

Agenda Item No: 9
Report To: Cabinet
Date of Meeting: 25 June 2020
Report Title: **COVID-19 Response**
Report Author & Job Title: Sheila Davison
Head of Community Safety and Wellbeing
Portfolio Holder Cllr. Peter Feacey
Portfolio Holder for: Community Safety and Wellbeing



Summary: Report documenting the borough council's emergency response to the COVID-19 outbreak. The report includes details of the command and control arrangements, the establishment of the Ashford Response Depot, the Voluntary Emergency Response Appeal, the assistance provided to those on NHS shield lists and other vulnerable people, and grant support arrangements for the voluntary sector. The report outlines the significant steps taken to keep essential services running as well as responding to immediate emergency needs.

Key Decision: NO

Significantly Affected Wards: All wards

Recommendations: **The Cabinet is recommended to:-**

- I. Note the report outlining the borough council's response to date to the COVID-19 pandemic.**
- II. Pay tribute to our residents, businesses, wider communities, volunteers and staff for all the support and help they have provided, the sacrifices they have made, and the personal challenges they have and continue to face as a result of the COVID-19.**

Policy Overview: While the Government coordinates the national response, it is clear that district councils have a major role in leading local efforts in response to the pandemic. At the heart of this is the need to continue providing priority services to residents and businesses as well as responding to the unique demands posed by the pandemic.

Financial Implications: The financial impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the council is significant but outside the scope of this report. This report

only addresses expenditure that is directly attributable to the response phase to date. It does not address wider financial aspects e.g. loss of income.

Legal Implications: The council's response has been informed by the Health Protection (Coronavirus) Regulations 2020 as well as other relevant provisions covering health and safety, community safety and data protection. This report does not however address the wide range of enforcement, transactional, and litigation issues faced in responding to COVID-19.

Equalities Impact Assessment: This report outlines immediate action taken as a consequence of the COVID-19 emergency. The action taken has been guided by the differing needs of our community and differing impacts experienced. Equality has been at the forefront of the response.

Data Protection Impact Assessment: Not applicable

Risk Assessment (Risk Appetite Statement): The COVID-19 response has been the subject of on-going risk assessment against the strategic goals to:

1. Protect our community (people and businesses)
2. Protect our staff
3. Maintain core service delivery
4. Prepare for longer term recovery

The council's ability to respond to an additional business continuity incident or emergency situation has also been reviewed in the context of the COVID-19 incident.

Sustainability Implications: While outside the scope of this report, the COVID-19 outbreak has significant sustainability implications. Cleaner air, burgeoning urban wildlife, and a shift to less carbon-intensive ways of life show what can be achieved in such a short time. There is an opportunity to make a transformation towards a more sustainable society and set our climate trajectory for the future. The council will, through its COVID-19 recovery plan, corporate plan, and carbon neutrality strategy, look to support this transformation.

Other Material Implications: There have been substantial implications for staff as a consequence of the outbreak, most notably the move to home and virtual working, accelerated digital transformation that has happened, and for many, a temporary change of role upon deployment to support the emergency response.

Exempt from Publication: **NO**

**Background
Papers:**

None

Contact:

sheila.davison@ashford.gov.uk – Tel: (01233) 330224

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Introduction and Background

1. COVID-19 pandemic has had an enormous impact on every aspect of our lives from the perspectives of our nation, local community and immediate friends and families. That impact will be felt for many years. There is no doubt that it will shape the future course of the council as we move forward with recovery.
2. The overriding priority, like that of the Government, has been to save lives. To that end the council has focused on a response that protects life and minimises impact upon our essential services and local economy. This has been achieved by mitigating risks to the public and supporting agencies who are working equally hard towards these objectives. We have sought to keep people informed and share accurate and consistent guidance and information.
3. The purpose of this report is to document the borough council's business continuity and emergency response to the COVID-19 outbreak. While much of this information has already been shared with members and is already in the public domain, it represents an opportunity to address the totality of the response to date, provide update on the various transition arrangements that are in operation (i.e. those arrangements and services that are operating specifically as a response to the emergency) and introduce longer-term recovery plans.
4. The report includes details of the following:
 - a. Command and control, governance, and partnership arrangements including our business continuity incident management; links to the Kent Local Resilience Forum; collaboration with the county, police, health service, and critically the community and voluntary sector.
 - b. Support for residents including the establishment and operation of the Ashford Response Depot; the Voluntary Emergency Response Appeal; the assistance provided to those on the NHS shield lists and other vulnerable people (for example homeless/rough sleepers) through the 'hub' model, and grant support arrangements for the voluntary sector.
 - c. Support for businesses including business rate reductions and reliefs, SME grants, communication and reassurance plus assistance to open our high streets.
 - d. Maintenance of council services including managing staff sickness and new working arrangements, redeployment to critical services, management capacity, remote working, financial management associated with loss of returns from income-generating services, and administration pressures in key services.

Command and control, governance, and partnership arrangements

The Ashford Critical Emergency Resilience Committee

5. Overall command and control of the council's response to the outbreak has been led by the Ashford Critical Emergency Resilience (ACER) Committee. ACER met for the first time just ahead of Public Health England (PHE) confirming the first case of COVID-19 in Kent on the 2 March. On the 12 March COVID-19 was declared a worldwide pandemic.
6. ACER, which consists elected members and senior officers, ensures that our response to emergencies is coordinated and that we are in the strongest position to protect our residents, businesses and staff. ACER has regularly met throughout the outbreak and has been instrumental in guiding and supporting the council's response.
7. Three further groups were formed to provide support in delivering ACER's strategic objectives, namely the Emergency Support Group (ESG), Business Support Group (BSG) and Communications & Intelligence Group (CIG). The work of these groups is addressed later in this report.

The Business Continuity Management Team

8. Day to day operational control has been provided by the council's Business Continuity Incident Management Team (BCIMT) which, in the case of this emergency, involved the whole Management Team. The BCIMT met on a daily basis throughout the early stages of the outbreak, reducing recently to three days a week.
9. Key activities undertaken by the BCIMT include:
 - Receiving and evaluating information from the Kent Local Resilience Form (LRF) and other external groups relevant to the local response.
 - Providing information to central government via the LRF on the situation within the council and borough in order to form the county Common Operating Picture (COP) and contribute to wider national assessments. Not only has this process ensure that decisions are made on the basis of commonly shared information, it also enables the council to determine necessary actions that require local delivery.
 - Reviewing the progress of, and issues for consideration, in the council's internal groups such as the ESG, BSG and CIG to guide future activity.
 - Identifying issues facing the borough and undertaking risk assessments setting tasks/objectives to be achieved and identifying hazards. Risk assessment was conducted throughout the incident and remains ongoing.
 - Maintaining a daily review of the council's business continuity position for each of the major service areas. Key to this has been the monitoring of staff sickness and self-isolation in order to organise cover where necessary. Any concerns for services were flagged immediately so that support could be provided to keep essential services operational. This daily communication

and review also ensured that we could update our community on changes to critical services.

- Reviewing and maintaining an action log and providing a record of the decisions being taken.
- Coordinating the flow of information to ACER.

The Kent Local Resilience Forum

10. At a county level, the borough council is worked closely with the Kent Local Resilience Forum (KRF) attending all Kent Strategic Coordinating Group (SCG) meetings. On the 19 March the KRF classified COVID-19 as an Emergency under the Civic Contingencies Act 2004 and as a Major Incident. The status of the incident is regularly reviewed by the SCG.
11. In the early stages of the outbreak the group met on a daily basis (including weekends). This group brings together all key public sector players including Kent Public Health, NHS, KCC, Ambulance Service, Police and the district councils. The SCG are in contact with a wider network of resilience forums which link into central government.
12. The SCG is supported by the Kent LRF Tactical Coordinating Group (TCG) on which the borough council is represented. As the name implies, their responsibility has been to implement the strategic decisions of the SCG. In daily meetings, the SCG and TCG have addressed, and continue to address, a huge array of issues in this dynamic and changing situation. Members of both groups are in regular contact with each other in order to implement agreed actions. As of the 15 June, the SCG and TCG now meet twice a week.
13. Heads of service are also supporting a number of focused response groups established by the LFR. These include a community cell, supply chain/PPE cell, and communication cell.
14. The Chief Executive has been in regular contact with her counterparts across Kent throughout the emergency in order to share information and undertake dynamic risk assessments. Needless to say, the Chief Executive and Leader of the Council have been in daily contact and have worked closely to address the challenges in a measured and effective way.
15. Further information on the Kent LRF is provided at <https://www.kentprepared.org.uk/about-us>. On this website it is possible to read more about the LRF activity relevant to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Business Continuity

16. In order to maintain our statutory and essential services throughout the pandemic, the council has drawn on its well-established and tested business continuity and emergency planning arrangements. All services have business continuity plans which have been supplemented by additional arrangements specific to COVID-19. This has necessitated services working in very different ways, including greater remote working, use of enhanced personal protective equipment, and rapid deployment of digital services.

17. What has been particularly impressive is the level of cross service working which has enabled the council to continue providing near-normal services and support recovery challenges. Staff have worked above and beyond to continue providing vital services as well undertaking some very unusual tasks. Staff have used their skills, and the positive working relationships they have built over many years, to support each other and achieve the near impossible.

Protecting the community – our residents

Emergency Support Group (ESG)

18. To ensure support to people in the community, the council's ESG continue to work with its various partners, in particular the Ashford Volunteer Centre (AVC), to bring our range of voluntary and community groups together, co-ordinating the assistance they can give to those who are most in need of help.
19. Under the direction of the ESG three sub cells have focused on:
 - contact and support for those shielding and those who requested help,
 - setting up and running the Ashford Response Depot (ARD), and
 - liaison and support for the voluntary sector including grant aid.

Supporting those who are shielded and others requiring help

20. In the first weeks of the emergency, local authorities were asked by the Government to provide a 'stopgap' for food deliveries and essential provisions (including specific dietary requirements) for those in need of immediate support (i.e. the shielded). This was required whilst the Government's delivery service was being mobilised. District Councils set up their own local hubs in varying ways, some in partnership with the voluntary sector, others completely on their own, and some, like Ashford, using a mix of voluntary both the shielded and those requesting help.
21. Ashford used its normal customer contact telephone number for residents and community groups to request help. Our customer contact staff called those on the Government/NHS shielded list and, as the lists received from the Government increased, additional capacity was secured by drawing on staff from across all services (totalling 70 trained callers).
22. In total 4,733 residents were contacted between 27 March and 22 May. During this period officers gathered relevant information and strengthened guidance on our website in order to offer the following:
 - Links to local voluntary and community groups (local shopping, foodbanks, prescription collections) <https://www.ashford.gov.uk/your-community/emergency-planning/health-and-pandemics/coronavirus-covid-19/coronavirus-help-for-community-groups/list-of-voluntary-and-community-groups/>.

- Assistance with the shield.gov.uk process and government food parcel registration.
 - Assistance from Welfare Intervention Officers for universal credit applications or other financial assistance.
 - Referral to relevant team/authority/specialist provider for welfare or medical needs.
 - Allocation to GOODSAM (Government NHS volunteers) or KCC wardens for prescription collection and delivery.
 - Advice on local food banks services.
 - Information on food supply options such as supermarket delivery slots for priority customers and details of local food suppliers and local takeaway business'.
 - Emergency food parcels and essential supplies from the Ashford Response Depot.
23. The 'one number' approach has allowed us to provide a simple system for those seeking assistance. Recently notifications from the Government of those who are shielded has stabilised at around 4,750 people. We are expecting this to continue to ease meaning existing customer contact staff are managing to call residents and refer as required without the need for additional call handlers. The more complex cases being referred to our welfare intervention officers. Support is now classified as:
- Tier 1: Those 'shielded' (identified as medically vulnerable)
 - Tier 2: Those who are self-isolating due to age or other reasons
 - Tier 3: Those who are vulnerable in other ways e.g. having financial or welfare concerns.
24. Support provided by volunteers has been critical for all tiers. Capturing details of local community groups and public sector services at an early stage of the pandemic has allowed ESG to refer those in need to local or Kent voluntary support. A partnership approach with Ashford Volunteer Centre provided advice and guidance for volunteers and voluntary organisations including funding sources, operational guidance and signposting for those wishing to volunteer. This has enabled a robust network of community groups to operate across the borough.
25. In addition, a council grant support scheme has helped community groups across the borough to pay for supplies and helped them to continue operating despite a fall in income as a result of reduced fund-raising opportunities.

Ashford Response Depot

26. The depot holds a range of essential food, cleaning items, toiletries, and dietary specific items that has been donated by local supermarkets and purchased with funds donated to the response appeal and the council directly.

27. The depot is operated by council staff who have been redeployed from their normal duties, working to form boxes of household essentials which are delivered to those in the community who urgently require them.
28. As of 2 June, over 470 deliveries have been made. The actual number of boxes is much higher as larger family households may receive several boxes of food and other essential supplies. Our data collection has highlighted that the majority of referrals to the Ashford Response Depot were initially 'shielded' residents awaiting parcels or those who did not know how to get a government parcel. Referral requests are now reducing as the gov.uk shield parcel system and online priority shopping slots become more effective.
29. Additionally, through targeted advice we help residents secure food supplies. For example, through using online shopping, utilising local volunteer shopping assistance, and through referral to the GOODSAM (NHS volunteer service). Furthermore, the council has volunteered to support a pilot scheme run by our customer contact centre allowing the council to refer customers in need for priority supermarket delivery slots. This went live on 26 May.
30. Updates to the website have included signposting to targeted support and self-help.
31. All information collected, including call data, vulnerability levels, and types of need, has been mapped. This allows the council to understand what type of need is required and where. A live database, developed by the Policy team, supports gap analysis and remains a vital tool to the project as recovery continues.
32. The range of support to various residents and community groups has been well received and the council has received very positive feedback on how it has responded to the pandemic.

Voluntary Emergency Response Appeal (VERA)

33. The Voluntary Emergency Response Appeal was launched at the beginning of April, supported by a multi-media marketing campaign to encourage donations from individuals and business.
34. Donations as of 16 June to VERA stood at £8,645 from 67 generous sponsors, which is 85% of our target of £10,000.

Community Funding

35. On the 3 April, the council introduce a funding scheme for voluntary groups in need of financial assistance. Within two weeks, the council had awarded £17,300 worth of emergency grants to 13 not-for-profit groups across the borough.
36. A support fund of up to £3,000 was established to bolster the resilience of local organisations following closure/loss of income and other COVID-19 impacts. The grants awarded could be spent on any of the organisation's costs including core costs and overheads.

37. Recipients included the Ashford Volunteer Centre who received a £3,000 support grant towards funding core activities; Tenterden Social Hub received £2,500 to help fund their overheads so they could continue to provide key services such as meals on wheels and community transport; and Pilgrims Hospices received £3,000 which enabled them to provide extra beds in the Ashford hospice, as well as cover some of the losses from their planned fundraising activities in the borough.
38. A separate project fund was made available for projects and services. Up to £200 was made available to organisations and individuals providing direct support to Ashford residents. These grants covered the purchase of goods or equipment or volunteer expenses.
39. As of 12 May, the total amount of funding agreed for the grants is £60,000 for the Support Fund and £5,000 for the Project Fund. The following table shows what has been approved up to 7 May.

Fund category	Number of approved applications	Total approved funding	Remaining Fund Available (£)
Support Fund	26	£51,950	£8,050
Project Fund	13	£2,587	£2,413

Help and community emails

40. Several new email accounts were created in early April to help manage our communications with partners and the public. This included community@ashford.gov.uk which helps individuals and groups wanting to support their community and help@ashford.gov.uk for residents who need the council's help in some way.

Signposting to Voluntary Groups

41. As indicated above the council has been signposting people to relevant groups where they can get help. We have collated information from various sources to understand who may be in need of assistance due to non-medical reasons such as financial hardship or digital exclusion. The data has included the elderly, isolated, those with children, the financially vulnerable, and those with poor internet connection. People have also been directed to us via Kent County Council.

Communication

42. From the start of the outbreak, information regarding the council's COVID-19 response has been provided on the council's website, through daily social media messages, regular press releases, and public responses to press enquires.
43. At the beginning of June, a special edition of the *Ashford For You* magazine was delivered to homes across the borough. This eight-page special edition included messages from the Mayor, Leader of the Council and Chief Executive. The publication focused on the enormous efforts by the council to support our

community in a time of crisis. A spotlight was shone on our voluntary and community champions who have gone the extra mile in the crisis, and residents were signposted to further information, support and advice.

Recognising our community champions

44. In late May, the council launched the Ashford Applause initiative. This recognises people who have done amazing things to help their communities during this challenging time. Many nominations are being received for Ashford Applause, which is being organised in partnership with Loveashford. It is our way of honouring local community champions.
45. Ashford Applause was featured on BBC Radio Kent during a segment of the programme called 'Making a Difference' which highlights ways in which individuals and groups are making a wonderful contribution to the community during the COVID-19 crisis.
46. Nominations are open to all, whether a dedicated key worker on the frontline, a selfless volunteer delivering food parcels, or a neighbour collecting shopping, prescriptions or cooking meals for others. Each week over the next 10 weeks, a community champion will be selected at random from entries received and their story showcased on Loveashford, our websites, and our social media channels, in recognition of their hard work. We currently have two community champions who have received an Ashford Applause and given a personalised hand drawn digital portrait by a local artist.

Support for testing and track and trace

47. From early May the council's Stour Centre car park has been used as a mobile testing centre. The centre has been managed by the army, with assistance being provide by council staff. The mobile facility has allowed for hundreds of people who were showing symptoms to be tested. Each visit has been for two to three days and has enabled our residents to access tests without needing to travel further afield.
48. As of the 15 June a drive-through Regional Testing Centre is operating from our new car park at Victoria Road, Ashford. This is part of the Government's programme to increase testing across the UK. The council is pleased to play its part by making the Victoria Road site available for this new regional testing centre.
49. The council is also hoping to support Public Health England to manage local outbreaks and assist with the track and trace programme. The exact nature of this work has yet to be determined, however, the council is providing feedback on the draft Local Outbreak Control Plan which is helping finalise local arrangements.

Protecting the community – our businesses

50. Supporting business has been, and remains, a strategic priority for the council. During early April, letters were sent to nearly 3,000 local businesses inviting them to apply for rate relief and business grants announced by the government.

51. All eligible businesses who have applied for the government's COVID-19 support grants have now been paid. In a short timeframe, necessary systems were designed, implemented and administered by the council's Revenues and Benefits team with support from colleagues across the council.
52. As of 28 May, the council has paid out almost £26m to over 2,169 businesses, which is over 90% of known eligible businesses, providing support at a time when they need our help the most. We are proud to have been able to make these payments so quickly and are grateful to the officers whose hard work has made this possible. Further details of both the business grants and rates relief is provided below.
53. With the number of applications reducing, and payments up-to-date, the business support team are now contacting any business who applied but were either ineligible for the grant or who did not provide all the information required for us to pay them in order to understand if support can be provided.
54. The council have paid out grants to 88% of the public houses in the borough who are eligible for the grants and have encouraged the remaining ones to apply as soon as possible.

Grants and rates relief

Total to date since 23 March (up to 28 May)

Companies who have received grants	2,169
Value of Grants provided	£26 million
No of businesses receiving additional business rates relief	880
Business support Coronavirus webpage hits	7,015
Business Rates Grant webpage hits	7,439
ABC COVID-19 business social media impressions	29,759
AshfordFor COVID-19 social media posts	34
AshfordFor COVID-19 impressions for posts	21,844

Small business grants

55. As of 28 May, businesses ineligible for previous grant schemes or other reliefs are being invited to apply for the Ashford discretionary grants scheme. The scheme is for businesses within the borough that have experienced loss during the current emergency. The council has around £1.4m available for distribution.
56. The council had received 120 applications as of 5 June. Awards of between £1,000 and £10,000 will be provided to qualifying businesses who have been adversely affected by the COVID-19 outbreak but were ineligible for the government's other business grant scheme or rate relief. The scheme is initially prioritising charities, bed and breakfasts, businesses in shared spaces, and market traders. Additional sectors will be considered if funds remain after this initial phase is complete.
57. Currently 2,132 grants have been paid to a value of £25,445,000. More than 90% of eligible businesses have been paid.

58. Alongside providing financial support, contact has been made with around 2,000 local businesses to provide guidance on COVID-19 recovery including helping them to prepare for reopening.

Reopening our High Streets in Ashford and Tenterden

59. As of 15 June, additional support has been provided to assist the reopening our high streets in both Ashford and Tenterden. Utilising the Reopening High Streets Safely Fund, the council has access to an allocated fund of £116,814 to establish a safe trading environment for businesses and customers, particularly in our high streets.

60. Our action plan, which is now in operation, includes:

- A comprehensive communications plan to support the message that Ashford and Tenterden High Streets are open for business, and to raise confidence in the safety measures being introduced.
- Provision of information and materials to support the safe opening of businesses such as posters, vinyl floor markers, and risk assessment templates.
- Daily Environmental Health presence in the High Street the week following re-opening non-essential retail and the week following the reopening of food & drink and other business venues.
- Provision of advice and resources to businesses on reopening safely, managing queuing, reduce risks, prevent incident reports etc.
- Additional High Street and public toilet cleansing and the reopening of the public toilet at New Street in Ashford.
- Establishment of public-use hand sanitiser stations at Park Mall (High Street entrance) and at Tenterden Town Council (High Street).
- Parking bay suspensions in Tenterden High Street in order to increase space for social distancing where particular pinch-points have been identified.
- Addressing pavement obstructions caused by A-Boards where necessary.
- Installation of additional general social distancing signage in High Streets.

61. Funding is available for 12 months with claims and evidence of expenditure being submitted on a quarterly basis to the Government. The effectiveness of measures being applied will be locally reviewed and modified as necessary over the course of the year. We will take into account feedback from residents, visitors and businesses particularly on additional steps that could be taken. The action plan was developed in conjunction with Tenterden Town Council and we thank them for their support helping to reopen our high streets.

Maintenance of council services

62. A strategic goal for the council has been to maintain its essential services and, wherever possible, operate services as normal.

63. Since the start of the outbreak, the council has adapted the way in which it operates. This has been necessary to protect both the public and employees from COVID-19 infection. At the start of the outbreak, steps were immediately taken to reduce the risk of transmission between staff, members, and the public. Visible change was seen in the closure of the civic centre at the end of March and halting face-to-face meetings and site visits. For staff, this meant working remotely and, for some, taking new roles in support of the COVID-19 response.
64. Visits requiring face-to-face contact were temporarily paused and officers of the council conducted detailed risk assessments for all activities to identify ways to reduce the risk of infection for the public and employees. Remarkably, the majority of services have continued and staff have risen to the challenge of COVID-19 and the emergency response.
65. Another significant challenge for the council was the move to virtual meetings to which the public have remove access. On the 22 April, the council held its first public virtual meeting (a planning committee meeting) which was followed on the 28 May by the first virtual cabinet meeting including full debates on a number of reports. Ashford was one of the very first in the country to have a full virtual planning meeting and this proactive approach has enabled the council to meet government advice to use new powers to ensure we continue to make decisions, important to our community and economy.
66. A list of service changes and updates have been maintained throughout the outbreak on the council's website at <https://www.ashford.gov.uk/your-community/emergency-planning/health-and-pandemics/coronavirus-covid-19/coronavirus-service-disruption/>.
67. A service delivery update was provided to ACER on 11 May in order to provide a picture of how services are being maintained, or delivered in a slightly different way, to our residents. This is reproduced at Appendix A with suitable updates where necessary.

Supporting our staff

Remote working

68. Our primary goal to support staff working from home was to ensure everyone was working safely and had the necessary equipment available to do their job. All staff were asked to carry out a Display Screen Equipment assessment which informed the council of any additional equipment or measures that were necessary to keep staff safe. A follow up assessment a few weeks later was conducted to check understanding and identify emerging issues.

From a management perspective, our approach started with an 'assumption of positive intent' i.e. that staff wanted homeworking arrangements to work and were keen to ensure this was the case. Key to maintaining motivation was ensuring daily contact between managers and their team member in order to understand staff's personal experience of the lockdown, to identify any practical issues such as IT equipment, set-up etc and provide general support to their work.

69. Managers provide a daily report to HR of those unwell or with COVID-19 symptoms and those with a household member with symptoms. This made sure we were able to support the staff member with advice, guidance, and information regarding testing. The daily COVID-19 absence report enabled the identification and resolution of any resilience and resource allocation in an effective way.
70. Staff capacity was recorded by managers to ensure staff could be redeployed where required to support the COVID-19 response. Roles included those supporting the depot, assisting with calls to vulnerable residents or analysing and cleansing support line data.
71. As the crisis unfolded, we became increasingly aware of the potential welfare impact on staff working at home during the lockdown. We quickly introduced a programme covering physical, mental, and financial wellbeing. Staff were provided with support and encouragement regarding multiple elements of their home-working experience, including home-schooling of children, home office set up, mental-health in isolation, and coping with financial pressures. This was delivered remotely using existing online systems.
72. The council introduced some additional flexibility for all staff in response to the exceptional circumstances created by COVID-19. This included removing flexitime bandwidth so that staff can work their hours around childcare and other practical issues (e.g. access to suitable desk space at home or broadband, for example) and permitting reduced hours on a temporary basis for staff who have exceptional childcare pressures.
73. Additionally, the Chief Executive and other Senior Officers provided staff with regular updates on our response and business as usual issues. This ensured staff understood how important their role was, whether it be as part of the response or in keeping crucial services operating.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

74. The health and safety of our staff during the COVID-19 outbreak has been of paramount importance. From the outset, a PPE logistics process cell was established to support the identification of the PPE needs, procurement and stock distribution. This used a risk-based approach and following relevant government guidance. The cell involves three key council teams working closely to meet the considerable PPE challenges.
75. The council's internal health & safety team have been at the forefront of identifying PPE needs and continue working with services to establish ongoing requirements. The team are advising on service risk assessments which ensure employees are protected from accidents and injury which could happen especially when working in very different roles and different ways. The risk assessment includes taking all reasonable steps to protect our employees and others from COVID-19 and ensuring we have followed relevant guidance from Government. Working with the health and safety team, services are reviewing their risk assessments as lockdown starts to lift.
76. The newly formed stock and distribution team have been key in ensuring stock levels of PPE are recorded and maintained. As part of their efforts, a stock and

distribution centre has been established from which the collection, delivery and disposal of PPE for services are managed. The team have received around £25,000 in PPE stocks.

77. During the height of the COVID-19 crisis, the procurement team met daily. More recently, they have met twice a week to source PPE through recognised procurement routes. In addition, our own officers have used their own supply chain intelligence to source supplementary PPE. We have received large and valuable donations from local business who at that time were unable to use the PPE that they had.
78. As we move further through the COVID-19 pandemic, our position, management and allocation of PPE will continuously be assessed.

Expenditure Implications

79. The full financial implications of the COVID-19 outbreak on the council's budget were reported to Cabinet on the 28 May. Full monitoring of the first two months of the current budget has been completed.
80. The following table show current expenditure as directly related to COVID-19 expenditure:

Housing - homelessness services	£100,000
COVID-19 Response Expenditure (Shielding, PPE etc.)	£139,232*
Grants to Community Groups	£65,000
Cultural & related - Sports, leisure and community facilities	£200,000
Finance & corporate - ICT & remote working	£85,000
Total emergency response expenditure	£589,232

* The total PPE spend as of 2 June stood at £25,119. Additional PPE was kindly donated to the council.

Community Impact Assessment

81. It is recognised that COVID-19 has impacted every individual and family across the borough. New evidence is emerging about the nature and extent of this impact and this is being used to inform current decision making as well as being reflected in the council's developing recovery plan. Supporting those who are particularly vulnerable, taking into account equality issues, has been at the centre of the council's response.
82. During the response, the council has been conscious that existing inequalities may deepen and that those with multiple impairments may face disproportionate challenges. The collaborative work with the voluntary and

community sector has helped to ensure communication of support to as many people as possible including those who already experience barriers to accessing information. More than ever, it has been necessary to support those who are particularly vulnerable such as those at increased risk of domestic abuse, rough sleepers, and the homeless. Support groups for people with protected characteristics have had to be suspended but where possible alternative contact methods have been used in order to continue providing support. Respecting people's independence and dignity has been a key consideration throughout our response and services have been careful to find solutions with people rather than doing things for them. These aspects will continue to be addressed via the council's recovery plan and accompanying equality impact assessment.

Consultation Planned or Undertaken

83. Given the nature of an emergency there is little time for consultation. Rather, it is the time to act immediately and to put into operation well established emergency planning and business continuity arrangements. What has been a feature of the response is the collaboration that has taken place with different groups and agencies across the community seeking to achieve shared goals.
84. By working together and listening to each other's views we have been able to provide the right support, at the right time, and in the right way. This is evidenced by the tremendous feedback the council has received. This includes feedback from those who have received food parcels, those awarded grants to carry out invaluable community work, businesses who have been so thankful to receive financial support, and from those who simply needed a friendly voice at the end of a phone. This feedback has moved our staff and bolstered spirits throughout this difficult period. Some examples of the lovely feedback received was featured in the *Ashford For You* publication. Most recently, the Leader has received thanks from the Ashford Branch of the Kent Association of Local Councils to congratulate and appreciate the council's excellent response in the face of a crisis unprecedented in recent times.

Other Options Considered

85. It is not possible within this report to document the many alternative course of action ACER and the BCIMT has considered throughout the COVID-19 response. Decisions have been made collaboratively, with constant reference to our COVID-19 risk assessment. This has enabled ACER and the BCIMT to address the various risks faced, discuss mitigation, and assign tasks to officers to implement control measures. The risk assessment has focused on the key strategic objectives of protecting the public, our staff, and businesses and preparing for longer-term recovery.

Next Steps in Process

86. This report has focused on the response to the outbreak and identified the transitional arrangements which will operate while we move to a 'new normal'. There is no doubt that the expanded use of digital solutions will enable us to

provide services more efficiently and effectively to our residents, businesses, and communities. We can become more responsive to community needs and involve them even more in shaping services and guiding how our borough develops. The outbreak has brought us closer to our local charities, the voluntary sector and an army of people who want to support each other. The positive relationships and connections that have been formed between the council and the community will be nurtured moving forward.

87. We must be mindful of the possibility of further surges in infection rates. Therefore, many of the safeguards we have introduced, and the transitional arrangements, will need to continue. Some transitional services are already being successfully integrated into the council's normal services where the appropriate expertise lies.
88. Beyond the COVID-19 response phase, we look towards our long-term recovery. A recovery plan is being prepared and will be presented to Cabinet in July 2020. This will set out the actions to be taken over the next 18 months addressing the many challenges we face and capturing opportunities for our borough and the council as an organisation.

Conclusion

89. It is difficult to capture the enormity of what has happened following the COVID-19 outbreak, but hopefully, this report demonstrates the strong leadership and engagement the council (both member and officers) are providing. An innovative response was needed to an what is an exceptional situation. Such a response was made possible due to the strong connections between the council, our community, and other public services alongside the voluntary and community sectors. It is these relationships that will support us to move forward and help us to thrive in our new world.

Portfolio Holder's Views

90. The borough council has always had a close relationship with the voluntarily and charity sector. This partnership I believe has played a crucial role in our ability to react to this crisis. Throughout this pandemic I have been impressed and surprised at the capability of council officers and members to adapt to the ever-changing landscape and the challenges that the virus has raised. We have taken a dynamic approach to the way we normally operate to ensure we are looking after the most vulnerable in our society. The residents of the borough have also stepped up to help in a variety of ways which has been truly phenomenal and has help show a different side to our communities. Caring Ashford has always been at the forefront of how we operate as a council and this crisis has just reinforced those values.

Cllr Peter Feacey, Portfolio Holder Community Safety and Wellbeing

Contact and Email

91. Sheila Davison – sheila.davison@ashford.gov.uk

Appendix A - Service Update

Finance and IT Team

The IT department are returning to more of a business as usual focus following a period where they had to rapidly support the move to remote working. This included completing the migration to Office 365 to allow staff to access Teams, building capacity by increasing the number of external servers from two to six, and supporting the virtual committees. The emphasis has returned to a business as usual and delivering projects to increase our IT resilience and ability to continue remote working.

Revenues and Benefits are slowly returning to business as usual, after administering and distributing almost £26m in Business Grants and Council Tax allocations. There is an increase in Council Tax Reduction claims, however, this is currently being managed with the staff being redeployed where necessary.

While the accounts team would usually be closing the accounts at this time of year, they have instead been working on reviewing the current budget for the emerging pressures and are focused on the two-month budget monitoring position which will lead to the Medium-Term Financial Plan being prepared. The deadline for closing accounts has been extended to the end of August 2020 and work is now stepping up to complete this.

Legal Services

Legal services has maintained its legal advice and support role across services and, despite the closure of physical courts and the need for social distancing in evidence gathering, has continued with high profile litigation especially around closure orders in collaboration with housing colleagues and the police.

The introduction and subsequent management of virtual meetings to which the public have remote access has been a significant project for both legal and member services. Virtual Planning Committee meetings have been a particular focus and challenge and the council was one of the very first in the country to have a full virtual planning meeting. The run of 2 weekly Planning Committee meetings since has required an increased focus on 106 agreements by legal services particularly to support the timely issue of planning permissions for major developments of importance to the economic recovery and prosperity of the borough. This has all been achieved with full time home working by most of the staff.

Electoral services continue to meet all statutory obligations and functions. The annual canvass beginning in late summer will present a particular challenge but new canvass procedures and extended timescales for completion of registers will assist efficiency and enable most processes to be done or managed remotely at the present time. Whether door-knocking remains a statutory requirement is still to be decided but in the unlikely event it is still required and it is undertaken, all proper safety precautions will be followed. Elections are currently suspended until May 2021 when fresh challenges around combined elections will arise with KCC, Police & Crime Commissioner and many parish by-elections potentially outstanding.

Environment and Land Management

Waste collections have continued for all types of waste but we have reduced our bulk collections. Council staff and Biffa have worked hard to guarantee minimum disruption

to services and residents' support has been overwhelming positive. Recycling rates will be released soon. Cemetery provision has coped well and bookings for service have moved online, with unrestricted access to cemeteries. Dog warden and allotment services are operating normally with the exception that we are not allowing plots to change hands.

Aspire has done an incredible job in challenging circumstances. Staff have been flexible to ensure that we can continue to provide grounds maintenance services (albeit in a different delivery model) while redeploying staff to run the Ashford Response Depot. We have ensured parks and open spaces have remained open and well maintained.

HR and Customer Services

Customer service calls are being answered more quickly. This is due to lower customer demand because as a consequence of the council temporarily suspending some services that drive calls through the contact centre. There has been no face-to-face service delivery due to the building closure so staff are dealing service request by phone and email. The HR team has worked remotely on business as usual issues as well as providing support to managers overseeing teams who are remote working.

Housing: day to day responsive repairs

Focus has concentrated on essential repairs, safety, security and hygiene-related issues, being completed on an emergency basis. Other repairs have been undertaken on an ad-hoc demand basis for vulnerable or elderly tenants.

Housing: planned maintenance (PM) contract

The PM programme has been largely suspended and is not expected to restart until August. The exception to the suspension of works has been service contracts that must be continued either for health and safety compliancy obligations, to avoid serious risk or to maintain essential services. These works include gas servicing, lifts, sewerage treatment, water hygiene, door entry systems and communal TV systems and essential works such as adaptations identified by occupational therapists as urgent.

We have suspended the electrical testing programme as these are five yearly tests and we will focus to get back on track as soon as restrictions are lifted. We will prioritise properties where this is an annual obligation to test and inspect electrical installations. Access into properties is the biggest issue and has been addressed by our contractors in accordance with best practice.

Housing: heating and maintenance emergency services

Heating installations and boiler replacements have been suspended until August. Emergency boiler replacements can be actioned if necessary. Our new heating contractor, Swale Heating, has a comprehensive set of risk assessment & method statements (RAMS) for attending all calls and they have specially trained engineers with full PPE so they can attend an infected household if need be.

Housing: homelessness & rough sleeping

Numbers in temporary accommodation have risen following the government's instruction to secure indoor shelter for all rough sleepers. The number of households in temporary accommodation has ranged from 147-151, and the number of applications has fallen to 126 monthly. Move-on accommodation is a concern but

efforts are being made to identify private sector, housing association and social housing stock.

Housing: choice-based lettings/social housing allocations

The scheme has not been operational during the pandemic but there is a steady flow of new applications. There are opportunities for using some void properties to reduce the pressure on the numbers of homeless households in temporary accommodation but there have been practical difficulties in doing so. Despite this, efforts are being made to safely work around this and enable some “move on” for households.

Housing: Social Lettings Agency

There are no new properties being procured but there is still remote working taking place to maintain tenancies, cover mid-year reviews and inspections and deal with essential works when the need might arise. It is expected that activity will rise as we emerge into the recovery phase and the team are well positioned to meet this need.

Environmental Health

While programmed food safety inspections are not being undertaken, advice is being given to businesses that remain open. The food safety EHOs are focused on supporting the new community/voluntary sector food services including our own Ashford Response Depot. Licence applications continue to be processed, planning applications reviewed for environmental impact and complaints investigated. Visits are undertaken in response to complaints that premises which should be closed are trading. This is being done with the police and trading standards. Extensions to licence renewal payments have been organised.

Community Safety

Service provision is near normal. The Ashford Monitoring Centre has continued to function as normal with additional calls made to our Lifeline customers to give them reassurance. Some AMC staffing gaps have been filled by Civil Enforcement Officers who are Lifeline-trained. The CCTV monitoring service is also operating as normal. Our Resilience Team’s work continues, and they have been focused on supporting our COVID-19 response. The strategic and operational rotas have been in operation ensuring 24/7 cover is maintained for all the ‘normal’ council activity. Although the domestic abuse (DA) one stop shop has been closed, our DA co-ordinators have been referring people to relevant advice services and when necessary refuges. Regular work with community safety partners has taken place. The Community Safety Unit is operating virtually and there is daily contact with the police.

Parking

Parking enforcement was temporarily halted. However, a staged return has been implemented in line with relaxing of lockdown. Civil Enforcement Officer, after a period of issuing warnings for parking contraventions are now back to full enforcement as of mid-June. Charges have continued to operate in our car parks but usage has been significantly hit. Work are almost complete to install ANPR at Elwick Place and the switch to the RingGo parking app has now taken place.

Planning

Four successful virtual Planning Committee meetings have been held, with Ashford being one of the first councils in the UK to trial them. Newtown Works and Conningbrook were both approved. Currently undertaking a review of planning

performance in terms of numbers of applications, fee income and other key measures. Site visits were suspended but some externally socially distanced site visits are now commencing for Building Control and Planning, when it is necessary to assess the proposal, but the service can also progress planning applications by focusing on background work and use of other means where appropriate such as Google Earth. Land searches have remained high possibly because solicitors continue to progress paperwork relating to house sales.

Culture

The team is working on project assessments and supporting the COVID-19 response. For the parks and greenspaces service areas there has been conflicting demands of making sure urban parks are open, providing opportunities for people to exercise, while supporting advice regarding social distancing. Play areas, MUGA's, cafes, toilets, sports pitches and skate parks remain closed. Car parks at country parks are currently closed which will be reviewed now that travel by car to open spaces has just been lifted. Parking to urban parks has remained open to support those less able, to access their local spaces.

The routes to parks and open spaces are important. There has been a big growth in pedestrians and cyclists. Improving sites and changing behaviours is contained within existing open space, walking and cycling strategies and the Cabinet will be considering the latter at its next meeting. Action plans will need to be reconsidered in light of finances, given loss of income but parks, open spaces and the paths and cycle ways should be a priority area to maintain the wellbeing of the community.

Corporate Property & Projects

The over-arching asset management strategy has been drafted and there is a slight delay due to current situation. This is expected to go to the June Cabinet meeting and will inform our approach to our corporate property assets.

Property Building Service

We're ensuring that compliance in our properties is being adequately managed for those we are responsible for. Further advice is being drafted to assist our tenants in their obligations where they are duty holder. Emergency reactive repairs are being undertaken on an as needs basis giving consideration to budgets.