

Part A

Report to: Cabinet

Date of meeting: Monday, 4 May 2020

Report author: Group Head of Transformation

Title: Watford Borough Council's Response to Coronavirus (COVID-19)

1.0 Summary

- 1.1 This report provides Cabinet with an update on Watford Borough Council's planning and response to Coronavirus (Covid-19).
- 1.2 This report does not address the financial implications or risks of the situation, as these are addressed in a separate report to Cabinet.
- 1.3 As a rapidly evolving situation the information held within this report and the appendices is correct at the time of publication; however may quickly become superseded by events.

2.0 Risks

- 2.1 This is a highly complex and challenging situation with a multitude of associated risks. Presented here are the three overarching risks arising from the situation that the council is responding to associated with the delivery of the council's core functions (both existing and emerging) and the impact of the situation on Watford as a whole.

| Nature of risk | Consequence | Suggested Control Measures | Response | Risk Rating (p x i) |
|---|---|--|----------|------------------------|
| Council may not be able to maintain essential service delivery. | Essential services may have to be stopped or reduced with the consequent impact on residents and businesses in Watford. | Robust Incident Management approach to be adopted closely monitoring service delivery, particularly staffing levels. | Treat | 2 x 4 = 8 |

| Nature of risk | Consequence | Suggested Control Measures | Response | Risk Rating (p x i) |
|---|--|---|----------|------------------------|
| Council may not be able to respond to new demands placed on it by government or to respond to local need. | Vulnerable people or businesses may not get the support required from the council. | Robust Incident Management approach to be adopted including the development of specific cells to provide focus on key new requirements overseen by senior officers in the organisation. | Treat | 2 x 4 = 8 |
| Watford as a place and as a council does not recover from the impact of the situation. | Serious impact on the economy and vibrancy of the town. Reduction in the ability of the council to deliver the requirements of residents and businesses and fulfil its statutory obligations. | Recovery cell established led by the Group Head of Commercial to ensure that plans are put in place as early as possible with action taken as early as possible and to ensure that decision-making is cognisant of Recovery. The recovery cell includes the Shared Director of Finance and will have a focus on financial as well as economic recovery. An updated Financial Strategy will be presented alongside Q1 Budget Monitoring. | Treat | 3 x 4 = 12 |

3.0 Recommendations

3.1 Cabinet are asked to note the contents of this report.

Further information:

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Report approved by:

4.0 Background

- 4.1 On 31 December 2019, the World Health Organisation (WHO) was informed of a cluster of cases of pneumonia of unknown cause detected in Wuhan City, China. The cause is now identified as a Coronavirus, one of the family of viruses which caused the SARS (Serious Acute Respiratory Syndrome) outbreak in 2002-2003 across the world. These viruses are fairly common and can range from mild to very severe in effect. Coronaviruses are a family of viruses that infect a wide range of different species including humans.
- 4.2 On Tuesday 10 February, the WHO named the disease caused by the novel coronavirus COVID-19. The virus itself has been named SARS-CoV-2, as the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV) have determined that it is the same species as SARS but a different and milder strain of the species.
- 4.3 Through the first quarter of 2020 the disease spread from China to most countries in the world with the first cases confirmed in the UK at the end of January.
- 4.4 Most people who get the virus will have symptoms similar to winter flu, but a small proportion will develop more serious illness including pneumonia. The symptoms of the virus can include dry cough, fever, fatigue and breathing difficulty. In very severe cases with pneumonia, organ failure can also occur.
- 4.5 The mortality rate is not yet accurately known but based on the available data it is estimated to be around 1-2%. This varies by country, but that is at least partly due to the fact the populations in different countries vary in their age structures (e.g. Italy has a much older population on the whole than China). However, this number is likely to be an overestimate since the figure is based only on the number of individuals who have been tested and confirmed to have the virus. It is highly likely that more people have been infected but have not been diagnosed because their illnesses were milder, and thus have not been counted in the number of those infected.
- 4.6 Although the virus can infect anybody, those with more severe illness, those over 70 and those with weakened immune systems are more vulnerable to serious disease.

5.0 National Position

- 5.1 On 23 March 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson made an announcement to the nation as part of the efforts to slow down the spread of the virus and introduced a number of measures:
 - People were told to stay at home and to only leave their homes for very limited purposes.
 - Certain Businesses have been ordered to close - All shops providing non-essential goods have closed, including libraries, playgrounds and outdoor gyms.

Furthermore, pubs, cinemas and theatres have been closed as well as all services for commercial/leisure use.

- Places of worship have also been closed
- Stopping all gatherings of more than two people in public (excluding gatherings of people in a household).

5.2 The Prime Minister said that these measures would be looked at again in three weeks and on 16 April 2020 it was announced that these restrictions would continue for “at least” another three weeks with five conditions to be met before the restrictions could be eased:

- Making sure the NHS could cope
- A "sustained and consistent" fall in the daily death rate
- Reliable data showing the rate of infection was decreasing to "manageable levels"
- Ensuring the supply of tests and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) could meet future demand
- Being confident any adjustments would not risk a second peak

5.3 Although there has been some progress in meeting these conditions there is still considerable progress to be made and it should be anticipated that there will be further extension of the restrictions when the current three week period ends.

5.4 The Government has also introduced guidance to support and ‘shield’ members of the population who are very high risk from severe illness from Covid-19. Individuals who have any underlying health conditions listed in the Public Health England Guidance have been advised to stay at home and avoid any face to face contact for 12 weeks. Around 900,000 people were initially placed on the Shield Patient List by the NHS and further activity has been / is being conducted by GP practices to identify clinically vulnerable people and this will add to the numbers on the Shield Patient List.

6.0 Hertfordshire position

6.1 The Covid-19 Strategic Coordination Group (SCG), which is a County wide incorporating representation from health, emergency services, local and national government and the military responsible which has overall responsibility for the multi-agency management of an incident and the establishment of a strategic framework for an incident has been meeting since 29 February 2020.

6.2 The SCG has set up a number of cells of activity since its establishment and Watford Borough Council has been as appropriate been for both the SCG and individual cells

participating directly (acting as the lead district council across the county) or providing information, updates and questions (where other district councils are performing the lead role).

6.3 A recent update from the Chair of the SCG, Hertfordshire County Council's Chief Fire Officer, Darryl Keen, was published on 27 March 2020. This report provided an update to Hertfordshire's response to the virus in the following areas:

- **NHS Update:** Hertfordshire's NHS organisations, including hospitals, community services, GP practices, mental health services and clinical commissioning groups (CCGs), are working together with Public Health England (PHE), NHS England, Public Health Hertfordshire and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) to coordinate their response to Covid-19. Significant steps have been taken to prepare the Hertfordshire health system to cope with the expected surge of patients who are affected by the virus and who may need specialist treatment. Work is taking place to increase critical care capacity in both Watford General and Lister Hospital in Stevenage, with health providers freeing up hospital resources through the postponement of non-urgent surgery, the discharge of patients who can be cared for at home and the training of staff to support patients with symptoms caused by Covid-19. GP practices are minimising risks by offering appointments via a telephone call or online where clinically appropriate. Face-to-face appointments are still available when needed. Patients are also being supported to order repeat prescriptions remotely and to collect them from pharmacies, which are playing a key role; meeting increased demands for prescription services and everyday minor illness advice. The free telephone and online service, NHS 111, has seen a huge increase in queries since the outbreak of the virus. Call advisors and clinicians are helping people to get the expert advice they need at home, relieving the pressure on GPs and hospitals.
- **Fire and Rescue Update:** Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue has managed to maintain both fire engine and Fire Control availability. The service has reviewed the way in which its high-risk fire safety activities are undertaken to ensure that these can continue without compromising public safety and/or social distancing. A request has been received from the East of England Ambulance Service to support them with staff to drive and crew ambulances and a solution is being worked upon.
- **Police Update:** Hertfordshire Constabulary continues to work with partners to deliver policing services across the county. Whilst current abstraction levels remain within tolerance, the force has plans to maintain core functions should resource levels drop suddenly. The use of technology is being promoted across the force to maintain public contact with instances of webchat into our control room and online crime reporting seeing significant increases.

- Business and Community Update: The SCG has established a ‘recovery’ subgroup to prepare for our county’s recovery from the Covid-19 outbreak. This group will coordinate responses from our local communities and report back on Hertfordshire’s economic resilience, feeding back critical and timely intelligence to central government on a weekly basis.

6.4 There were 1,954 confirmed cases (as of 22 April) of Covid-19 in Hertfordshire (data is not available for Watford specifically).

7.0 Watford Borough Council Position

7.1 In mid-February it became likely that the Coronavirus would have a significant impact in the UK and work started across the council to review business continuity plans and other plans and policies to prepare to respond to the emerging situation.

7.2 A governance structure was developed for Watford to ensure that the council response was cognisant of the position nationally and locally with SLT and OLT reframing the way they work to ensure sufficient strategic and operational resource to respond to the situation and ensure the organisational response evolves as required as the situation progresses.

7.3 A specific governance approach was developed (and has been evolved as the situation has progressed – the diagram below is correct as at 21 April 2020).

| | | | |
|------------------|--|---|---|
| STRATEGIC | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Mayor • Managing Director | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political and stakeholder liaison and briefing • Service delivery change decision-making • Decision-making re external influences / demands • Decision-making on requirements of cells • Direction | |
| TACTICAL | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SLT • Heads of Service (reps) • Cell leads | Silver meeting – Mon, Wed, Fri: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reviewing service delivery changes for decision • Oversight of requirements of cells • Receiving strategic decisions and planning their operationalisation • Re-deployment of resource with no service reduction / change impact • Data hub | Focus on Cells – Tue & Thu: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detailed overview of key and high risk cells: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current status & Progress • Risks and issues • Staffing requirements • Communications |
| DELIVERY | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heads of Service and teams • Cell leads and teams | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service delivery: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivery of services • Situation reporting Including staffing • Service delivery change recommendation development • Cells: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivery of cells • Situation reporting including staffing • Cell delivery change request / recommendation development | |

7.4 The council initiated its Incident Management processes on 13 March 2020 following the government moving to the “delay” phase of its response, as it was clear at this point that the situation would escalate still further and that the council was no longer in a business as usual situation.

7.5 The Incident Management Teams (Silver and Gold) have been meeting daily since 13 March 2020 to oversee the council's response.

7.6 A number of objectives have been set for the council's response (which have and will continue to evolve as the situation develops):

- To support the most vulnerable in our communities
- To use technology to connect with our staff
- To actively listen to our employees
- To enhance our workforce resilience
- To support our volunteers in responding to emerging needs in a safe and meaningful way
- To support businesses in the Borough
- To put the infrastructure in place to deliver the financial commitments the government have made
- To provide a trusted source of information to our communities
- To support our communities wellbeing with technology
- To monitor and respond to community issues and tensions
- Liaise with key partners to provide an effective, co-ordinated multi-agency approach
- Be agile and move swiftly from concept to implementation
- Ongoing assessment and prioritisation of critical and non-critical Council services
- To plan for recovery

7.7 The council's response has been focused on two key themes:

1. Evolving council service delivery to continue to operate in accordance with government guidance and emerging demand as a result of the situation
2. Responding to new requirements placed on the council by government or locally as a result of the situation

7.8 The council's response is discussed in the sections below, with more detail provided in Appendix 1.

8.0 Council Service Delivery

- 8.1 Since the introduction of guidance around “social-distancing” and then the “lockdown” on 23 March all but a very small number of staff are working from home with some staff re-deployed to support the council’s response.
- 8.2 With the rollout of the new 8x8 telephony system in January and all staff being deployed with laptops and remote working capabilities by the end of February this transition has been relatively smooth and service delivery and performance have generally been maintained (accepting that the whole situation and staff’s personal circumstances will have some impact).
- 8.3 Processes have been developed and implemented through which service changes, which are identified in response to the situation, can be proposed by Heads of Service, endorsed by the Incident Management Team and then approved by the Mayor and Managing Director on a daily basis.
- 8.4 Appendix 2 details the key changes that have been agreed between 13 March and 21 April. These changes have focussed on:
1. Reducing non-essential face-to-face interactions between council officers and residents to support social-distancing and protect the health and safety of residents and officers
 2. Closing council facilities (e.g. public toilets, playgrounds, museum) in response to the government measures to support social-distancing and reduce the risk of disease transmission
 3. Adapting policies and services to respond to the situation presented and the consequent financial and wider pressures on businesses and residents
 4. Enhancing Community Protection services where there is an anticipated increased / changed demand to better support and protect residents and businesses
 5. Stopping some non-essential (at this time) council activity to enable officers to focus on response
- 8.5 Throughout the duration of the situation the delivery of council services will be under constant review to ensure that services are still able to be delivered and that the council is appropriately responding to the evolving situation, demands and government guidance.

9.0 Cell Delivery – Responding to new requirements

- 9.1 In line with standard Emergency Planning terminology this area of the council’s response has been broken down into a number of cells of activity, each with their own specific objectives and Action Plan.

9.2 The cells have been formed to ensure there is robust planning, delivery and ownership of specific areas of activity arising from the situation due to requirements on local authorities from government and/or responding to local pressures and needs and/or as part of our Hertfordshire wide role as a member of the Local Resilience Forum (LRF). Each cell is headed up by a Chief or Deputy Chief Officer.

9.3 The cells and their objectives are listed in the table below with detail of their current status included in Appendix 1. Some cells have a very specific objectives in a narrow area of the response (section 8.3.1) whilst others are cross-cutting (section 8.3.2) across the entirety of the council’s response.

9.3.1 Response Cells

| Cell | Lead Officer | Objectives |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| Rough Sleepers and Homelessness | Head of Housing | To provide accommodation to all rough sleepers in Watford To respond to any emerging housing demands |
| Co-ordinating our Community Resource | Group Head of Community and Environment | To setup a local hub to co-ordinate/have oversight of all voluntary activity in Watford To ensure that our most vulnerable in all areas of Watford have the required support from volunteers To support our volunteers in responding to emerging needs in a safe and meaningful way To respond to requirements from the LRF / central government |
| Support for Business | Group Head of Strategy and Communications / Head of Revenues and Benefits | Ensure businesses are aware of the measures being put in place by government To put the infrastructure in place to deliver the financial commitments the government have made to support businesses To hear and respond consistently to any other issues or concerns raised by businesses |
| Watford Together | Head of Culture, Heritage and Parks | Co-ordinate the creative organisations in Watford to provide a programme of events / activities throughout the lockdown and social distancing period to provide people with entertainment while they are staying at home To plan events to mark the end of the incident to celebrate, thank and reflect |

| Cell | Lead Officer | Objectives |
|---|---|--|
| Community Impact and Cohesion | Group Head of Community and Environment | <p>To assess and understand the current community impacts due to covid-19 situation in Watford in order to inform and target actions / interventions.</p> <p>To ensure there are sufficient and appropriate resources available to deliver the required actions</p> <p>To inform the work and decisions of other cells across the council to maximise the effectiveness of interventions.</p> <p>To ensure legislation and guidance is adhered to across Watford to address any adverse community impacts</p> |
| Bereavement Support and Funeral Provision | Head of Community Protection | <p>Bereaved family and friends have access to the required advice, support and information</p> <p>The Cemetery and Crematorium are effective in meeting the demands placed upon them within their capacity</p> <p>Work collectively with partners including other burial authorities to meet all of our communities' demands</p> |
| Responding to external demands | Group Head of Transformation | <p>Assess and prepare the organisational response to any demands made of the council either by government or LRF partners</p> |
| Public Health Response | Head of Community Protection | <p>To assess and understand the current epidemiology of the covid-19 incident in Watford and Three Rivers in order to inform and target interventions</p> <p>To inform the work and decisions of other cells across the council to maximise the effectiveness of controls.</p> <p>To work proactively to ensure the legislation and guidance is adhered to across Watford to minimise infection and deaths</p> <p>To support partners and community and faith groups in complying with the legal requirements and best practice to minimise spread</p> <p>To support and facilitate the implementation of alternate ways to meet business, community and faith needs</p> |

9.3.2 Cross-cutting cells

| Cell | Lead Officer | Objectives |
|--------------------------------|---|---|
| Communication | Group Head of Strategy and Communications | Ensure that people get the right information at the right time to dispel rumour and unnecessary worry – WBC should be a trusted and credible source of information Keep morale and a sense of community spirit high |
| Workforce Resilience | Group Head of HR and OD | Ensure the council workforce is supported through the COVID crisis and has both the operational and mental health support required |
| Finance | Director of Finance / Head of Finance | Assess the financial impact of the COVID crisis on the finances of WBC Provide required updates to central government on the impact of COVID on WBC's finances Provide support to any schemes involving the disbursement of grants/loans or payments from the Council |
| Governance and Decision-making | Group Head of Democracy and Governance | Ensure that the Council is following the guidance issued on governance matters throughout the COVID crisis |
| Recovery | Group Head of Commercial | Put in place and carry out activities to help ensure that Watford (as a place and as a council) recovers from the impacts of Covid and thrives going forwards Support recovery across all aspects of the response work: economic, financial, social, operational, staff/organisational and communications Integrate strategic direction for the 'new normal' into recovery activities Ensure Watford is well prepared to move from Covid response and resilience to the recovery and thrive phase over the short and longer-term |

9.4 As the situation progresses the cells will be kept under constant review and will evolve and change to respond to emerging requirements and priorities.

10.0 Planning for the future

10.1 Work is underway to assess and scope the impact of the current situation on both the town and the council and to plan the action that will be required as a result of this. The work be extensive and cross-cutting and will have both a short and long term focus.

10.2 The council's business continuity and incident response plans were reviewed and updated in advance of the current situation and have evolved since it started and these will be further updated to ensure the council is ready to respond to any future requirements.

11.0 Implications

11.1 Financial

11.1.1 The Shared Director of Finance comments that comments that the current financial implications of Covid 19 are shown in the separate report – 'Finance Digest Covid 19 update' on this agenda.

11.2 Legal Issues (Monitoring Officer)

11.2.1 The Group Head of Democracy and Governance comments that the council is continuing to undertake its statutory duties and also comply with legislation implemented as a result of the pandemic.

11.3 Equalities, Human Rights and Data Protection

11.3.1 Given the nature of the situation and having to respond and evolve council services in response to an emergency situation formal Equalities Impact Assessments have not been completed when assessing service changes. However through this process consideration is given to the impact of changes and where possible mitigating action is taken to address equalities issues; however this has not and will not always be possible where the fundamental purpose of the response is to keep people safe and prevent spread of disease.

11.3.2 It is worth noting that generally individual service changes have been minor in nature and have often been beneficial to all residents.

11.3.3 Through Recovery activity if service delivery does not return to the previous approach an Equalities Impact Assessment will be conducted.

11.3.4 Having had regard to the council's obligations under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2018, it is considered that officers are not required to undertake a Data Processing Impact Assessment (DPIA) for this report.

11.4 Staffing

11.4.1 The vast majority of the council's staff are working from home as a result of the situation and requirements imposed by government. There has been considerable activity by the HR Team and managers to support staff in this transition and to enable staff to maintain performance, morale and their own physical and mental health.

1. Wellbeing and Mental Health Support: Considerable information has been made available to staff to support them through this period both to support

themselves working in this new way, but also their families. Importantly this is helping them to look at the output of their work and not just time spent at their desk.

2. Support for managers: Managers have been provided with considerable guidance to support them in their roles, where they now have to manage teams virtually. Part of this support includes three videos developed by our Organisation Development partner on managing staff working from home.
3. Communication: All staff receive regular updates and information from the Mayor and Managing Director and all Heads of Service are briefed weekly on the situation with information from these briefings to be cascaded to staff. FAQs on the intranet are reviewed and regularly updated so all staff have access to the latest decisions and agreements made.
4. Flexible working: It is important to recognise that given the circumstances some staff have been managing caring responsibilities alongside work commitments. Policies have been adapted to give staff the flexibility to manage this situation as best they can during these unprecedented times. Staff have been allowed to flex hours to suit their needs - working early mornings or late evenings for example and training has been provided for those who may be struggling with this situation.
5. Staff recognition: Covid-19 has meant a lot of staff have had to operate in a different way, at a different pace and perhaps more importantly, in unprecedented conditions. For those staff that have stepped up, we have put in place recognition of the extra effort through the honorarium scheme with initial payments to be made in May salary.
6. Working from home allowance: A working from home allowance, as defined by the government, of a tax-free £26 per month per employee working from home, towards their costs will be paid made from May salary.
7. Provision of equipment: All staff already had a laptop and headset deployed and all were given a £50 provision to buy additional equipment (such as a mouse, keyboard or riser) if they required one to comfortably work from home. Additionally in certain specific circumstances where an individual's has particular requirements due to their own physical health or the work they are doing they have been able to collect their chair from the Town Hall and / or have been given a monitor.

11.4.2 The levels of absence from staff has been significantly lower than expected when planning work as conducted in February / early March where up to 25% or 30% absence rate was potentially envisaged. The reality is roughly 4 people have had symptoms of Covid-19 and been unable to work as a result. While some staff have self-isolated the majority are productively working from home.

11.5 Community Safety/Crime and Disorder

11.5.1 The Council is very aware of the potential impact of the situation on Community Safety / Crime and disorder. This is being monitored weekly through the One Watford Board and a dedicated Community Impact and Cohesion Cell has been established led by the Group Head of Community and Environment.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Coronavirus Response - Action Plan

Appendix 2: Service Changes Agreed

Background papers

No papers were used in the preparation of this report.