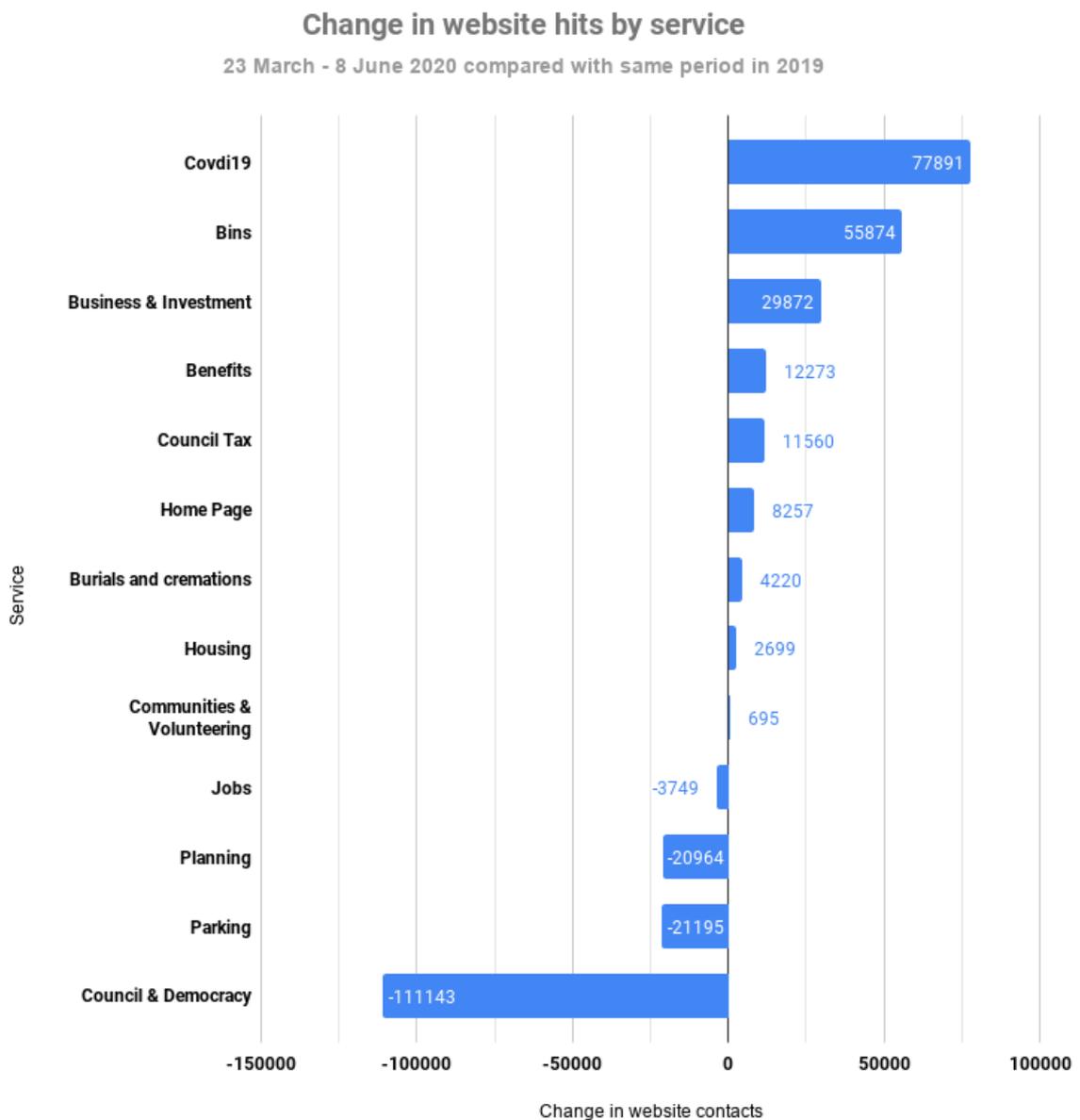
- 2.4. The Council has consistently followed government advice in taking decisions on service delivery. As a consequence, a decision was taken to close a number of Council venues including the museum and Lockmeadow. Play areas were closed and several services that were either non-essential or non-compatible with social distancing rules were suspended including food safety inspections and taxi driver knowledge tests. The Council's contractors also closed the leisure centre and the theatre.
- 2.5. Under its business continuity arrangements, the Council maintains a list of priority services. These are (in alphabetical order):
  - Bereavement services
  - Customer services
  - Communications
  - Emergency Planning
  - Environmental Health
  - Finance
  - Housing
  - ICT
  - Revenues and Benefits
  - Waste collection

### Communication

- 2.6. The need for good communication with residents and businesses has been accentuated during the response phase for the Covid19 public health emergency. The Communications team has supported front line service delivery communication needs through over 50 design projects including signage, posters and newsletters , 44 press releases, 22 radio interviews have been delivered and six radio adverts have been scripted. Topics covered include changes to services e.g. parking, parks and new initiatives including business rate grants, virtual committee meetings and the community hub. The team have also been active across social media channels producing over 300 posts on both facebook and twitter as well as 22 posts on instagram.
- 2.7. A wide range of information was brought together in the Covid19 edition of Insight which replaced the planned edition and enabled the council to cost effectively both inform the public and engage with residents and businesses concerning support available to them through printed form and hence complement the social media

messaging that has taken place throughout the emergency. In terms of reach activity has generated nearly 580 press items, engaged with 13,800 people through Facebook, and around 10,500 via Twitter and 2500 via LinkedIn.

- 2.8. Our website content was developed to assist residents and businesses. Between 23 March 2020 (the date the website started to see significant traffic increases) to 8 June 2020 there have been 590,698 visitors. This is a 350% increase on the same period last year. The histogram below sets out the key information on what our web site has been accessed for.



- 2.9. Internal communication has also been key. We have provided regular webinars for staff on a range of topics including use of virtual meetings technology and looking after their mental and physical health, and increased the frequency of our staff newsletter (Inside MBC) and the Members' bulletin for a period when there was greatest change. We have undertaken staff well-being pulse surveys to better understand the impacts of increased homeworking.

#### Support for Communities

- 2.10. Throughout the Covid19 emergency, the Council has been in regular dialogue with parish councils directly and Maidstone branch of the Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC) and many of the Borough's voluntary and community sector organisations who have played such a vital role in supporting residents.
- 2.11. The Council has supported residents and communities in several ways. On a purely practical level, the Council has done several things to make residents' lives easier for example relaxing some parking regulations to allow more residents to park close to home, allowing carers to park for free and providing help and support with housing and benefits.

#### Supporting vulnerable people and the 'Shielding' Programme

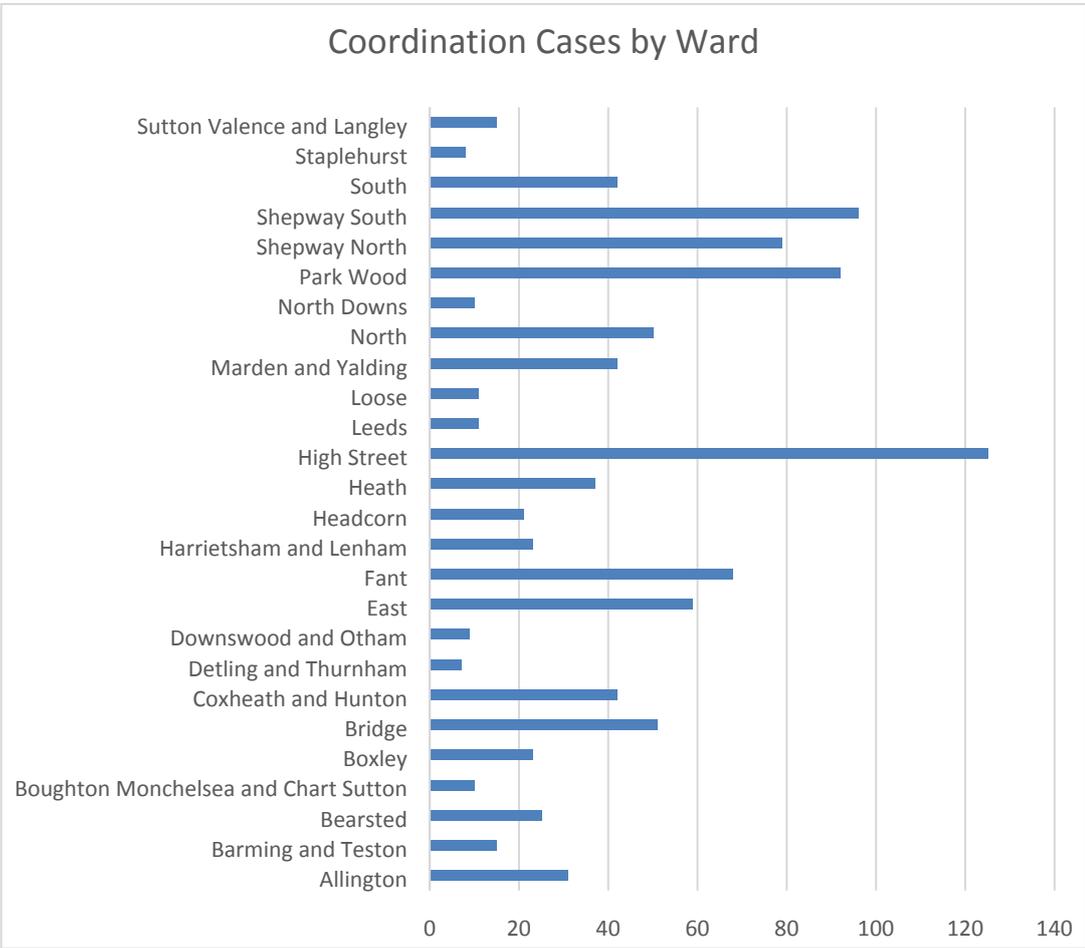
- 2.12. Following the government's request to provide support to the 'shielded' population, the Council set up a 'Community Hub' comprising a contact centre where people can seek support, a physical distribution hub, a befriending service and a dedicated part of the MBC web-site to provide information for people needing support and a place where volunteers could offer support. Led by the Head of Policy, Communications and Governance staff were quickly re-deployed from across the council (audit, debt recovery, civic team, procurement, democratic services, museum electoral services, policy and information, parking, housing, customer services, fraud, mid kent enforcement) to enable set up in a matter of days. The Community Hub provided free phone and web based contact channels, the team developed processes for managing contact with residents and the provision of support, sourced and procured food and household essentials and linked in with parish councils, community services, voluntary groups, KCC, health providers and volunteers.
- 2.13. The set up commenced on 25<sup>th</sup> March at which point the level of demand and the nature of need was largely unknown. The team have worked well, been agile and flexible in their approach and have captured data and learning to inform evolution of the hub operation over the subsequent weeks. This has been complemented by KCC's

24/7 helpline and website under the umbrella of 'Kent Together'. Local businesses have also been supportive with offers of food, household essentials, boxes and more. Golding Homes provided staff for the free phone contact centre for a period too.

- 2.14. Initially the primary purpose of the hub was to meet urgent food, medical and social isolation needs of the shielded community – these are known as tier 1 residents. A secondary purpose was meeting those same needs for other residents who are not part of the shielded community but are vulnerable and were told to isolate and need support – known as tier 2. This community has made up most of the caseload. A third tier of support is for those who have no access to food and other supplies because of the impact of Covid19; wherever possible these people have been referred to community organisations for support or other agencies if their needs are driven by financial hardship. We have provided emergency food parcels but not ongoing support for these individuals.
- 2.15. MBC has also undertaken work to contact the shielded community as a safety net for central government. For Maidstone borough the shielded community comprises around 5530 people (this varies as people are added to or ask to be removed from the list). There have been numerous issues relating to the quality of the data provided by government to local authorities, deliveries of food by their centralised system of suppliers, cancellations, and delays. We were notified of the contact details for people in tranches commencing on Friday 27<sup>th</sup> March – and initially contacted everyone by phone, and for later tranches making contact by letter. More recently at the request of government, we have endeavoured to contact those people whom government agencies have not had a response from, or they have concerns about. This has resulted in research to establish complete contact details, a large volume of outbound calls and welfare checks/visits to properties where people have not responded to calls. By the beginning of June this had resulted in MBC attempting to contact nearly 800 people and welfare checks for approximately 70 people so far.
- 2.16. The Hub has provided support directly or signposted around 1500 people. Around a third have been re-directed to others for support at the first contact e.g. to a parish council or existing community group. Our co-ordination team has worked directly with around two thirds (1000) of the people who requested support; the Hub team have contacted them, undertaken a needs assessment, and provided or co-ordinated appropriate support.
- 2.17. As well as receiving data from central government 'shielded' residents and contact from residents seeking support, MBC has also sought to identify additional vulnerable and isolated residents

through its own data; using this we contacted people who were 70+ to publicise the support available. A Covid19 Borough Insight edition was also distributed to all households in the borough outlining the council’s response to the Covid19 pandemic and providing contact details for anyone in need of support – other districts in Kent have achieved blanket coverage of their offer by means of a letter to every household.

2.18. The biggest contact has been with residents in our central urban Maidstone area: High Street, Shepway, Parkwood and Fant wards – perhaps reflecting the support provided in parished areas by parish councils.



2.19. As of 31 May, with the support of volunteers, 1028 food parcels have been delivered to households across the Borough.

2.20. New community groups have emerged, councillors have taken the lead in local engagement including in unparished areas and where community groups have not been in place and need expressed through people contacting the hub has been highest, officers have worked with councillors to engage with residents and offer support.

- 2.21. Alongside the provision of direct support, the Council has also been working closely with local voluntary and community organisations. The Council has worked with a number of agencies including Foodbanks, MADM, Maidstone Daycentre, The Rotary Club, Involve, Mid Kent College (providing capacity for foodbank storage and volunteers), the Citizen's Advice Bureau, Maidstone Children's Centres, Golding Homes (they provided staff for our phonenumber), community groups who responded to the pandemic such as Tovil Helping Hands and the Parkwood Church Group who have provided over 1,000 cooked meals.
- We were able to access a rich network of community support across the Borough to support our residents this information was shared on the website and used by our coordination team to help residents get support in their local area. Support has been provided at an individual local level by neighbours, friends and relatives in our fantastic local communities. We are very grateful to every volunteer and good neighbour who stepped up – thank you.
- 2.22. Many voluntary and community sector organisations have faced significant challenges. KCC have front-ended payments for commissioned VCS organisations. Government have provided £750m for 'front line' charities and for charities supporting victims of Domestic Abuse and sexual violence. However, there has been an absence of support from the Department for Culture Media and Sport for charitable cultural and music venues. MBC has secured a £22k grant from Arts Council emergency funding for developing virtual tours of Maidstone Museum.
- 2.23. Challenges remain with the programme. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has recently circulated a request for 10 weeks-worth of back-data. We are also uncertain as to whether we will need to support those who have been asked to isolate themselves as part of the 'test, trace and isolate' programme. Notwithstanding these challenges, we are now giving consideration as to how we manage the support on a more proportionate basis given the reducing level of support that is being requested whilst recognising there may be a need to increase support at short notice if further restrictions are put in

#### Parish Councils

- 2.24. MBC officers have maintained regular contact with parish councils and the Chair of Maidstone KALC and provided a weekly parish newsletter. Parish councils have provided extensive excellent support for residents including with shopping, medicine and some with food parcels as well. Some highlights include:

- Nettlestead - 50 households have been supported with shopping/prescription and befriending calls.
- Marden - 40-45 families helped through their own local foodbank since start of lockdown, 54 vulnerable residents are being supported with shopping/prescriptions and befriending calls.
- Boughton Monchelsea - 50-60 shopping/prescription collection/drop offs per week. Up until 6 June 150 fruit/farm produce parcels delivered every Sunday to the most vulnerable and elderly.
- Harrietsham and Lenham – currently supporting around 250 residents with shopping/prescriptions and befriending calls.
- Broomfield and Kingswood - an estimated 30 requests for shopping or prescription, plus dog walking matched with local volunteers.
- Bredhurst – 14 vulnerable residents being supported with shopping and prescriptions.
- Tovil – supporting 20 residents with shopping and prescriptions and supplying 2 preschools with food parcels on a weekly basis.
- Chart Sutton – supporting 48 residents with shopping and prescriptions.

#### Support for businesses

- 2.25. From the outset, it was clear that there would be very significant adverse consequences for many businesses and people employed by them arising from the restrictions announced by government. The Council very quickly set up a cross disciplinary group with the objective of providing co-ordinated support to local businesses. Responsibility for supporting businesses through tax and spend measures lies with government. The Council has worked closely with partners to publicise details of support available via its website and social media and administered various programmes of support.
- 2.26. The Government's response to the Covid19 crisis and its impact on the economy was to launch a raft of grant and loan schemes for businesses and charities together with the Job Retention Scheme and other initiatives including:
- all retail, hospitality, and leisure businesses in England to receive a 100% business rates holiday for the next 12 months
  - grant funding of £25,000 for retail, hospitality, and leisure businesses with property with a rateable value between £15,000 and £51,000
  - increase in grants to small businesses eligible for Small Business Rate Relief or rural rate relief from £3,000 to £10,000
  - the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme offers loans from £1,000 to £5 million, and ensuring businesses can access

the first 6 months of that finance interest free, as Government will cover the first 6 months of interest payments

- support for liquidity amongst large firms, with a major new scheme being launched by the Bank of England to help them bridge COVID-19 disruption to their cash flows through loans
- businesses may be able to access an interest free time to pay arrangement from HMRC
- confirmation that Government advice to avoid pubs, clubs and theatres etc. is sufficient for businesses to claim on their insurance where they have appropriate business interruption cover for pandemics in place
- relaxation in planning regulations to allow pubs and restaurants to start providing takeaways without a planning application.

2.27. The Council worked with other Local Authorities in Kent and Medway to commission a hotline service, delivered by the Kent and Medway Growth Hub, which can offer businesses advice and guidance about all these schemes. The take up of this service by Maidstone based businesses is the highest in Kent following extensive promotion by the Economic Development Team.

#### Business Rates Relief

2.28. The Government made several changes for retail business rates relief. Prior to Covid19 small retail businesses received 33% relief. This was raised to 50% for small businesses, then increased from 50% to 100%; this was subsequently applied for all retail premises and extended to the hospitality and leisure sector where all premises now have a business rates payment holiday for a year irrespective of size.

2.29. The Business Rates team reissued Business Rates bills to those eligible businesses in the retail, hospitality, and leisure sectors stating that they will not pay business rates in 2020-21. There was no need for businesses to apply for the relief.

#### Small Business Grant Fund and the Retail Hospitality and Leisure Fund

2.30. The Council was allocated £27,608,000 by the Government to deliver the Small Business Grant Fund and the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Fund to local businesses. Cross departmental work between Economic Development, Business Rates, Finance, Audit, Communications and the Digital Teams has resulted, as of 8<sup>th</sup> June, in the payment of 96% of the fund to over 2,100 of the 2,222 potentially eligible businesses. This performance is 2<sup>nd</sup> in Kent and 27<sup>th</sup> in the country.

2.31. The Government recognised that some small and micro businesses and local charities were not eligible for these grants and launched a Discretionary Grant scheme. The cost of the scheme is funded by Government up to a cap for Maidstone borough of £1,380,000, with the expectation that most grants would be £10,000 or less. MBC produced a Grant Policy and launched its scheme by the 18<sup>th</sup> May and publicised it extensively. The deadline for grant applications was the 8<sup>th</sup> June; 317 applications were received. Following assessment of these applications to check eligibility and need, payments have been made commencing from the 15<sup>th</sup> June.

#### Support for Partners

2.32. During the response phase support has been provided in particular for our health partners. This has included support for the Maidstone Central and Weald primary care networks to establish hot sites at Maidstone leisure centre and Headcorn Aerodrome respectively to enable separate GP facilities for Covid19 patients as part of an infection management and control strategy. Site suitability assessment was also undertaken for potential Nightingale hospital venues and regional testing facilities. Arrangements to facilitate a mobile testing facility have been made for the Park and Ride car park site in Allington.

#### Business continuity – managing new service delivery models and increased and changed demands

2.33. The lockdown has presented several challenges to conducting democratic decision making at the authority primarily because committees could not meet physically and publicly due to restrictions on gatherings, and health considerations for attendees.

2.34. The main focus of work for the democratic services team was establishing remote committees in response to temporary regulations relaxing requirements for physical attendance at committee meetings and public access. This consisted of:

- (i) technical discussions and development of the relevant software (Skype for Business), this also included exploring the development of alternatives including Microsoft Teams;
- (ii) producing new protocols, testing, and consulting with members on them; and
- (iii) training and supporting Members in using the relevant software.

2.35. The remote committee process has now run for Policy and Resources, Planning and Strategic Planning and Infrastructure

Committees with other committees scheduled. Key challenges have been the extra democratic services team resource required for remote meetings and facilitating public speaking. Further developments are in train to improve the committee experience for the public and Councillors through rolling out MS Teams.

- 2.36. Our corporate property and contracts work has refocussed. The impact on Corporate Property has been significant in terms of rental income with most tenants experiencing financial difficulties. There has however been a positive uptake of grant funding and this has helped our smaller commercial tenants continue to operate. There has been a rise in rent arrears, with 22 tenants failing to pay rent invoices for the first time, but repayment plans are being made with each tenant. As yet we have not lost any commercial tenants. Lettings do not appear to have been impacted and we continue to complete on new leases and have good interest in vacant commercial premises. Significant work has also been needed with our contractors and outsourced service providers who have experienced significant financial impacts and invoked various contractual provisions. We have applied the Government's advice on payment of suppliers as set out in the Procurement Policy Note (PPN) to ensure service continuity for suppliers during and after the Covid-19 outbreak.
- 2.37. Initially the council received a lot of enquiries from customers regarding Council Tax arising from the co-incidence of the annual billing and changes in some residents' financial circumstances. Debt recovery has been reduced as a result of not enforcing debts through the courts and workload arising from moving to a new house has also reduced. Workload has been managed through flexible working across the team. A soft reminder has been sent to all non-CTS households who have not paid April and May instalments. The 1<sup>st</sup> statutory reminder will be sent to those that have not paid or contacted the council to put suitable arrangements in place from the 22 June. For Council Tax Support cases, we are aiming to award the £150 hardship payment in the week ending 12 June and re-bill all working age claimants (4,107 cases).
- 2.38. The workload in our benefits service has significantly increased and at some points in March new claims exceeded the February levels by over 335%. Whilst this has now reduced, the volume of notification of changes coming through from the Department of Work and Pensions due to variations in earnings has more than doubled to just under 3000 a month; each notification needs to be reviewed for impact on benefits and council tax support.
- 2.39. Waste and recycling services have remained fully operational throughout the emergency with only one day in which garden waste

was suspended but caught up the following day. Since the beginning of March until end of May 2020, over 2.6 million collections have been made across waste, recycling, food, and garden waste. Only 2,259 collections were reportedly missed during that time, which means 99.9% of collections were completed successfully. The closure of the Household Waste Recycling Centre (HWRC) resulted in an increase in new garden waste customers. 1,538 new garden waste bins have been delivered since March which is a 110% increase compared with the same period in 2019/20. Tonnage data is currently available up to March 2020. This indicates a small increase in overall tonnage (4%) compared with the previous year.

- 2.40. The street cleansing, grounds maintenance and commercial waste teams have assisted Biffa by providing staff and vehicles. This has protected the Council from any claim for additional costs as well as ensuring all services have remained fully operational. This has had minimal impact in the street cleansing, grounds maintenance and commercial waste services due to the decline in demand for these services. The team also secured support from Kent County Council including the provision of a 7.5 tonne refuse collection vehicle to assist with the roads which due to parking were inaccessible by the standard frontline vehicles.
- 2.41. The waste team have worked almost completely remotely from home, dealing with residents' queries. Site visits have continued where required and the waste manager has remained in constant dialogue with the contractor. The Head of Service was actively involved in weekly meetings throughout this time with the Kent Resource Partnership (Officers Advisory Group), Biffa's national management team and the Mid Kent Partnership. This ensured that the team were fully briefed on the national and Kent-wide picture as well as the WISH (Waste Industry Safety and Health Forum) guidance regarding social distancing and safe working practices.
- 2.42. Regular schedules of cleansing have been maintained throughout the pandemic and lockdown. A deep clean of the town centre has taken place due to the low footfall and resources usually focused in retail and high footfall areas have been redeployed to the urban wider residential area.
- 2.43. The waste crime team has remained active throughout the pandemic, including deploying CCTV and as a result has seized 3 vehicles and have several cases pending. They have also continued to carry out joint operations with the Police during this time.
- 2.44. Park usage has been high, with most people complying with social distancing. There have only been a handful of issues relating to congregations and anti-social behaviour. Car parks at Mote Park and

Cobtree were closed, however all parks remained open throughout lockdown, except for Clare Park which was closed for several weeks due to congregations of youths. All children's play areas remain closed and there is clear signage at each site. Social distancing signage has been installed at the main parks and open spaces. The toilets in parks remain closed as they pose a concern regarding social distancing and maintaining cleanliness. However, the team is working on ways that these could be partially reopened as the lockdown eases. We have continued to inspect trees and respond to residents' concerns.

- 2.45. The commercial waste service has remained fully operational throughout. The Commercial Waste Advisor contacted all our customers to discuss their service and to advise them of the business grants they could apply for. 172 customers suspended service during this time, whilst 112 continued to it. Several customers have already returned to using the service, with 155 currently receiving a service. 13 new customers have signed up since March.
- 2.46. Bereavement services has remained fully operational throughout despite increased demand and cremator breakdowns. The number of cremations per week peaked in the week commencing 11 May with 74, compared with 21 in the same week the previous year and an average of 32 per week in 2019/20. In April and May, there were 452 cremations carried out compared with 272 the previous year. The number of burials has remained low, in line with previous years. The Cemetery and Crematorium were closed briefly to visitors, apart from funeral parties, however, are now open at the weekend and are due to reopen fully on Monday 15 June. The team worked shifts, sometimes starting at 4am and working until midnight to carry out cremations during the busiest weeks. The cool storage unit which was installed last year has enabled us to continue to provide a service to Bluebell cemetery in Sevenoaks, which has increased steadily during the pandemic.
- 2.47. As a result of Government Covid-19 advice to work from home, significant increases in parking have been seen in residential areas of Maidstone town centre since late March, many of which are protected by parking restrictions such as time limited resident parking bays, single yellow lines (restricting parking Monday to Friday during the day) and double yellow lines (restricting parking at all times). Contravention levels peaked at the end of March within the residential areas as capacity was quickly overwhelmed by parking demand.
- 2.48. Civil Parking Enforcement patrols have continued in line with Local Government Association (LGA) and British Parking Association (BPA)

guidance, where focus is on maintaining traffic flow and highway safety particularly within the residential zones. On street surveys have demonstrated that 15% of resident parking bays are occupied by non-permit holder resident vehicles, which were normally absent during the day. To ease the situation, an operational decision was made for residents to have unrestricted parking within the resident parking bays until 1 July 2020. To ease on-street demand, concessions were published allowing resident parking permit holders to park for free in council off-street car parks until 1 July 2020. This has facilitated some migration from residential streets into off street car parks where occupancy levels were very low in April at around 5% of normal levels. The high number of vehicles parked in residential areas during the day have caused issues with refuse collections in some areas. To manage this sensitively, 1500 advisory letters were hand delivered (maintaining social distancing) to properties in the roads most affected, reminding residents to park more considerately and that restrictions such as those placed at junctions will continue to be enforced to ensure highway safety and the free flow of traffic.

- 2.49. Civil parking enforcement has continued for disabled bays to ensure that less mobile residents have unhindered access to local shops. Loading bays have also remained enforceable to maintain unhindered access for lorries to deliver much needed stock to local business and school keep clear markings are patrolled regularly to ensure that safety is maintained outside schools attended by vulnerable children and children of 'key worker' front line staff.
- 2.50. Rural locations also identified resident parking demand issues and so to ease the problem, enforcement ceased on single yellow lines and parking bays that relate to 30-minute wait restrictions until 1 July 2020. These are normally in place to reduce non-resident long stay commuter parking close to rail networks.
- 2.51. The Local Government Association and the British Parking Association have published guidance on Civil Parking Enforcement, and this is being closely followed. In March, this included a temporary hold on cases going to the Traffic Enforcement Centre and a hold on warrants to bailiff agents. Cases progressed to the Traffic Enforcement Centre were reinstated from 18 May 2020 and bailiff agents have also started to re-engage with debtors. However, the government's position remains unchanged in relation to face to face visits to enforce warrants resulting in these cases being placed on hold.
- 2.52. Following an announcement by Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government local councils in England were required to provide free car parking for NHS staff and social care

workers during the coronavirus outbreak. Our parking operation adapted quickly, and these measures were put in place across all off-street car parks, resident parking bays and on-street paid bays in accordance with LGA and BPA guidance.

- 2.53. Cash collections from pay display units ceased in mid-March and our supplier teams were stood down under the governments furlough scheme. This resulted in some concerns that as car parks remain chargeable, coin boxes may become full at prime locations. Pay unit activity is being closely monitored to ensure that they remain operational with collections being made only where necessary to maintain operational stability. As we have seen a slow increase in demand, our operations team have established a skeleton collection rota with our agent to maintain cash security. The new pay units have helped with a reduction in cash transactions as contactless payments are now available alongside the normal RingGo payment options. These payments represented 62 % of all payments in April and May. Off-street car park income is now slowly recovering since the recent government announcement to slowly emerge from lockdown.
- 2.54. As restaurants have adapted to 'take away' arrangements we have seen an increase in parking problems in roads such as Earl Street. Loading bays vital to businesses, disabled bays and double yellow lines are all being used by drivers to wait for collections, in some cases for over an hour. Although it is important to support local business operation, the current situation cannot be sustained as more and more businesses reopen after lockdown. To facilitate an improvement, 200 letters were delivered by hand (maintaining social distancing) to local business asking them to support their community and ask customers to park in nearby car parks. This is being closely monitored and where the problem persists Civil Parking Enforcement will be applied to manage the situation.
- 2.55. Back office appeals, case progression and permit applications and renewals have continued, and the Parking Services team resources have been rebalanced to meet the changing environment and increased demand in resident parking enquiries and complaints. Many residents and visitors consider that parking enforcement should not take place during the Covid-19 outbreak and so we have seen an increase in complaints, verbal and physical assaults on our patrol teams.
- 2.56. The Park & Ride service was suspended from both sites from early April and the London Road site is periodically being used as a Covid-19 mobile testing site by the Army. Arriva initially considered re-opening Park & Ride from 1 June 2020. However Arriva has since

confirmed that the impact of social distancing on patronage is being considered on their primary routes first after which a decision will be made to re-open the Park and Ride service from one site (Willington Street) and then the second site (London Road) once demand increases.

- 2.57. The planning service has continued to operate largely by working from home with some modifications with respect to site visits. The volume of planning applications and therefore fee income has reduced. The number of valid applications in the system was typically 300 pre-lockdown and this is now around 250 ie a reduction of around 16%. Performance in terms of determination in time remains good. Work on the Local Plan Review has continued uninterrupted.
- 2.58. Our housing service has continued uninterrupted and has seen increased demand. Maidstone's Housing Teams were well placed to respond to the developing health crisis. The Rough Sleeper Initiative (RSI) had managed to achieve a zero-street count earlier in the year and ability to reach and accommodate people at short notice was well developed. In addition to the existing nearly 30 clients being supported in RSI accommodation, new persons who were not previously known to the Outreach Service were received and assisted, as relatives and friends felt unable to cope with the growing concern about infection spread. In rapid response to the crisis, our Accommodation Team worked vigorously to create capacity within the Council's owned temporary accommodation stock, which enabled MBC to avoid procurement of large scale usage of hotel and Bed and Breakfast accommodation which has been the case elsewhere in the UK. During the crisis, the Outreach and Accommodation Teams continued to provide a front-line service and provided accommodation to over 40 people, of whom 17 remain in temporary housing. These clients are being assisted back into settled accommodation or reconnected with their areas of origin where that is not Maidstone. Our team is working closely with the specialist advisers at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to avoid anyone having to return to the streets as the emergency protection measures are lifted.
- 2.59. New ways of service delivery had been introduced prior to the health crisis, which meant the Housing Service was able to fully function without interruption over the lockdown period. Although we received an initial upsurge in applications and spikes in requests for assistance, many of these have been helped without the need for temporary accommodation, in line with our homelessness prevention duties. Currently the team are working with over 650 open cases, with nearly 250 of those at the prevention stage. An increase in applications to join the Council's Housing Register mirrored the

increase in homeless approaches. With over 940 live applications, the number of households on the Housing Register actively seeking affordable housing is the highest it has been since 2015. Whilst vacant properties from our housing partners dried up almost completely during the first month of lockdown, increased activity within the sector saw 36 households move into new homes in May and we hope to get closer to our 50 lettings a month average in the coming short-term. In addition access to the private rented sector has improved, in the main due to lettings agents no longer being open and word-of-mouth recommendation from our existing private landlords to their peers who are new to our schemes and have vacant property.

### The Way We Work

- 2.60. Ways of working for most staff have changed. Some of us have continued as usual – but with some adaptations for safe working. Some of us have worked from home. Some of our services have been paused – and colleagues have been temporarily redeployed. We have invented some new services to respond to our communities’ needs and we have managed some significant increases in workload. HR policies have been temporarily adapted to meet current needs including an extended period of combining childcare and work while schools have been closed. Levels of absence related to Covid19 including illness arising from the virus and self-isolation have been low, typically fewer than 15 people at any one time and currently below that.
- 2.61. For office-based activities most staff have worked continuously from home, supported by robust IT services and communication enabled by, amongst other things, Skype for Business and increasingly MS Teams. Operational buildings are mainly closed. Regular inspections and essential works have continued to be carried out. Heads of Service and Unit managers have kept in touch with their teams. Our HR team have delivered a programme of webinars to train and develop staff in their use of technology and to support their well-being. The Wider Leadership Team has delivered staff webinars (with 250+ participants) so that people are briefed on the situation and how recovery will be managed in terms of arrangements for a phased return to working at our office bases at an appropriate time. As noted above in terms of internal communications we have surveyed all staff to research their wellbeing and experience of working in a Covid19 changed world of work; we have also conducted a survey of managers’ experience. This has provided helpful information for managing during lockdown and for short term recovery and will provide insight for our future plans including “working from anywhere” options.

2.62. Our business support services have provided advice and guidance throughout. For example Mid Kent Legal Services have provided advice on state aid in relations to business grants, changes in permitted development rights to assist the NHS, contract reviews eg with respect to the Hazlitt theatre, Maidstone leisure centre and cash collection, legislation on restrictions on gatherings and licensing matters and requirements and protocols for remote committee meetings and changes in planning guidance

2.63. I would like to recognise and pay tribute to the enormous professionalism, resilience, flexibility and dedication of staff who have risen to every challenge posed by the Covid-19 pandemic and who have worked around the clock with good humour to respond to it.

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### **3. RISK**

3.1 This report describes how the council has managed and mitigated the risks arising from the Covid19 public health emergency during the response phase. Separate reports are presented on the same agenda as this one covering the financial impacts and the proposed approach to recovery.

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### **4. REPORT APPENDICES**

4.1 None

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### **5. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

5.1 None