

Committee(s): Policy, Resources and Economic Development	Date: 9 September 2020
Subject: The Council's response to COVID-19	Wards Affected: All
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Summary

This report provides Members with an overview and update on the actions that have been delivered to assist with the Covid-19, (C19), pandemic and the boroughs response during this period.

Recommendation(s)

R1. Members are recommended to note the report.

Main Report

Introduction and Background

Members will be fully aware of the impact on Brentwood's residents and businesses of the C19 pandemic. As of the beginning of August 2020 Brentwood had 288 confirmed cases of coronavirus with the rate of confirmed cases per 100,000 residents of 373.

In order to deal with the C19 pandemic Officers implemented an emergency structure to ensure that as an authority we could provide services to residents and businesses. This structure included both a Strategic Co-ordinating Group (SCG), consisting of the Leader and Chief Executive and a Tactical Co-ordinating Group (TCG) consisting of appropriate officers.

At the beginning the TCG met on a daily basis and worked through in detail each of the matters that needed addressing and fed up to the SCG on a weekly basis. After a period of time as matters were stabilising the meetings went from every day to 3 days a week then subsequently to once a week. The Council then moved to a recovery structure with a team of officers commissioned to develop and assist in delivering the Recovery Plan.

As part of the work undertaken by the TCG officers worked very closely with partners to ensure that services were delivered and the vulnerable were taken care of. These partners included other public sector bodies, voluntary groups and businesses.

In addition to the work undertaken since the end of March 2020 the Council are going to undertake an exercise, provided by the Council's Insurers Zurich, for horizon

scanning for future plans to ensure that the authority can be ready for any future emergency and business continuity situations.

Issue, Options and Analysis of Options

Set out below are the main streams of work that was undertaken by Officers in response to the C19 pandemic. A number of these actions and processes are continuing and have impacted on the delivery of the Council's Key objectives 2020/21 as set out in Item 5 on this agenda.

Growing our economy

Economic Development - Financial Support

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Economic Development Team has been actively providing support to local businesses. Over 1,170 businesses in the borough have received a £10,000 or £25,000 cash grant via the Government's Small Business Grant Fund and Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grant Fund. In total, over £16.4m has been pumped into the local economy as a result of the efforts of the Business Rates team and the Economic Development working together to identify businesses who fit the eligibility criteria.

In June and July, £904,000 was distributed to 170 micro and small businesses through the Brentwood Discretionary Business Grant scheme, which was funded through central government. Businesses were awarded grants ranging from £2,000 to £10,000.

The government announced in March that certain businesses would receive a rates holiday for the 2020-21 tax year. In Brentwood, 646 businesses have benefitted from £12.2m in expanded retail business rate relief and 10 nurseries have received £135k in nursery rate relief.

The government has collated additional statistics, which are only available at the constituency level. Across Brentwood and Ongar, 12,800 people have had their job protected through the Job Retention Scheme, which has allowed employers to furlough workers while the government has provided up to 80% of their wages. Self-employed people in Brentwood and Ongar have accessed £15,100,00 worth of self-employment income support scheme grants, which do not need to be paid back, to cover lost earnings. £77.9m has been paid out to Brentwood & Ongar businesses in the form of Bounce Back Loans, which provides loans of up to £50,000 within days of an application. The constituency was in the top five in the region for volume and value of Bounce Back Loans take up.

Business Engagement

Since 11 March, the Economic Development Team has engaged with over 600 businesses, either through answering inbound enquiries, signposting to further financial support or networking virtually.

Business Webinars

To provide local companies with direct access to expert advice, the Council worked with the Brentwood Chamber of Commerce and Brentwood Business Partnership to host a series of 'Backing Brentwood Business' webinars from April to June. Some of the topics included dealing with crisis management, understanding business continuity, furloughing staff and reopening premises COVID Secure. The webinars have received over 1,000 views. The webinar library can be viewed here:

<https://brentwoodchamber.co.uk/webinars/>

Brentwood Open

The Brentwood Business Partnership, with support with the Council, launched the 'Brentwood Open' Facebook group to give a platform for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses to promote themselves during lockdown. Many local traders have innovated and adapted to offer home delivery or takeaway services. Brentwood Open gives a space for shops, cafes, pubs and home-based retailers to share their real time updates to a growing audience of over 6,450 members. Within the first six weeks of Facebook group launching, borough businesses self-reported that over £3,000 of orders had been generated as a result of this forward-thinking initiative. To join the group, please visit <https://www.facebook.com/groups/BrentwoodOpen>.

Reopening the High Streets

A consistent brand was developed to support local businesses and encourage confidence in those shopping amongst uncertainty caused by the pandemic. "Brentwood Open", "Shenfield Open", and "Ingatestone Open" brands were created in partnership with businesses and stakeholders. The branding is consistent, with each high street having its own colour scheme. Through various signage and banners we have spread the message that we are "Working together to keep you safe" and encouraging residents to "Eat Local", "Shop Local", and "Support Local". The brand was created by Brentwood-based graphic design company Blue Serif and funded through the Reopening High Streets Safely Fund.

Another Brentwood-based business, Baker Labels, has provided over 500 social distancing floor stickers free of charge to shops in Brentwood, Shenfield and Ingatestone.

The Council's Economic Development team has hand delivered 500 printed information packs to businesses in our local centres to help them reopen COVID-19 Secure, in line with the latest government guidance. The packs also included social distancing and COVID risk assessment posters. A library of print-on-demand posters has been created for traders to download and display in their windows as needed.

The Licensing and Environmental Health teams have been working closely with businesses to help interpret government guidance to ensure they are compliant with COVID-19 Secure procedures.

Over 50 'Retail Heroes' from Marks and Spencer, Boots, Superdrug and Poundland signed up to the Council's initiative to provide free parking at William Hunter Way for essential retail workers during lockdown.

A large amount of work has gone into making our high streets as safe as possible for pedestrians, cyclists and shoppers, with the aim of supporting businesses. Distancing stickers and eye-level signage has been installed by the Depot team in each of the high streets to encourage social distancing.

We have been working with Essex County Council, as local highways authority, on various measures in the Brentwood and Ingatestone High Streets. The County Council has been working with all Essex district authorities to implement on-street measures designed to make city/town centre public spaces safer for people during the pandemic.

Called 'Safer, Greener, Healthier', the schemes aim to provide bigger, safer spaces in key locations for town centre shoppers, residents, workers and visitors to social distance in. These safety improvements have been funded by national government from the Emergency Active Travel Fund as part of the national response to COVID-19, designed to allow people more space to social distance as people move around high streets.

During July, measures were put in place on Brentwood High Street to close the road to all vehicles other than buses between 09:00 and 18:00. This was to prioritise space for pedestrians and cyclists. Exceptions were made for those businesses requiring deliveries via the high street through temporary barriers at each end with highways operatives in place to manage traffic. These measures were originally introduced for an initial three-week period with a further three-week extension if further evaluation was required.

Monitoring of the measures has included regular communication with businesses about the usefulness of the road closure. In late July the Monitoring Board concluded that the core steps taken under the government's temporary measures had served their purpose and should be reduced within the following two weeks. The High Street has since reopened to all vehicles.

In Ingatestone, a 20mph zone has been installed along the high street to create a safer space for pedestrians.

Essex County Council are now working towards future, longer-term measures in the wider area to help accessibility, particularly for cycling and walking to and around Brentwood Town Centre. No decisions have been made, but several options are being discussed with a view to form part of a bid for funding from the Department for Transport for any changes that might be implemented.

Eat Out to Help Out Scheme

In July, the Chancellor announced the roll out of the Eat Out to Help Out scheme designed as a bid to encourage the public to support the hospitality industry by going out to eat at local restaurants on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays during August.

Participating venues offer 50% off their menu (up to £10 per diner not including alcoholic beverages) and are able to claim the discount back from the government. 85 Brentwood restaurants, cafes and pubs have signed up to the scheme, over 60% of which are independents. The Council has been supporting by printing posters for venues to display in their windows, creating a directory listing on the Discover Brentwood website and organising a social media campaign to promote the scheme locally.

Planning Development Management

Applicants and agents were updated in April 2020 on revised processes for validating and determining planning applications as a result of COVID-19 pandemic. The team has worked to deliver business as usual. Services continued during lockdown, albeit with some revised measures mainly caused by the need to work from home, such as:

- **Electronic Submissions:** Worked to limit paper submissions so that staff time in the office was reduced and encouraged electronic submissions, consistent with advice from the Government.
- **Site Notices:** Where a site notice was required, we asked that applicants help display the notice.
- **Site Visits:** Applicants were asked to help provide photos and videos where relevant to help case officers assess applications. Officers carried out site visits where essential and these are pre-arranged with safety measures followed.
- **Pre-Application:** This service was maintained throughout via online methods and/or over the phone.
- **Extensions of Time:** Whilst every effort is made to avoid delays, the turnaround of certain tasks sometimes required more time. Where necessary, applicants were consulted on any formal extension of the statutory timescales to determine their application.

The service continues to be delivered in accordance with legislation, including consultation with residents, stakeholders and statutory consultees as appropriate. Regular reviews of these measures continue to be undertaken to revise arrangements according to the national situation. As lockdown measures have been lifted in recent weeks the team has adapted to ensure more site visits and similar tasks are undertaken. Throughout this time and moving forward, applicants and agents are encouraged to contact us where they have questions.

At Extraordinary Council on 29 April 2020, Members approved the use of virtual means for Planning and Licensing Committee to continue through the COVID-19 pandemic. Committees have been held online in June and July.

The Development Management Team took part in an online public inquiry as part of the appeal process for the former blood transfusion site, Crescent Drive, Shenfield. A public inquiry was held between 7-14 July 2020. Preparation and participation involved significant resource from the Council. This followed the decision of the Planning and Licensing Committee to refuse permission for development of 86 residential units (Item 283, Planning and Licensing Committee, 18 December 2019),

and the subsequent appeal of that decision by the applicant. The decision was issued on 22 July 2020 to allow the appeal and grant planning permission.

The Planning Enforcement Team has been active throughout lockdown, including in response to increased reports of unauthorised activity. The team has been on the front line supporting the process of serving three injunctions on sites in the Green Belt where evidence suggested risk of new or further unauthorised development, among other things. See also updates below from Corporate Enforcement and Law & Governance.

Strategic Planning

The Brentwood Local Development Plan (LDP) was submitted for examination-in-public in February 2020. Planning inspectors were appointed to examine the plan. The COVID-19 pandemic and introduction of lockdown measures began shortly after, which resulted in a delay to the examination programme. The Planning Policy Team continued work to support the examination process. Initial questions were received from the planning inspectors in June. The team has been working to respond to these questions with the publication of several examination notes and topic papers. Examination hearing sessions are expected later this year, likely to involve some online elements either wholly or through a hybrid approach.

Full details and updates on the examination are published on the Council's website at www.brentwood.gov.uk/examination.

A key part of the LDP strategy for growth is to deliver Dunton Hills Garden Village. An update on this project was brought to PRED Committee in March (Item 430, 18 March 2020). This included work underway to prepare a detailed design Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) for the garden village. The pandemic resulted in a delay to the SPD programme in terms of community engagement (co-design and public consultation). However, work has continued and co-design is now underway, albeit in a redesigned way including online events and ways for the public to engage. This has included online workshops, videos and youth activities. A draft version of the detailed design SPD will be brought to PRED Committee before it is published for public consultation.

A website has been launched to promote the project at www.duntonhillsgardenvillage.com.

Protecting our environment

Waste and Recycling

Initially safe working was engaged which included the use of other vehicles to transport staff to support the refuse service. Staff from other areas were re-deployed to assist this service.

Due to Covid – 19 it was agreed to suspend the start of the new recycling scheme at the start of June. However since that time resources and services have got back to as near normal as possible and therefore roll out of the new recycling scheme started on the 3rd August 2020.

The collection of all waste streams are now fully running. Safe distancing and the use of PPE is still in place and will be for the foreseeable future. Support staff still deployed will be reviewed at the end of August 2020 when the new recycling role out would have had time to bed in.

The commercial waste service was hit hard as many of the contracts up for renewal coincided with the lockdown from Covid –19. Many contracts were not initially renewed however the number is again slowly growing as businesses begin to start to get back to their offices and start work again.

Parks and Countryside

The staff working on these areas were redeployed to assist with the delivery of the essential waste services. The refuse service is getting back to some sort of normality however still supported by a few staff from Parks and Countryside however in the majority they are beginning to return to their normal positions. We are however several weeks behind our normal schedule and therefore catching up with the lost time and work.

Worth a special mention is Golf. The course at Hartswood has seen unprecedented levels of use since restrictions were loosened. The ground staff have worked hard to keep the course in good order and it is hoped that this will see many of those using the course to return again and again. We are looking at measures as to how we can retain this upturn in use and income.

Cemeteries

Due to the Covid -19 outbreak we have seen an increase in the number of burials at our cemetery. Although this increase required resources to be redirected to keep up with demand the team have worked hard to ensure that the appropriate safe distancing measures were adhered to and we maintained a good level of service. The area continues to deliver against an increase in demand.

Developing our communities

Booklet

A booklet was produced which was delivered to all residents just before the country went into lockdown. It contained the latest health and government information and local contact information.

Community Support Email address

A new Community Support email address was set up to coordinate the response for residents that wanted additional support during the pandemic. The main support hub at the Council worked with the community help hubs to support residents with emergency food parcels, help with shopping, the collection and delivery of prescriptions and telephone befriending service.

communitysupport@brentwood.gov.uk

Community Help Hubs

Supported by Brentwood CVS a network of 18 Community Help Hubs was established across the Borough to provide more localised support for residents. The hubs varied in the support that they provided with some providing direct support such as Brentwood Foodbank and Daily Bread Café.

Community Support Network

The Community Support Network was established which consists of Voluntary, Community and Statutory organisations that provide a coordinated support across the Borough. It also includes recently established volunteer networks established to deal with the pandemic such as Brentwood Mutual Aid Group and Brentwood Residents Action Group (BRAG). A community handbook was produced to support the network with advice, guidance and best practice. The network as a whole has the support of over 2,500 volunteers across the borough. The frequency of meeting has been reduced as the country moves into the recovery phase and is looking at the long-term sustainable support that needs to be in place to support our residents, but mindful that additional support could be drafted if we encounter a second spike or local lockdown situation. From lockdown to the end of July the community support network has supported X residents with emergency food parcels, providing X residents with assistance

with their food shopping, X residents with assistance in the collection and delivery of prescriptions and x residents with telephone befriending.

Can in the Van initiative

In order to support the local Brentwood Foodbank, Daily Bread Café and Manna Meals, residents were asked to donate extra items as part of their normal shopping at Sainsbury's, Marks and Spencer and Iceland supermarkets. An initial event on the weekend before lockdown was repeated in May and June. Residents were extremely generous providing enough to fill over 100 red boxes of food and toiletries. These items will be distributed to Brentwood Foodbank, Daily Bread Café in Hutton and Manna Meals who are supporting the most vulnerable during the pandemic.

Extremely Clinical Vulnerable Residents

These are known as Category A and have been encouraged to register on the Government's website if they require additional support and the Council is calling or emailing them to ascertain if that support is in place. The information is cross referenced with Housing colleagues who are undertaking their own calls to their tenants, so that we try and avoid any duplication.

Staff wellbeing SWAY site

A staff wellbeing SWAY site has been set up to provide staff with health and wellbeing tips and resources to support them during the pandemic, around home working and support that they need due to home schooling.

Community Safety

The Community Safety & Enforcement team have continued to work collaboratively with partners to keep people safe during this pandemic. While we have had to suspend some of the activity particularly around engagement, the team, alongside the Community Safety Partnership are continually reviewing and looking at new ways in which to work and support the community. Positive things are happening too and some of the new ways of working which have been adopted to adapt our response to the pandemic are set to continue and see operations improve as a result.

Food for the Vulnerable

The Community Safety and Corporate Enforcement Team have provided additional support to the Community HUB and delivered approximately 35 emergency food parcels to vulnerable residents of Brentwood. They have also taken part in the 'Can in the Van' initiative that took place outside Sainsbury's and M&S on the 14th of May. The feedback received as a result of this has been outstandingly positive.

Anti-Social Behaviour

Since lockdown began there has been a 300% increase in Anti-Social Behaviour reports. These have come in a variety of forms from noise nuisance, drugs issue, parties, and breaches of Government guidelines. The team has supported Housing & Essex Police in issuing Community Protection Warnings (CPWs) to tackle COVID 19 breaches in Council housing.

Although the figures may appear low, it is worth noting that anti-social behaviour (ASB) cases are being managed by one member of staff. The team has now reviewed their workload to provide additional support in this area. The following figures show some of the work the team has been doing concerning ASB:

- 36 Open Cases
- 58 Closed Cases (since the beginning of lockdown)
- 22 CPWs Served
- 8 NSPs Served
- 1 Closure Order
- 3 Cases with Legal

Projects & Initiatives

The Community Safety Partnership (CSP) have continued to use their funding on various initiatives, as and when safe to do so. The CSP funded the installation of a door chain and knocker to a vulnerable resident. As well as continuing to use the funding to support the most vulnerable in the community, the CSP has also funded 12 radios for the Volunteer Police Cadets to help them work more efficiently at events and when training.

Domestic Abuse

Figures have shown that Domestic Abuse in the home is beginning to rise and Essex Police will continue to prioritise this. A Domestic Abuse campaign was started with the hashtag #YouAreNotAlone to help those during the lockdown. The following message was sent out:

The Nation Domestic Abuse Helpline is open 24/7 on 0808 2000 247 for anyone who is experiencing or at risk of domestic abuse.

This message will continue to be promoted to ensure the upmost support can be given to Domestic Abuse victims through this already difficult time.

Patrols & Enforcement

Corporate Enforcement has continued to patrol the borough daily including 5 evening patrols since 4th July. This is to provide a visible presence and tackle a wide range of issues. Their priorities are to help tackle fly-tipping, early presentation of waste, and abandoned vehicles, to name a few. They have also assisted other departments such as Planning Enforcement and Environmental Health and Housing. Since the commencement of lockdown, the team has issued the following.

- 24 – Section 46 Notices for household waste.

- 3 – Section 108 Notice (pursuant notice) for environmental crime
- 114 – Warning letters for the early presentation of waste.
- 1 – Warning letter for incorrect disposal of waste.
- 17 – Abandoned Vehicle notices.
- 1 - £80 FPN for dog fouling.
- 7 – FPN's for littering. £150 reduced to £75 for prompt payment.
- 1 – FPN for fly-tipping. £400

The Community Safety and Enforcement team continues to adapt to the changing advice of the Government as well as ensuring optimum service delivery where it is safe to do so. Many of these incentives and initiatives will remain in place with the hope to reintroduce those that we have not been able to undertake during this period. The current circumstances have provided different challenges for the team, nonetheless, operational needs have been consistently maintained.

CCTV

CCTV continued to provide 24-hour coverage despite resource issues and is in the main credit to the dedicated officers who are undertaking longer shifts to support the service. One operator was even thanked by Essex Police for their assistance in tracking and locating an offender who was later arrested and charged for offences in the High Street. In addition to the increased workload during office hours dealing with contractors and building access they have also dealt with 140 out of hours calls since lockdown.

Improving housing

Housing Options

The homeless team continues to implement Government guidance concerning rough sleepers and homelessness, dealing with complex and highly emotional cases daily. Our staff are undergoing continuous training to ensure robust and responsive service provision. The team is working closely on a strategic level with partners to identify a positive post-COVID housing 19 pathways. Since the pandemic hit the team has worked harder than ever dealing with the threat of parental evictions and some challenging cases.

Sheltered Housing

Officers are doing a fantastic job reaching out to and supporting our vulnerable residents and customers through daily welfare calls and emergency visits. The public response has been an overwhelming 'thank you' to the Council and our staff have made new friends and shared the highs and lows of our customers.

Housekeeping staff have also been working hard to ensure the sheltered schemes are cleaned more regularly. They are on site everyday cleaning and supporting staff and residents on some occasions. Their support has been unwavering and without hesitation.

In order to provide additional protection during this time we have also introduced a new misting programme for all sheltered schemes which provides longer protection for residents. The process provides a barrier on surfaces and reduces the lifespan of bacteria.

Recently Ingleton House has benefited from hanging baskets donated and fitted by the Rotary Club. Apparently, they are not finished and have very kindly agreed to help clear out the pond.

Repairs

The repairs service continues to provide a safety-first approach to ensure all residents receive a responsible service. They have now commenced offering appointments ensuring operatives are wearing appropriate PPE. Until recent weeks there has been a focus on undertaking repairs in communal areas including fencing repairs and replacement. These will continue alongside the return to the business as usual approach. It is accepted that there will be a backlog of jobs which were placed on hold during the height of the pandemic and Axis are working to ensure these are booked in, in chronological order to reduce any unnecessary delays.

Items such as Gas Safety checks remained a legal requirement and the team had to adopt new approaches to achieve success in compliance. We have also now implemented an interface with the Axis System, Rocc, and Orchard. This allows the whole Housing team and the contact centre to see repairs that have been raised, appointments and relevant notes. This is a huge move forward and provides housing much more visibility of the contract to maintain a good customer journey.

Behind the scenes, our Officers have also been working hard configuring the 2nd module for Keystone and are in the final stage of testing for the 1st module. This will allow servicing details for our stock to be monitored online rather than spreadsheets and therefore improve service delivery.

Estates Management

At the start of July, the estates team implemented Rent sense. Rent Sense uses predictive analytics to identify problems with rent accounts. It can prompt Officers about priority cases on a weekly basis, displays payment trends, and gives projections on arrears accrual. It also tracks the progression of Universal Credit claims and notifies an Officer when payments should be received. This information is crucial to aid with early intervention of non-payment and hasn't previously been available to Officers with our previous software solutions.

This is a change from the historical two weekly arrears monitoring undertaken in the past due to the levels of accounts which required action. On average, each housing officer is looking at 150 cases per week instead of 450 plus in 2 weeks. In week 3 of the new system officers managed to process 100% of recommendations on the system which is 5 weeks ahead of Rent Sense's other clients. New arrangements are being made with residents and the feedback has been positive from both officers and residents alike at raising arrears issues at the earliest opportunity.

Officers are working tirelessly to support tenants currently, particularly relating to rent arrears and tenancy issues. The team is identifying and mapping the financial effects on the HRA, to ensure business continuity and a responsible reaction in the post-COVID period. Their commitment to providing support to our tenants at this is remarkable and the dedication and passion are shining through despite some real challenges.

There are two dedicated Housing Responders located in the borough daily to deal with emergencies related to Sheltered, Community Alarms, and Estate Management. These officers have been provided with PPE and have undertaken tasks from identifying deceased residents, assisting the elderly with community alarm issues or support needs, and estate inspections. They also undertake all lettings on behalf of the department to ensure our safety-first approach.

Special mention must go to our caretakers, they have diminished in numbers due to COVID 19 and shielding etc, but they have carried on regardless. They are often forgotten as they now attend sites from 5am in order to ensure they can undertake the cleaning of all the touchpoints and prepare the estates for the day ahead making sure residents have as clean an environment as possible. This can be a thankless task with the increase in litter and fly tipping which they do their best to remove and take to the depot. They are now being supported by enforcement who are issuing Fixed Penalty Notices to those residents who dispose of the rubbish inappropriately.

We also undertook misting at all general needs' blocks recently as an additional measure.

Delivering an efficient and effective council

Organisation

From an organisational perspective, the council had to change rapidly as the impact of the virus increased. Improved IT capabilities and platforms that have been introduced in recent years has enabled which has enabled the vast majority of staff to work from home since March.

Since this time the Council has been monitoring the announcements by government and work is being undertaken to how changes can be made to the office environment so where necessary staff are able to return under controlled conditions.

Measures at the Town Hall such as automatic hand sanitisers, door foot opening, signage, one way entrance and exit have been put into place. This has enabled a very small number of staff to return with permission.

Similar arrangements have been made to the Depot office and the other buildings at the site to reduce unnecessary social interaction and maintain social distancing.

Customer Services

The Contact Centre started working remotely on 18th March 2020 with the Reception team redeployed to the Contact Centre as Reception was closed on full lockdown.

April saw low levels of customer contact across the board, but these have slowly risen again.

Call volumes have returned to normal and, in recent weeks, have exceeded the same period last year. This, however, can mainly be attributed to the new recycling scheme. There are now minimal calls in relation to C19.

Reception at the Town Hall remains closed.

Website sessions remain significantly higher than the same period year (35%) and online transactions have now increased back to expected levels.

Law & Governance

Council Meetings

The country went into lock down on the 23 March 2020, the Government passed the Coronavirus Act 2020 introducing Regulations to enable Councils to hold remote meetings. Democratic services with the Director worked alongside the project team and IT to ensure that the Council could hold virtual meetings.

The Council on the 29 April 2020 resolved to create an Emergency Committee to ensure that the Council could make decisions going forward. The Monitoring Officer on one occasion has provided the reasons for convening an Emergency Meeting on the 5 June 2020 for the Council to be able to administer the Discretionary Business Grant Scheme. The Council has also held remote Planning Committees during the current Pandemic.

A Constitution Working Group has been set up and held its' first virtual meeting on the 1 July 2020, where a work plan was agreed. The CWG met again on the 5 August to process the review of the Constitution.

Since some lock down restrictions have been lifted the officers have again worked hard to ensure that meetings can take place both at the Town Hall and remotely. On the 22 July 2020 a hybrid Extraordinary Council meeting was held, with social distancing within the Chamber enabling Officers and Councillors to attend in person whilst all others could attend remotely. A calendar of meetings was also agreed to enable more Council Committees to commence from September.

Member's Training

Virtual training on Civic Life was delivered remotely by the Democratic Services Manager.

Review of decisions

A review of decisions made during the Pandemic will be undertaken to ensure transparency of decision making.

Canvass Reform

Officers are undertaking the Canvass Reform, to ensure that all those that are eligible to engage in the democratic process are registered to do so. Despite the Elections office being badly damaged by a flood at the Town Hall the first phase of matching was completed on time.

Lexcel Assessment

Legal services successfully passed their first annual maintenance visit and have been reaccredited under the LEXCEL scheme which is a voluntary accreditation scheme administered by the Law Society. It shows the Council is compliant to the highest standard on delivering legal services, with auditable measures and customer services at the centre of what they do.

Contract Review

A contract review has been undertaken to ensure that contracts especially build contracts or works contracts are compliant with current legislation regarding COVID, temporary measures introduced to protect the supply chain. The review has protected the Council from entering contracts that would have left the Council vulnerable if a dispute arose.

Injunctions

We have managed to obtain three injunctions to protect the Green Belt either from being developed or from further development. It takes a lot of work and evidence gathering to convince the High Court Judges to grant these orders. It should be recognised that officers have worked hard to obtain these injunctions including out of hours, this has been across the service areas including all enforcement teams, legal and planning.

Legal Service Review

A separate update will be provided to show what progress has been made on the review.

Civic Life

The Deputy Mayor has attending some virtual meetings of outside organisations recently. Engagements are still suspended. An on-going review is taking place on the Civic Dinner and Remembrance Day, we are awaiting guidance from Central Government on these events.

Weddings

As restrictions have been relaxed this has meant that weddings are taking place in the Town Hall. The first ceremony was held on 25th July 2020 with a maximum of 10 people in attendance.

Council Tax

Recovery

The service continues to monitor accounts in arrears, No recovery action or reminder notices have been issued. Non-payment of Council Tax is managed on a case by case basis. Approximately 1,505 account have had revised pay arrangements put in place. The Council has distributed an assistance support letter to residents that are in arrears to sign post them, should they needed additional support.

Council Tax Hardship Fund

Government funding of £500m was distributed to Councils of which Brentwood received £0.345m. Current caseload is estimated to be 1,593 claimants; resulting in a potential commitment of £0.147m. The balance of the grant will support remaining Council Tax Reduction (CTR) customers over the course of the year and any surplus will form part of a wider discretionary scheme to support vulnerable residents. The Council will continue to advertise this scheme through social media and subscription emails.

Business Rates

The Council originally expected to collect £26m in business rates on behalf of all preceptors during 2020/21.

Of this only approximately £0.454m was to be directly retained by Brentwood. The remaining monies are passed back to ECC, fire and central government. The Council is obliged to pass these monies according to the schedules agreed at the start of the financial year unless there is mutual agreement to change these. Central Government has announced it will defer collection of its central share of business rates for the first three months of the year to ease LAs immediate cashflow. Currently there are no plans to change the payment schedules to ECC and Fire or Police.

The Council also receives another £1.3m from central government via a Section 31 compensation grant for loss of income incurred as a result of Business Rates relief schemes, such as small Business Rate Relief (this was paid earlier than expected in one lump sum to the Council in March to aid cash flow)

Extended Business Rates Relief

On 11 March, the Budget announced that businesses in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors, with a rateable value of less than £51,000, would pay no business rates this year.

On 17 March, the government announced it would go further by removing the £51,000 rateable value threshold.

On 18 March, the Department for Education also announced that, to support nurseries, the Chancellor has decided that they will also now be eligible for a business rates holiday for one year.

The further expansion of retail Relief Scheme was expected to cause a significant reduction in the total amount of Business rates income the Council collects in 2020/21 of **£11.6m** and was funded by government through Section 31 grants which was paid in equal instalments from June to March 2020/21 to Local Authorities.

Business Grants

At the Budget, the Chancellor announced that all businesses eligible for Small Business Rates Relief and Rural Rates Relief would receive a grant of £3,000 each to help with the impact of Covid-19. On 17th March, the Chancellor confirmed that the Government would increase the value of this to £10,000 per business. All properties occupied by active businesses in receipt of rural rate relief or small business rates relief on 11 March, including those in receipt of tapered relief, will receive the grant.

The Government also provided those businesses in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors with an additional cash grant of up to £25,000 per business:

1. For businesses in these sectors with a rateable value of under £15,000, received a grant of £10,000.
2. For businesses in these sectors with a rateable value of between £15,000 and £51,000, received a grant of £25,000.

Brentwood has currently identified 1,263 businesses that are entitled to the Cash Grants, totalling approximately £17.1m. £15.5m was received from government to help Brentwood's Cash flow of the payment of these grants. They will be reconciled as they are processed, and the Council will receive the full amount from government. The Scheme ended for applications on 28th August.

As explained above in the economic development update, the total number of grants paid out as at 7th August are 1,170 and broken down in the table below.

Type	Paid out	Value	Total %
£10k	857	£8,570,000	
£25k	313	£7,825,000	
	1,170	£16,395,000	92.6%

In May the Government also announced that it would provide Local Authorities with additional funding to target small business with high fixed property related costs but that were not eligible for the main Grant schemes. The Government awarded a fixed 5% of Local Authorities main grants scheme eligible figures as at 4th May. Brentwood was awarded a fixed total of £904k. As like many other authorities within Essex, Brentwood Council formulated a Discretionary Grant scheme focussing on various priorities and criteria from Central Government. The Scheme was approved at the Council's first ever Emergency Committee on 5th June 2020. The Scheme was extremely popular and was awarded out completely in two separate application

periods, with businesses being categorised as small or micro businesses, for transparency and fairness. The total allocations are highlighted in the table below:

Type	Paid out	Value	Total %	Round
£2k Micro	36	£72,000		Round 2
£5k Micro	98	£490,000		Round 1
£4k Small	3	£12,000		Round 2
£10k Small	33	£330,000		Round 1
	170	£904,000	100%	

Council's Financial Position

MHCLG have requested authorities to complete a return regarding COVID-19 service pressures and expected income reductions. Four returns have been submitted, the first on 18th April, the second on 15th May, the third on 19th June and the fourth was submitted on 31st July. The fourth return requested similar information as the previous. There is a fifth return due to be submitted on the 4th September. The main points of the fourth return have been summarised:

Revised budget projections are tabled below and breakdowns are listed underneath. Please note that the figures in this note are based on assumptions that have a high degree of uncertainty given the early stages of the crisis. Assumptions will continue to be reviewed as more information becomes known.

	Original 2020/21 £m	Revised Forecast 2020/21 £m
Net budget	8.800	8.800
COVID 19 related Pressures (1)		0.862
COVID 19 related Income losses (2)		1.462
COVID Government Support (3)		(0.882)
Funded by:		
Business Rates	(1.800)	(1.800)
Council Tax	(6.384)	(6.384)
New Homes Bonus	(0.688)	(0.688)
Collection Fund	0.072	0.072
Total Funding Gap	0	1.442

Notes on Assumptions

(1) Pressures:

Type of Service	Financial Impact £m	Notes
Environmental & Regulatory	0.153	Waste Management – hire of additional vehicles, drivers and overtime
Planning & Development	0.040	Additional recruitment costs.
Finance & Corporate (ICT/Revenues/Other)	0.140	Costs of additional software and home working equipment.
Other		
- Shielding	0.104	Residents leaflets and Community Hub
- PPE	0.060	Expected cost of service
- Unallocated Savings	0.365	Recycling Scheme/Leisure Services
COVID 19 Related pressure forecast	0.862	

(2) Income Losses:

Type of Service	Financial Impact £'000	Notes
Highways & Transport SFC (Sales, Fess & Charges)	0.842	Season Tickets and Car Parking
Cultural SFC	0.091	Opens Spaces/Golf Courses
Planning & Development SFC	0.103	Building Control and Land Charges reductions.
Other SFC	0.250	Waste Management and all other Fees and Charges
Commercial Income	0.176	Commercial portfolios rents & Town Hall Space
COVID 19 Related Income losses Forecast	1.462	

(3) Government Support:

On 19th March the Government announced an emergency fund for local government of £1.6bn. This funding was distributed in particular to enable Council's to:

- Meet the increased demand for adult social care and enable councils to provide additional support to social care providers.
- CCGs will separately be funding additional costs of discharging and keeping people out of hospital
- Provide additional support for the homeless and rough sleepers
- Support those at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19
- Meet pressures across other services

Brentwood Council is a tier 2 Authority and allocation was **£0.029m**. Approximately £37.4m was circulated to Essex County Council to aid and support social care, schools and the community. On 18th April Government announced that a further £1.6bn of funding will be distributed to support local authorities delivering frontline services. Brentwood Council's allocation was **£0.755m**.

On 2nd July Government announced that a further £500m of funding will be available for expenditure pressures. Brentwood Council's allocation was **£0.098m**

The total amount received to date of **£0.882m** is an unringfenced Grant, however at this present time, it will be held in reserves for the team to review the Council's finances over the course of the coming year, to help mitigate the substantial loss of Income the Council is facing during the current pandemic.

On the 2nd July the Government has also announced a new scheme to reimburse councils for lost income from sales, fees and charges. The new income loss scheme will involve a 5% deductible rate, whereby council will absorb losses up to 5% of their planned sales, fees and charges income, with government compensating them for 75p in every round of relevant loss thereafter. By introducing a 5% deductible the government is accounting for an acceptable level of volatility, whilst shielding authorities from the worst losses. The Council has received some technical guidance on the scheme but awaits more information from Central Government to understand how the Council can submit a claim.

Statement of Accounts

In April MHCLG published The Accounts and Audit (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 (SI 404/2020). These extend the statutory audit deadline for 2019/20 for all local public authorities in England, apart from health service bodies.

The draft accounts to be approved, were extended from 30th May to 31 August 2020, however they may be approved earlier. A report was taken to Audit & Scrutiny on 28th July to approve Brentwood's Unaudited Statement of Accounts 2019/20 and the Annual Governance Statement by the council's revised deadline.

The finance staff have worked extremely hard to ensure this deadline was adhered to, as well as working in unprecedented circumstances and the additional reporting that has been required to MHCLG as explained further above in this report.

For local authorities the publication date for audited accounts moved from 31 July 2020 to 30 November 2020. The Council's external auditors EY LLP are scheduled to commence the audit on 21st September and complete on 31st October 2020.

To provide local authorities more flexibility, the requirement for the public inspection period to include the first 10 working days of June has been removed. Instead they must

commence the public inspection period on or before the first working day of September 2020 and should give notice of the period planned.

Public Inspection notices and the Full Statement of Account 2019/20 have been published on the Council's website.

Communications

Media Covid-19 response End March to End July

During Lockdown the priority for Comms centred around social media and getting the national and local messages out and making sure our residents were up to date as quickly as possible. We effectively became a news service and the engagement with residents continued to build during this period. This interaction confirms that residents refer to the council as a trusted information source particularly during times of crisis.

Press releases

Number of press releases issued during Lockdown was 32 (April 12, May 7, June 9, July 4). All press releases are posted to the website and sent to members. To see all the press releases issued go to <http://www.brentwood.gov.uk/index.php?cid=826>

The Brentwood Gazette

The weekly newspaper furloughed staff during Lockdown and editor Alan Woods and Head of Print Content Simon Murfitt asked for support to produce local content to keep the paper going. This was an opportunity for us to effectively takeover the content of the paper supplying local Brentwood stories, photographs and information.

This enabled the paper to continue weekly production with zero dedicated staff. The content we provide ranged from all our press releases to community stories including 15 year old Jessica Evans making face masks for charity, 8 year old Sam Woodcock's tabletop sale for the NHS, Doddinghurst's Dean Weedon raising funds by singing every Thursday on ClapforCarers, an appeal for lockdown support for Hopefield Animal Sanctuary, and the reopening of the Lighthouse project.

We included these on our social media content too. Every story published in the Gazette was then photographed and posted on our social media. This increased the exposure of each story by around a third.

In total the Gazette photographs/posts had 54,939 impressions. The Can in the Van (May 21) and Lighthouse Gazette stories reached 5,105 and 1,533 people respectively when reposted onto our social media - this was on top of the original post which reached 8,164 people for Can in the Van and 7,741 for the Lighthouse. Brentwood Gazette's Simon Murfitt sent an email noting *"Just dropping a line to say Brentwood Council was*

very helpful during lockdown, especially with the supply stories and pictures when it was not possible for reporters or photographers to get out in the borough finding content.”

Staff newsletter

The Chief Executive sent a daily update to all staff and members from the start of Lockdown through April. These included a summary of the latest information from Government, the action being taken by each council department, support information for staff wellbeing, and the media coverage received. These emails moved to twice weekly in June and then to weekly in July.

May 1st saw the publication of a joint statement from the political party leaders for residents outlining their thanks to residents during the Covid-19 crisis and was seen 9,223 times.

Radio interviews

Council updates are on Phoenix FM with Michelle Ward every Friday featuring the Leader, CEO or a member of SLT. We publish the details ahead of time on social media and then the link to the interview post the weekend. The station broadcasts to 140,000 people potentially and the social media posts have been seen 129,767 times.

Video

We posted 85 videos. ClapforCarers was effectively led by the Deputy Mayor, Cllr Olivia Sanders who works in the NHS and provided weekly updates on video for social media on her experiences. The Thursday evening event was filmed throughout lockdown and posted to our social media platforms every week. The 85 videos were produced covering the recycle scheme pre-launch, VE day, Can in a Van, the Community Hub in the Town Hall, and the High Street.

Videos received 325,230 impressions in total. Highlights included;

1. Brentwood Community Hub video on April 25 had 14,546 views
2. Leader's lockdown message on March 21 had 9,321 views
3. First ClapforCarers had 6,638 views – the average view each week for Clapforcarers was 1,228.

The VE video was viewed by 15,845 people on social media and 343 views on YouTube - accompanied by a social media campaign and the VJ video was viewed by 1,716 people.

Social media

90% of social media content is home generated - just 10% is shared content. During Lockdown we posted 2,238 times across our social media channels receiving 2.4m impressions.

LinkedIn

During Lockdown we posted 280 LinkedIn posts and received 123,000 impressions. This is an increase of 127% in the last year with July figures showing that we had the third highest engagement rate of any council in Essex. With 39 updates in the month Brentwood Borough Council's LinkedIn had the second highest number of updates of any council in Essex.

Email

Residents who had registered were able to receive a Covid-19 update email every Thursday using the Gov Delivery software.

Instagram

During Lockdown we posted 315 Instagram posts and received 149,000 impressions. Top performing posts are those featuring multiple strong images/photos. The rule of thumb is "people and places" driving the community engagement. Top Instagram posts range from the hot cross bun delivery to the depot (836) to the King George's Playing Field boomerang video of a child playing on the new equipment (340).

Facebook

During Lockdown we posted 500 Facebook posts and received 1.2m impressions. The number of impressions and engagements is up nearly 500% year on year. Top performing posts included the King George's and River Road play schemes with 48,889 people reached, the reinstatement of the glass collections in April with 18,000 people reached and the Leader's inaugural video at the Town Hall hub on April 25 which reached 14,546 people.

Twitter

During Lockdown we sent 700 Tweets and received 922,000 impressions. Top performing posts featured Government Travel Advice (7,661 impressions), the reopening of the High Street (6,278), Refuse Collections (5,484), Brentwood FoodBank (5,105) and Covid-19 updates for Leisure (4,888).

Essex

Comms group met online daily during Lockdown and this has now rescinded to weekly. This sharing of information meant that Essex Police, NHS, councils, Essex County Council were all running the main Covid-19 messages and themes, ensuring continuity during Lockdown. We have been reporting our top 5 performing social media posts on a daily and now weekly basis. This continues as we move into recovery with local lockdown scenarios and Brexit impact now being assessed and prepared for.

National

We had daily updates from PHE and a number of other government departments. Government provided certain set messages around handwashing, social distancing etc and these were issued across our social media as soon as requested. The Government provided daily afternoon press briefings which we monitored to ensure that our social media messages were updated and relevant and in line with the latest information issued that day. This was also vital to ensure that the council itself and its staff were up to date and working in line with expectations.

Reasons for Recommendation

To provide information on the Council's duties to deliver efficiently and effectively in an emergency situation and in accordance with business continuity arrangements.

Consultation

No consultation undertaken.

References to Corporate Plan

Delivering an efficient and effective council.

Implications

Financial Implications

Name/Title: Jacqueline Van Mellaerts, Director of Corporate Resources
Tel/Email: 01277 312500/jacqueline.vanmellaerts@brentwood.gov.uk

As highlighted within the report COVID-19 has presented multiple financial challenges. The Council's position is regularly monitored and reported to Senior Management and MHCLG as and when required.

Legal Implications

Name & Title: Amanda Julian, Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer
Tel & Email: 01277 312500/amanda.julian@brentwood.gov.uk

During the Pandemic the Council has had to implement emergency legislation with consequential changes to the Constitution and the way the Council has had to work and adapt. By reviewing the Constitution, the Council can ensure that decision making continues to be transparent and lawful. As restrictions are amended or lifted the Council will need to ensure compliance with any new legislation.

Economic Implications

Name/Title: Phil Drane, Director of Planning and Economy
Tel/Email: 01277 312500/philip.drane@brentwood.gov.uk

The economic impact of COVID-19 has been unprecedented and looks likely to continue to affect businesses for years to come. Measures set out within the report have been implemented to support local businesses and the borough's wider economy. Government intervention through grants and other means have been put in place to maintain the UK economy during lockdown. The Council has worked to provide the social and economic support in the borough that is expected of local government. Through uncertain times in the near future, it will be important for the Council to continue to work in partnership with Government, relevant agencies, local businesses, community groups, and residents, among others.

Other Implications (where significant) – i.e. Health and Safety, Asset Management, Equality and Diversity, Risk Management, Section 17 – Crime & Disorder, Sustainability, ICT.

Background Papers

None

Appendices to this report

None