

**WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL
CABINET – 5 OCTOBER 2021
REPORT OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

COVID-19 RECOVERY – UPDATE

1 Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report builds on the report agreed by Cabinet in May 2020 which outlined the process of recovery and suggested a framework to initiate the recovery phase of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 1.2 Since that report, many council services, working through the Local Resilience Forum with partner agencies have needed to continue to support the response phase to the pandemic. Indeed, there had been two further national lockdowns since May 2020.
- 1.3 The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of the council's recovery activities to date.

2 Recommendation(s)

- 2.1 That Members note the activities to date.

3 Explanation

- 3.1 The recovery framework approved in May 2020, contained the following four themes:

- Business and Economy
- Communities
- Financial Resilience
- Organisational Recovery

- 3.2 The paragraphs below highlight a summary of recovery activities undertaken by service areas so far.

Business and Economy

- 3.3 A lot of progress has been made to ensure that the council continues to provide support for businesses. In particular, over £29m of Business Grant has been paid out to businesses aimed at supporting businesses during the pandemic. The council is currently looking at how best to distribute a further

£900k of funding to support businesses through recovery and with the ongoing impacts. This scheme is expected to go live in October.

- 3.4 The regeneration work in our town centres and High View have continued to progress well. In particular, the Common car park in Hatfield was open in March 2021 and three hours free car parking is retained to encourage visitors and shoppers to continue to shop in Hatfield.
- 3.5 The council has also provided funding to support the Welwyn Garden City Business Improvement District (BID) to implement the gift voucher scheme for users of the Hunters Bridge car park.
- 3.6 These town centre parking schemes are part of the town centre revitalisation to encourage shoppers to return to our high streets.
- 3.7 The Council was also able to utilise about £160k of Welcome Back Funding from the government to organise events and activities throughout the summer months to increase footfall at various locations in the borough. These events include Big Summer, street entertainers, retro arcade, which were successfully delivered, with over 3000 people attended.
- 3.8 The Council opened a new business centre, HatTech, during the pandemic. Along with Weltech, the council continues to support business start-ups as part of the business recovery work.
- 3.9 Information regarding regulatory guidance to help support and advise businesses about “opening up” have been included in Newsletters to businesses as well as on our website.
- 3.10 Going forward the council will continue to actively participate in the Hertfordshire Growth Board, in particular the work into the reinvigoration of town centres.
- 3.11 The Council’s Corporate Plan has also identified the recovery of business and economy and town centres are key priorities of the council.

Communities

- 3.12 Following a successful bid to the Health Protection Board, the council was successful in receiving £100k to enhance the council’s Community Grants programme and help support local charitable and voluntary organisations in connection with COVID infection control and recovery. The first round of grant applications is due to be considered at the Grants Board at the end of September.
- 3.13 Following extensive work with the Community Safety Partnership (CSP), officers have devised a new Community Safety Strategy and an 18-month action plan to deliver the priorities set out in the strategy. One of the key priorities is to support the community through COVID-19 recovery and the following objectives were agreed with all the CSP members.

- Increase awareness of mental health and wellbeing support services
 - Promote community inclusion, particularly in areas of higher deprivation.
 - Work in partnership to support Public Health with recovery from the pandemic
- 3.14 The council's £2.2m Splashlands facilities at Stanborough North was opened during the pandemic and has been visited by thousands of visitors.
- 3.15 Workshops were also held with Welwyn Hatfield Alliance Partnership to discuss the work of all Partners in relation to COVID recovery activities.
- 3.16 Officers continue to support a County-wide group to ensure that all districts and County are working collaboratively to meet the housing needs of vulnerable people and to deal with issues such as COVID positive cases in hospital discharge and the prevention of rough sleeping.
- 3.17 The Council's Communications team continues to signpost information to the public to raise awareness of infection control, vaccine take-up as well as community mental health support.

Financial Resilience

- 3.18 The impact of the pandemic on the council's key income and expenditure are regularly monitored. This is also formally reported on the council's quarterly financial reports.
- 3.19 The Council's Medium Term Financial Plan was reviewed and reported to September Cabinet. Work is already underway on the 2022/23 budget setting and to ensure that the council's finances is sustainable in the medium to long term. Similar to previous year, a cross party task and finish group has already been set up to examine the budget in more detail before it is considered at Full Council in February 2022.
- 3.20 Officers will also be monitoring the impact of any national funding announcement, such as the publication of the forthcoming Spending Review at the end of October.

Organisational Recovery

- 3.21 The Council continues to make good progress on the modernisation programme. In particular, the findings from the office accommodation review as well as agile working have helped to inform the roll out of hybrid working.
- 3.22 A staff survey was carried out earlier this year to gauge whether there were any barriers that had to be overcome before hybrid working is rolled out. The result indicated that staff welcome the move to hybrid working and there were also a number of benefits identified, including:
- Give staff a better balance between home and office working
 - Reduce our carbon footprint by cutting staff travel

- Enable a redesign of our office space to create a better office environment, make savings, and/or generate income from renting out office space, thereby raising funds to protect our frontline services.
 - Continue to invest in the technology needed for us to work in a more agile way and more responsive and tailored to customer needs.
- 3.23 Following the staff survey, managers also had one to one discussions with staff to address any concerns. The council's Human Resources team have also arranged a number of training courses for managers and staff to attend in September. These are to ensure that teams could work as productively as possible in a hybrid working environment.
- 3.24 Heads of Service have agreed a number of teams that will be involved in trialling the hybrid working model in the second half of October. Everyone involved in those trials will have a briefing beforehand. The idea of the trials is to begin working with a clear-desk policy, using lockers, hot-desking, using hybrid meeting facilities, and understand if any other practical issues come to light. If there are no issues arising from the trial, it is expected that formal hybrid working would be rolled out to the rest of the council before the end of the calendar year.

County-wide recovery

- 3.25 The Chief Executive continues to represent the council at the Hertfordshire wide Recovery Coordinating Group (RCG) which meets regularly and comprises senior leadership level staff from Hertfordshire local authorities, health sector, Local Enterprise Partnership, police and also a liaison officer from the MHCLG.
- 3.26 Work is currently underway to explore joint working opportunities on some of the recovery activities at County-wide level and a further update will be provided to members in due course.

4 Legal Implication(s)

- 4.1 None directly arising from this report.

5 Financial Implication(s)

- 5.1 The impact of the pandemic on the council's finances have already been reported in previous budget monitoring reports. The ongoing impact of the pandemic will continue to be reported via budget monitoring reports and in our 2022/23 budget setting process.
- 5.2 The councils housing rental income collection has continued to perform well through the pandemic and into the recovery phase of the pandemic. The team worked closely with tenants to arrange payment plans and no material impact was seen on collection rates.

- 5.3 Unsurprisingly, due to the mandated closure of many businesses, there was a direct adverse impact on the councils collection on commercial rental income and business rates. The commercial debt peaked in March 2021, which was the last quarter billing period before restrictions started to be eased, and positively debt has reduced by 44% from this date to the end of August 2021. Business Rates is also showing signs of improvement with collection rates up on 2020/21, although not quite at pre-pandemic levels. This is a positive position particularly given the increased liability raised for 2021/22 due to the reduced reliefs provided by national government compared to 2020/21.
- 5.4 Similar to business rates, council tax saw a drop in collection rates during 2020/21, but there have been improved collections for 2021/22, although not yet back to pre-pandemic levels.
- 5.5 Bad debt provisions were set aside during 2020/21 as part of the council's closure of accounts. Based on the current position it is felt these provisions remain adequate.

6 Risk Management Implications

- 6.1 A risk relating to the impacts of Covid-19 on our communities, and our organisation has been placed on the risk register. This is assessed as major impact and very high likelihood.

7 Security and Terrorism Implication(s)

- 7.1 None directly arising from this report.

8 Procurement Implication(s)

- 8.1 None directly arising from this report

9 Climate Change Implication(s)

- 9.1 Recovery present opportunities for carbon reduction for example through hybrid working.

10 Human Resources Implication(s)

- 10.1 Recovery activities have by and large been integrated into the work of council service areas.

11 Health and Wellbeing Implication(s)

- 11.1 Community health and wellbeing is a fundamental part of the recovery process.

12 Communication and Engagement Implication(s)

- 12.1 Where appropriate, the COVID recovery activities are communicated to the public.

13 Link to Corporate Priorities

13.1 The council's recovery activities are linked to all the corporate priorities

14 Equality and Diversity

13.1 Where necessary, equality impact assessments will be undertaken on the COVID recovery activities, and the results used to inform activities.

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20 September 2021