

Five Year Plan Update

For Finance and Governance CAB on 10 November 2020

Summary

Lead Member: Alan McDermott, Leader of the Council

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Wards Affected: All

Approval Timetable	Date
Management Board	Various dates
Portfolio Holder	29 October 2020
Planning and Transportation CAB	9 November 2020
Finance and Governance CAB	10 November 2020
Communities CAB	11 November 2020
Cabinet	3 December 2020

Recommendations

Officer recommendations as supported by the Portfolio Holder:

1. That, given the current exceptional social and economic context, Cabinet focuses on the delivery of an updated set of priority projects and action plans in response to impact assessments associated with Covid-19.
2. That Cabinet notes and approves a set of long-term priorities and that further work is undertaken to develop and deepen these themes over the course of 2020 and 2021 as the financial context in which we will be operating becomes clearer and as the environment for external consultation improves.

1. Introduction and Background

- 1.1 This report considers the current social and economic context that the Council is operating in, and how this affects our ability to strategically plan in the short and medium term.
- 1.2 The report sets out our thinking around dealing with the immediate crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the plans we have in place to deal with this in the short to medium term (12-24 months); highlights our remaining plans for delivering out the viable projects within the existing Five Year Plan; sets out new future priorities, and considers how we can establish an evidence base to support future plans or projects we might develop.

2. Immediate Recovery

The Covid-19 Pandemic

- 2.1 The unprecedented impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on our residents, businesses and partners has meant that the Council has had to focus its attention and resources on responding to the worst public health emergency to affect us in a century.
- 2.2 The pandemic has affected almost every part of society and the economy, both here and across the world. Countries have raced to respond by imposing strict limits on social contact to limit the spread of disease. The tragic health consequences of the pandemic have seen many thousands lose their lives and there have been other significant social and economic impacts – some of which will have a long-lasting impact.
- 2.3 Alongside the many negative impacts there have also been some positive outcomes including the mass mobilisation of residents, businesses and community organisations to support local people who have been affected by the pandemic and changes to working patterns and a reduction in commuting with associated environmental benefits.
- 2.4 The pandemic has had and will have both short-term and long-term impacts on the Borough. The short-term to medium-term impacts have been highlighted thorough our impact assessments and action plans, and national evidence is emerging to show that the pandemic will have a disproportionate impact on the economies of destination towns and on the hospitality industry and also that it will exacerbate disadvantage and inequalities.
- 2.5 The pandemic has also had a significant impact on the Council's finances. Details are set out elsewhere in this agenda but, put simply, it has required the Council to commit all of its reserves to absorbing the loss of income, meeting the challenges of the pandemic and maintaining service delivery. Whilst there has been some support from government, at the time of writing this report, the

Council is looking at a shortfall of over £2 million for the current year and a highly uncertain outlook for subsequent years. This is clearly not a sustainable position going forward and greater clarity will be required before the Council can fully set out its ambitions for the future.

- 2.6 In this environment of uncertainty and change, the pandemic has created an opportunity for the Council to re-think how it works and how best to deliver public services in the most cost-effective way.
- 2.7 The immediate need to support our residents and the economy, coupled with an uncertain future for the state and nature of the economy, means that we are now looking to revisit our Five Year Plan at the earliest in 2021/22. Other factors to consider are the future of our high streets, how resident and customer behaviours and expectations may have changed as a result, our reduced income streams and the funding likely to be made available to local authorities and the public sector more generally.
- 2.8 However, this does not mean that we are foregoing planning in the short to medium term. In fact the Council has worked over the summer and autumn with a range of stakeholders, including Kent County Council, Parish and Town Councils, the Federation of Small Business, Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce, Tunbridge Wells Together, Tunbridge Wells Citizen's Advice Bureau, and Town and Country Housing to establish impact assessments and action plans over a wide range of workstreams, which deal with different aspects of recovery (attached at **appendices A-M**).
- 2.9 The impact assessments, covering the business sector; housing; community safety; financial inclusion; health; and the voluntary and community sector (VCS) and local councils sector (Parish and Town Councils) show that the pandemic has had a significant impact on business and society, which is predicted to increase over future months.

Businesses

- 2.10 In terms of businesses, the impact assessment shows that unemployment has already significantly increased in the borough, with over 1,000 businesses responding that they only have cash reserves to cover the next 1-3 months. Turnover for businesses in the Borough has been negatively affected, with the hospitality and leisure amongst the worst affected.
- 2.11 Following national expectations and trends, existing employers within the Borough may be looking to downsize office accommodation requirements, with more working-from-home opportunity, which will have an impact on the way in which our town centres work, and there may be greater need for more flexible space to be provided.
- 2.12 Employers in London may also be looking to do something similar however, which may mean local residents spend more time working from home and can

more often stay local and shop local. This could be an emerging opportunity for our towns and villages.

- 2.13 The action plan that has been developed to support business recovery focusses on skills, so that businesses can move from recovery to growth. It also recognises the importance of providing opportunities for younger employees (as the 18-24 age group has been most affected by unemployment), and actions have been included to create a Kickstart Gateway for the Borough.
- 2.14 Five key objectives of place-shaping and promotion; accessibility and connectivity; skills and employability; rural economy; and supporting enterprise; have been included in the Business Recovery Plan.

Housing

- 2.15 Housing need and availability within the Borough was already acute before the pandemic, and affordability for residents was a particular concern. Plans to address this are coming forward as part of our emerging Local Plan (our strategic document for planning homes, business and leisure sites, and protecting green space across the Borough).
- 2.16 The Plan recognises the importance of protecting the Borough's highly valued green spaces and historic built environment, whilst at the same time enabling economic and housing growth. It also emphasises the need to provide affordable housing (in all its forms) for young people and older households.
- 2.17 This pre-existing need is likely to have been exacerbated by the pandemic, and our Housing Services department's impact assessment shows that placements in emergency housing (where households are in priority need and at immediate threat of homelessness) have already increased.
- 2.18 Moving households on from this emergency accommodation is likely to be challenging given the lack of affordable rental accommodation across the Borough. This may be further exacerbated in the coming months by the end of the furlough scheme, and national trends which are seeing more people move to areas outside of London for larger homes (given that working-from-home makes this a more viable option) and with more open space, putting further pressure on the housing market.
- 2.19 Priorities for the housing action plan include moving the rough sleepers who were accommodated as part of the 'Everyone In' policy into more stable accommodation during the lockdown, to ensure that they remain in secure accommodation, focusing on negotiating with private landlords on behalf of residents at risk of homelessness to try to maintain their current housing wherever possible, and using Discretionary Housing Payments to help prevent homelessness for those who have been financially affected by the pandemic. We are also considering the potential conversion of a number of our existing properties.

Financial Inclusion

- 2.20 Evidence suggests virus has impacted heavily on the economy, with job losses being felt across all sectors, but with a particularly hard impact being felt by the young and the lower skilled.
- 2.21 The number of out-of-work benefits claimants has increased most dramatically in the younger age groups in the Borough, with the 25-29 age group seeing a 270 percent increase in unemployment levels between March and July. This is often a crucial time in people's lives, as they start to consider taking the next steps in their careers, first home buying and planning to start families. The loss of work at this age can have a devastating impact on these fundamental life plans and can have a negative impact that is experienced over a lifetime.
- 2.22 The financial inclusion impact assessment highlights that the hospitality and retail sectors, where many young people start their employment, have been hit the hardest, with job vacancies advertised in Tunbridge Wells decreasing by 72 percent. Low income families with children (who were already struggling before the pandemic) are 50 percent more likely to have lost their jobs than those with children who were not struggling.
- 2.23 Nationally, the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, and the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (the largest public intervention in job preservation ever seen, by some distance) has meant that at one point, nearly a third of all employees were on some type of furlough. These schemes have undoubtedly been significantly beneficial for low income families, and those at greatest risk of jobs losses, but this level of support cannot continue. With the schemes set to unwind from October, and the prospect of further local lockdowns on the horizon, the issues around financial inclusion are likely to become more acute in the coming months.
- 2.24 Actions for the financial inclusion plan include joint working between the Council, Tunbridge Wells Citizen's Advice Bureau and Debt Advice to support residents, identifying those who may be vulnerable and/or are behind on rent and helping them maximise income through benefit take up, improving accessibility to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme support, reviewing and adapting the Council's approach to debt recovery, signing up to the Citizen's Advice Bureau Council Tax portal, sending communications out to communities about what financial help is available, and running a targeted benefits campaign to maximise takeup.

Health

- 2.25 The coronavirus, and its associated effects, has had a significant impact on physical and mental health and wellbeing. For those who have directly suffered directly from the virus, this impact has at times been devastating and tragic. But the impacts on health and wellbeing have been much more widespread, ranging from cancelled operations and services for other diseases that would have normally been critical to support good health, to increased anxiety and stress

caused by job losses and reduced social interactions – in particular reduced contact from family members or support networks who would normally provide mental health support in a crisis.

- 2.26 Nationally, we know that Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic populations are more likely to be affected by Covid-19 and, when they do contract it, it is more likely to be severe. Reasons for this are still being understood, but the evidence points to a range of socio-economic factors, including a higher likelihood of suffering from co-morbidities which exacerbate Covid-19 and which are linked to economic disadvantage, the higher likelihood of working as a 'key worker' and/or using public transport to access work which increases the chances of exposure, and a higher likelihood of living in cramped or overcrowded accommodation which reduces the ability to apply social distancing measures.
- 2.27 Whilst these issues exist at a national and structural level, the Borough Council needs to consider what it can do to mitigate any disadvantage or inequality through its plans and policies.
- 2.28 Health data for Tunbridge Wells Borough is not easily accessible at a local level, although the data sources we do have available indicate that there has been an increase in demand for mental health support and an increase in hospital admissions for alcohol-related harm.
- 2.29 Actions within the health action plan include promoting and extending physical activity opportunities, improving cycling access through the Cycling Strategy and promoting alternatives to the car through the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan. Alongside this, networking with health care professionals across Kent, developing digital access to 'One You Kent' services, promoting the Everyday Active Campaign, developing better awareness and understanding of local communities and needs, and working in partnership to promote and provide mental health services have also been included.

Community Safety

- 2.30 Local data is more readily available for understanding community safety issues, in particular from our domestic abuse service partners, DAVSS and from Kent Police.
- 2.31 The impact assessment shows that anti-social behaviour, in particular around noise and nuisance complaints, and neighbour disputes has increased significantly since March. The Police nationally have been given the responsibility and powers to enforce restrictions to public and private life that have been brought in to manage the pandemic, and locally are dealing with complaints around a lack of social distancing being observed.
- 2.32 The impact assessment also shows that need for support around domestic abuse issues has increased dramatically since March. This is in line with national data, which has shown that the lockdown had a critical adverse effect on those

suffering from domestic abuse due to a lack of privacy or 'safe space' available, which is usually outside the home, to gain respite from abuse or to seek support.

- 2.33 Tackling domestic abuse within the Borough was already a priority for the Council in its Community Safety Action Plan, and so this has been expanded on support DAVSS to apply for extra funding for service provision. Alongside this, actions for outreach workers have been identified to help support young people during this difficult time and ensuring that networking with other agencies and organisations continues to evolve and improve.

Voluntary and Community Sector and Local Councils

- 2.34 Nationally, the voluntary and community sector (VCS) have suffered from significant losses in income over the period from March. Whilst this has in part been mitigated by government grants to the sector (in particular for larger charities) this support has not been universal, and a number of charities are struggling with both a lack of resources and increased workloads.
- 2.35 Overall, the impact assessment shows that the local position for the VCS is relatively secure, but demand for services had increased across the board. At the time of the survey The Forum Community Interest Company was concerned about their financial position, however in October they were able to secure funding from the Government's Cultural Sector Support Grants, which has helped to mitigate the funding pressures in the short-term. Local Councils in the area are faring well, however. They do not have significant financial concerns at this time and have been able to help mobilise significant community action within the areas.
- 2.36 It is important to note for the VCS in particular, the local data only gives a snapshot of a small part of the sector. Some organisations that were invited to take part in the survey did not respond, and there are many others where the impact remains unknown – particularly the smaller and more niche organisations providing on the ground support. This means that there could be significant problems for the sector locally that the Council is currently blind to.
- 2.37 The health and vitality of the VCS community is of vital importance to the Borough as the services they provide to residents helps to prevent or lessen the need for more intensive and costly interventions later on. These later interventions are usually borne by the public sector in the form of Police contact, enhanced benefits and/or housing support, Social Services contact and NHS contact.
- 2.38 Actions included in the action plan centre around exploring the provision of a 'community hub' for the VCS, which will promote networking opportunities and resource sharing, ensuring that we further understand the local situation, in particular for those organisations that have not responded, providing support around digital skills and training and to access funding opportunities, and ensuring that Local Councils are as prepared as possible for winter business continuity planning.

Council Services

- 2.39 The Council has worked exceptionally hard to support local residents, businesses and voluntary and community organisations during the pandemic. This has included the establishment of a ‘community hub’ to support vulnerable and isolated residents access food and household essentials, ‘TWSocial’ – a website to tackle social isolation, the distribution of £27 million in business grants and providing support to voluntary and community sector organisations. The Council has set up a ‘Covid-19 Panel’ involving representatives from business, residents’ associations and parish and town councils to oversee the Council’s response to the pandemic and to promote a sustainable recovery.
- 2.40 The impact assessment and action plan on the Council’s services highlights the extreme level of uncertainty that the authority is now operating in. The move to flexible and digital working, which was already underway well before the pandemic, has been crucial in ensuring that the Council was able to continue to deliver a high level of service whilst staff work almost exclusively at home. This has created an opportunity to redefine the Council’s accommodation needs and working patterns for the future. Whilst it is incredibly difficult to set plans and priorities in the current environment, the Council has identified that it will need to prepare for increased demand in the future, review key plans and policies, continue to engage with residents, businesses, and Councillors, consider accommodation requirements and flexible working needs, ensure the ICT strategy continues to meet the needs of the organisation, and continue the Modern Ways of Working Programme.

3. Delivering Current Projects

Current Projects

- 3.1 The current Five-Year Plan lists a set of eight priority projects which had been identified as important to meeting the vision and priorities set out in the Plan. Some of these projects have now been delivered, and others are no longer relevant due to political decisions made last year within the Council. This affected three projects which were collectively known as ‘Calverley Square’, and included the provision of a Theatre, new Town Hall and office space, and underground parking. These projects are now no longer being progressed, and therefore need to be removed from the Five Year Plan. The Council has also completed the project to deliver an enhanced public realm in Royal Tunbridge Wells and so this too can be removed from the Plan.
- 3.2 That leaves four other projects: delivering the Local Plan; supporting the delivery of community hubs in Cranbrook, Paddock Wood and Southborough; delivering the Sports Facilities Strategy; and delivering the Amelia Scott Cultural and Learning Hub. These remain as key projects for the Council to deliver over the short to medium term.

- ***Delivering the Local Plan***

- 3.3 Following widespread consultation on the Draft Local Plan in autumn 2019, work has been progressing at pace on the “Pre-Submission version the Local Plan”. We are scheduled and on track to undertake consultation on this in spring 2021, before submitting to the Planning Inspector in summer 2021, ahead of formal Examination by the Planning Inspector in late 2021.
- 3.4 In the autumn, the Government undertook two consultations on proposed changes to the national planning system. The Council made strong representations on both.
- 3.5 The first consultation relates to changes to the current system. It includes proposed changes to the ways that the amounts of housing to be planned for are calculated, unless a Council is able to finalise work on its emerging Local Plans within a “transition” window. For Tunbridge Wells the proposed changes would result in a 32% increase in housing requirement above that which formed the basis of the Draft Local Plan (rising from 693 homes per year to 895). This would provide huge increased pressure on the Green Belt, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, heritage designations and infrastructural capacity of the borough. However, the timetable for the Local Plan should fall, just, within the “transition window” meaning that we can progress on the current, lower housing figures.
- 3.6 The second Government consultation is a “White Paper” on longer term fundamental and widespread changes to the national system. Having a submitted, and adopted Local Plan, will put the borough in the best position as these longer term changes are introduced over the coming years: it will provide clarity and certainty on where growth should go, and reduce the risk of speculative development, whilst work then starts on the new style Local Plan.
- 3.7 The development and submission of a Local Plan will require the Council to make difficult decisions on balancing the need and Government requirements for housing, employment and infrastructure development, but it is a fundamental priority for the Council to undertake the consultation on, and submission of, the Local Plan within the current timetable.

- ***Delivering Community Hubs***

- 3.8 There has been significant progress on the delivery of the Hubs over the previous Five Year Plan period. These community facilities will ensure that key services are retained in local areas, and will be used as a space for communities to come together.
- 3.9 Southborough Hub is under construction and will be opened in 2021 which will see the delivery of a GP surgery, library, theatre/hall, community rooms, retail unit, football pavilion, increased parking and public realm open to the public.
- 3.10 Paddock Wood Community Centre will deliver a community facility including community rooms, catering facilities, parking, pre-school and a café on the Memorial Field in Paddock Wood. With Baxall now appointed as the contractor,

the project will shortly be submitted to planning with construction on site anticipated to begin in 2021, should the planning application be agreed.

- 3.11 Cranbrook Community Centre will see the delivery of a GP surgery, community rooms, catering facilities and a library on the Cranbrook Engineering site in Cranbrook. Having completed the feasibility on the project and the NHS having confirmed the location is acceptable, the project will shortly start to pull together a project team in order to progress through the RIBA stages.

- ***Delivering the Sports Facilities Strategy: Hawkenbury Hub***

- 3.12 This particular strand of work aims to improve football facilities for the Royal Tunbridge Wells area through the provision of a new sports hub adjacent to Hawkenbury Recreation Ground. Some of the existing underused or poor quality football pitches and facilities will be provided through the provision of two senior pitches (one of which to be 3G/stadium quality), three youth pitches, and one mini pitch at a new sports hub. Outline planning permission was granted in 2017 for expansion of recreational facilities.
- 3.13 Ecology, noise, lighting and traffic surveys are have been completed or are in the process of being carried out and an early pre planning application advice request will be submitted to the Local Planning Authority and KCC in November.
- 3.14 An updated Business Case will be produced in 2021 to take in to account the feedback from the pre-application and prevailing market conditions to inform the next steps of the development of the project.

Delivering the Amelia Scott Cultural and Learning Hub

- 3.15 The Council has a clear and ambitious vision to “grow our role as the cultural centre of the Kent & Sussex High Weald, so that by 2024 the borough of Tunbridge Wells is nationally recognised for its vibrant cultural provision”. The development and delivery of The Amelia Scott sits at the heart of this vision. Likewise, the commitment to enhance the vibrant cultural and arts scene, and to further encourage tourism and investment in the economy, is a key component of the Council’s current Five Year Plan.
- 3.16 The Amelia Scott is a new and exciting cultural and educational concept bringing together learning, culture, art and advice in an integrated and expanded Grade II listed building. Linked to the heart of the concept is the collection of 60,000 objects including the important Camden collection, Victorian costume and Tunbridge ware which to date have either been displayed or stored at risk of deterioration in an old museum which does not meet current standards for the storage or display of collections.
- 3.17 The project has been widely supported by businesses and residents alike to help deliver the wider regeneration of Royal Tunbridge Wells, a destination town that relies heavily on footfall and which has, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic seen a five-fold increase in unemployment. This unique space will protect and grow the nationally recognised creative economy, promote learning and skills, and play a key role in the economic recovery of the town.

- 3.18 In 2015 Cabinet agreed to deliver a joint project with Kent County Council to establish a Cultural and Learning Hub to be known as The Amelia Scott. The vision for the new hub was for it to become “a vibrant centre for heritage, arts, culture and learning, delivering a diverse programme to engage and inspire visitors” bringing together the following services; museum, art gallery, library, registration, archives, adult education (Community, Learning and Skills), visitor information service and Gateway.
- 3.19 Since 2015 the project has been overseen and managed by a Partnership Board comprising Cabinet Members and senior officers from KCC and TWBC who receive regular reports on the programme and its constituent projects, costs and timelines for delivery.
- 3.20 In December 2017 the Arts Council England (ACE) confirmed their support and funding with the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) (now National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF)) confirming their support and funding in March 2018. These decisions bookmarked the planning permission and listed building consent for the scheme which was granted in January 2018.
- 3.21 Further updates to Cabinet were received in June 2018, December 2018 and October 2019. These reports progressed the development of the scheme including Kent County Council and TWBC signing a Collaboration Agreement setting out how the project would be undertaken. The October 2019 Cabinet report set out to approve funding, novate contracts, commence construction and undertake all necessary construction, ancillary works and fit out works to deliver The Amelia Scott project.
- 3.22 Now, Willmott Dixon Interiors are appointed as our contractor and work on site commenced in January 2020. Despite the Covid-19 pandemic the construction work remains on course to complete in May 2021, with the contractor approximately 3 weeks ahead of schedule. Alongside the build, the fit-out workstream is progressing to timetable and The Amelia Scott remains on track for a soft public opening taking place in April 2022.

Additional Projects

- ***Future of the Town Hall***

- 3.23 In addition, whilst the Council has decided that it no longer wishes to proceed with the Calverley Square group of projects, it has decided that it wants to explore options for the Town Hall. This work was begun initially in 2019, but due to the pandemic, the context that the Council is working in, the space requirements, and flexible working considerations have all changed, and will need to feed into this piece of work going forwards.

- ***Assembly Hall Theatre***

- 3.24 With the ending of the Calverley Square scheme, there has been a need to review the ongoing future of the Assembly Hall Theatre. This work was due to take place this year, but the pandemic has significantly affected the Theatre’s

operation, and there is now a need to consider the future landscape of the cultural sector and how the Assembly Hall can fit into this. The key aim of this review will be to ensure that the Assembly Hall Theatre provides value for money for taxpayers.

4. Our Priorities for the Future

Consultation

- 4.1 The current Five Year Plan comes to an end in 2022, and it had always been our intention to revisit and redraft it in 2021 based on a consultation process in 2020.
- 4.2 As a result of the pandemic and the consequential restrictions imposed on meetings and social gatherings, the plans for extensive consultation this year were put on hold, and we are now facing an uncertain future – both nationally and locally.
- 4.3 However, as a Council, we need to plan for the future. The Council shapes the Borough and makes a difference to its residents, businesses and visitors in a number of ways – through delivery of our various plans and strategies (most particularly the Local Plan which sets out what gets built where), through projects and initiatives, through community leadership and through the very many services we deliver on a day-to-day basis. This place-shaping function requires us to think ahead and plan for what we want the Borough to look like in the future, and one of the ways we do this is through the Five Year Plan.
- 4.4 Whilst we haven't been able to conduct significant consultation and engagement this year with businesses and residents, we held a consultation event in 2019 for local elected leaders, termed the Councillor Convention.
- 4.5 Attendees at the Councillor Convention included Kent County Councillors, our Borough Councillors, Parish and Town Chairmen, and the Chairman of Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum. The Convention discussed the broad themes and issues that they felt were affecting the Borough, and the outcomes of this Convention have informed early thinking on revising the priorities in the Five Year Plan.
- 4.6 The common themes that came out of last year's Convention were:
 - Culture
 - Infrastructure
 - Housing
 - Transport, and
 - Environment.
- 4.7 Top priorities under these themes (which are expressed as both challenges to address and opportunities to take) were:
 - Culture – marketing cultural activities and variation in cultural offer.

- Infrastructure – broadband, cycling, population growth, HE/FE offer, sports and leisure facilities.
- Housing – affordable housing, dispersal of housing growth.
- Transport – condition of the roads, cheaper buses, incentives to walk/cycle, better parking, reduced traffic.
- Environment – EV charging points, grey water recycling, protect the countryside, reduce air toxicity.

4.8 It is important to recognise that the above themes and priorities represent very early stage thinking in the strategic planning process, and for many of the priorities, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council is not directly responsible for the service, and so our role would take the form of lobbying and persuading those who do have responsibility (Central Government, Kent County Council, Highways England, BT, etc.).

4.9 To add to the broad strategic aims expressed above, the Council conducted a small scale digital consultation in 2020 on setting the budget for 2021 and asking what our future priorities might be. The broad issues that came out of this public consultation are:

- Reducing council costs by reducing number of councillors, staff and pay.
- Sell fixed assets (property).
- Reduce costs by stopping/reducing some services.
- Merge with another authority.
- Review contracts to make savings.
- Increase on-the-spot fines.
- Tackle anti-social behaviour.
- Encourage parking in off-street car parks.
- Conserve the environment.
- Invest in green energy projects.
- Sell stake in RVP or redevelop part for residential.

4.10 Once there is greater clarity on the national and local economy, our funding and the environment in which we operate we will be able to consider the above priorities in our new operating context and consult more formally and widely with members of the public and businesses on what the list of priorities should be, and what form viable projects could take to deliver them. This is likely to be towards the end of 2021.

Future Priorities

4.11 Whilst the above themes are broad and high level and have not been tested against public opinion or deliverability, we want to set out for what our priorities are in the longer term, following the recovery period. The below themes and priorities set out the direction of travel in our strategic planning, taking into account what we are already committed to provide in the future, and what our stakeholders have so far said to us. Our ability to deliver on some of these long-term aims will crucially depend on the availability of external funding from Central

Government or elsewhere. By setting out our long-term aims now, we believe we will be well positioned to take advantage of external funding opportunities as and when they arise.

Future Priority 1 - Sustainable Growth

- 4.12 **Attract new investment** - We want to attract local investment into the borough to secure high quality local jobs. To do this we will work with partner organisations across the South East to improve the business environment and make the borough an attractive and profitable place to do business. We will actively seek to encourage Foreign Direct Investment by working with Kent County Council to promote the borough, and by supporting economic development within our Local Plan.
- 4.13 **Increase housing provision** - Through the Local Plan, we will increase housing provision, in particular affordable housing of which we know there is a significant lack across the borough. This will need to be done whilst protecting our historic, built and natural environment qualities, and having regard to concerns about congestion and air quality.
- 4.14 **Improve infrastructure provision** - We will work with relevant organisations to secure infrastructure improvements, and if necessary challenge other authorities who are responsible for providing the infrastructure to make sure our residents get the quality of built environment they need. In particular, we will seek the timely delivery of infrastructure to support the delivery of new housing and ensure the vitality of our communities.

Future Priority 2 - Green Environment

- 4.15 **Protect biodiversity** – The Council is aiming to protect and improve biodiversity across the borough and bring people closer to nature for the benefit of all. The Council will move from ensuring no net loss to biodiversity to achieving a minimum 10% net gain for biodiversity from all new development through the introduction of new planning policies. The Council has committed to producing Supplementary Planning Documents to ensure these policies are implemented, that gains are properly measured and secured in the long term and properly funded.

As part of achieving net gains for biodiversity the Council will explore opportunities for enhancing existing sites and creating new sites for nature working with Kent Wildlife Trust, and Kent Nature Partnership. Where appropriate sites will provide new and improved public access to bring people closer to nature, and where possible contribute towards improved ecosystem services such as providing timber, improving flood mitigation and carbon storage.

The Council will continue to work with Kent High Weald Partnership to improve biodiversity on council owned sites, raise awareness of nature through education and community activities, and to run an accessible programme of volunteering to

assist with site management and offer opportunities for improving physical and mental wellbeing.

- 4.16 **Promote sustainable travel** - Sustainable travel includes walking, cycling and public transport. We will promote these low environmental impact methods of travel in our towns and villages by working with Kent County Council to improve the network of lanes for cycling and Light Electric Vehicles. We will seek to ensure that this network of lanes can be used by horse-riders, which is particularly important in our rural areas. In the centre of Royal Tunbridge Wells we will aim to create cycling and Light Electric Vehicle infrastructure to the town and the Pantiles with nearby population centres.

We will work with partners to improve and increase the availability of charging points for electric vehicles, encourage low emission zones and 20mph areas, improve pedestrian and cyclist safety across the borough and introduce pedestrian areas where they are suitable.

- 4.17 **Reduce carbon emissions** - The council has declared a climate emergency and set out an ambition to be carbon neutral by 2030. We will deliver an action plan to reduce net carbon emissions in our own estate by 2030 and to ensure that all new contracts include plans to be carbon neutral by this date.

We will explore switching our own vehicle fleet to run on electricity or hydrogen and will encourage public transport providers to switch to electric or hydrogen powered vehicles.

We will investigate whether and how hydrogen refuelling facilities can be encouraged or provided in the Borough, both for our own vehicles and for private vehicles. We will monitor our progress and report it publicly.

Air quality is improving across the Borough, but we will work with schools in particular to ensure that vehicle emissions around children are minimised. We will explore whether 'No Idling Zones' can be established, particularly in areas with high levels of vehicle congestion.

Future Priority 3 - Culture and Leisure

- 4.18 **Strengthen and preserve the cultural and heritage offering** - As we outlined in the context section, the town of Royal Tunbridge Wells has a rich history of as Spa Town providing cultural and leisure activities. But this extends beyond the town itself and into the wider borough, with many of our beautiful towns and villages, such as Cranbrook and Hawkhurst being sought after tourist destinations because of the high quality of heritage preservation and cultural activities available.

As a Council, we want to strengthen and preserve these borough qualities by ensuring our heritage is protected by policies within the Local Plan and developing a design guide to ensure new development remains in keeping with its surroundings.

- 4.19 **Provide leisure opportunities** - Participation in sport and active recreation has the potential to improve the quality of life for residents and communities and deliver wider social, health, economic and environmental benefits. Covid-19 has limited some elements of organised sports due to the restrictions put in place to control the pandemic but it has reinforced that a healthy active lifestyle can help combat the impact of the virus.

As a Council, we will continue to implement the Sports and Active Recreation Strategy, including the provision of sports hubs and facilities at our three leisure centres. We will continue to encourage opportunities and facilities for active travel on foot, bike and horseback.

- 4.20 **Protect green spaces** - Our green spaces are an important asset and access to high quality open spaces, and opportunities for sport and recreation, can make an important contribution to the health and wellbeing of communities and they will be protected by policies within the Local Plan. The Council will continue to manage its own parks and grounds to provide environmental enhancements and improve biodiversity.

5. Options Considered

1. Recovery, Consultation and Future Priorities Approach

- 5.1 The above outlines an approach to strategic planning over the short to medium term, which will enable to Council to both assist in the economic and social recovery of the Borough following the pandemic, establish its own recovery, and begin to plan for a new future post Covid-19.
- 5.2 The approach uses our recovery plans as the basis for planning the work that the Council will deliver over the next 12-18 months, and includes commitments to deliver on existing projects in the current Five Year Plan, plus two additional projects that are considered necessary in the current context (options for the Town Hall and AHT).
- 5.3 It recognises the work that has already been done regarding setting future priorities and the feedback that has been received from stakeholders. This is translated into the above initial priorities in section 4, which can be consulted on and deepened over the coming months.

2. Recovery and Future Priorities Approach

- 5.4 The Council could choose to take the above approach to strategic planning but decide not to consult more widely on its proposed future priorities. This would

enable the Council to agree the detail that supports its proposed priorities (including project proposals) more quickly.

3. Recovery Only Approach

- 5.5 Given the extraordinary context in which we are now operating, the Council could choose to focus only on strategic planning and delivery in the short term, to ensure recovery is embedded in both the economy and society, and within the Council itself. This approach recognises the extraordinary levels of work being undertaken by Council staff at the time to respond to the pandemic and focusses on the immediate needs of the Borough's residents.

6. Preferred Option and Reason

1. Recovery and Priorities Consultation Approach

- 6.1 The recommended approach is to focus on recovery and delivering the remaining projects within the current Five Year Plan over the next 12-18 months, and to consult extensively and widely on the proposed priorities within this paper towards the end of 2021.
- 6.2 This approach means that the Council can focus its resources and energies on dealing with the immediate and pressing issues of recovery, and delivering the remaining projects in the short term, whilst allowing time for funding certainty to become clearer. The priorities can then be consulted on with the benefit of better understanding around what the Council is realistically able to deliver within its resources.
- 6.3 Ensuring there is time and space to conduct deep and meaningful consultation on the future priorities will also ensure that there is wide public support for any projects that are proposed as a result of the priorities, and will ensure the Council delivers its place-shaping role in a way in which residents, businesses and stakeholders support and find acceptable.

7. Consultation on Options

- 7.1 The above options have been discussed with Management Board and Leadership Board and represent the realistic options that the Council could take with regards to strategic planning in the current environment.

Recommendation from Cabinet Advisory Board

- 7.2 The Finance and Governance Cabinet Advisory Board were consulted on 10th November 2020 and agreed the following:

To be updated following the Finance and Governance CAB meeting.

8. Implementation

8.1 Implementation of the actions from the Recovery Action Plans

9. Appendices and Background Documents

Appendices:

- Appendix A – M: Impact Assessments and Action Plans

Background Papers:

- None.

10. Cross Cutting Issues

A. Legal (including the Human Rights Act)

The Five Year Plan Update will enable the Council to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness as required under section 3 of the Local Government Act 1999. The implications arising from the Covid-19 pandemic are addressed within the report since they have an impact on the Council's priorities. These include obligations arising from the Coronavirus Act 2010 and related regulations.

Paragraph 6 of the report outlines the preferred option. The recommended approach is to focus on recovery and delivering the remaining projects within the current Five Year Plan over the next 12-18 months, and to consult extensively and widely on the proposed priorities within this paper towards the end of 2021. The decision falls within the remit of Cabinet following consideration by the relevant Cabinet Advisory Board(s) since the proposal is to update the priorities within the existing Five Year Plan.

Human Rights Act 1998: Council policies and decisions should take into account the 1998 which protects a number of rights, to include the right to respect for private and family life (article 8), the right to a fair trial (article 6) ie criminal and civil proceedings undertaken by the Council; and the right to personal liberty (article 5). The proposals in this report do not conflict with the Council's statutory obligations under the 1998 Act.

Patricia Narebor, Head of Mid Kent Legal, 29 October 2020

B. Finance and Other Resources

The issues in the report relate to the main priorities of the Council and clarify the current work that is being undertaken to response to the Coronavirus pandemic. The priorities that the Council is currently working on have already been included in this year's budget and are a part of the current Medium Term Financial Strategy. Two new priorities have been added, both of which will require additional financial resources to explore further. The priority to explore options for the Town Hall will be met within current budgets for the Property Team. At such time as further resources are needed that are outside the budgetary framework, a report detailing the proposed expenditure, and the effect this will have on the existing budget and priorities, will need to be agreed by Cabinet and Full Council at the appropriate time. The priority to explore options for the Assembly Hall Theatre will be met within existing resources. Again should further funding be required that is outside of the budget framework, a report with the proposed expenditure and implications will need to be agreed at Cabinet and Full Council.

The work to respond to the Coronavirus pandemic has been partly funded by Central Government. Where actions within action plans require financial resources to implement, these actions, together with proposals for how to fund them (which might include further funding from Central Government) will need to be brought forward to Cabinet. If the proposals are outside the budgetary framework, this will also need to be agreed by Full Council.

Jane Fineman, Head of Finance, Parking and Procurement

C. Staffing

The report relates to the current and future priorities and work plans of the Council, and so directly impacts on the staffing requirement at the Council.

The additional work created by responding to the Coronavirus pandemic will need to be taken into account when planning the work to progress the longer term priorities of the Council, some of which may need to be delayed or postponed until the relevant staffing resources are available. This is particularly the case for senior managers, who are required to liaise and be a part of the regional and national response, as well as the local response.

The Council will need to monitor levels of health and wellbeing closely, and be aware of the additional 'asks' it is placing on staff so that work levels can be managed carefully.

Nicky Carter, Head of HR, Communities and Culture

D. Risk Management

The issues in this report relate to the current and future work programme of the Council, and where appropriate, are included in the Council's main strategic risk register.

Jane Clarke, Head of Policy and Governance

E. Environment and Sustainability

The proposed future priorities that are contained in this report have a direct relevance to the requirements in the National Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 and the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. The proposed priorities seek to preserve biodiversity in the Borough and to conserve the Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, through specific policies within the emerging Local Plan. As these policies come forward through the Council's decision making processes, further details regarding how they impact on the environment and sustainability will be provided for consideration.

Section 40, National Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006

40(1) Every public authority must, in exercising its functions have regard so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity.

Section 85, Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000

85(1) In exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in an area of outstanding natural beauty, a relevant authority shall have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area of outstanding natural beauty.

Karin Grey, Sustainability Officer,

F. Community Safety

The majority of proposals within this report have a low relevance to community safety. Where the Council has proposed actions around community safety relating to the Coronavirus pandemic, this have been developed in accordance with the Council's Community Safety Partnership Plan.

Section 17, Crime and Disorder Act 1998

17(1) Without prejudice to any other obligation imposed on it, it shall be the duty of each authority to which this section applies to exercise its various functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area.

Terry Hughes, Community Safety Manager

G. Equalities

The recovery impact assessments include an assessment of how the Coronavirus pandemic has impacted on those with a protected characteristic. Nationally it has been observed that the pandemic has a greater impact on the elderly, those with a disability or long term illness, and those from BAME groups. Actions and policy interventions to support recovery will need to take this into account when being implemented.

The future priorities of the Council will need to be consulted on, and an Equalities Impact Assessment conducted at the relevant time to ensure that none of the proposed policies have a detrimental impact in terms of discrimination, harassment or victimisation on those with a protected characteristic, and where possible seeks to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between communities.

Section 149, Equality Act 2010

149(1) A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to –

(a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;

(b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;

(c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

Jane Clarke, Head of Policy and Governance.

H. Data Protection

The issues highlighted in this report have a low impact on data protection issues. Where consultations with the general public are run in the future, these will need to be conducted in accordance with the principles and requirements of relevant data protection legislation.

Article 5, General Data Protection Regulation 2016

1. Personal data shall be:

(a) processed lawfully, fairly and in a transparent manner in relation to the data subject;

(b) collected for specific, explicit and legitimate purposes and not further processed in a manner that is incompatible with those purposes;

(c) adequate, relevant and limited to what is necessary in relation to the purposes for which they are processed;

(d) accurate and, where necessary, kept up to date;

(e) kept in a form which permits identification of data subjects for no longer than is necessary for the purposes for which the personal data are processed;

(f) processed in a manner that ensures appropriate security of the personal data, including protection against unauthorised or unlawful processing and against accidental loss, destruction or damage, using appropriate technical or organisational measures.

Jane Clarke, Head of Policy and Governance

I. Health and Safety

The issues in this report have a low impact on health and safety considerations.

Jane Clarke, Head of Policy and Governance

J. Health and Wellbeing

The Council's response to the Coronavirus pandemic has a direct impact on the health and wellbeing of the residents within the Borough, and specific actions have been proposed through the Health impact assessment and action plan.

These actions have been developed in conjunction with the relevant policies of the Council that relate to health and wellbeing, and seek to support the health and wellbeing of all residents through the recovery period and afterwards.

- 1. Areas of deprivation: Will the proposal have an impact (positive or negative) on those living in areas of deprivation within the borough (40% most deprived in the country). These are Sherwood, Southborough and High Brooms, Broadwater and Rusthall.*
- 2. Healthier lifestyle opportunities: Will residents be more or less able to make healthier lifestyle choices such as physical activity (e.g. active travel, access to green spaces or access to leisure facilities), healthy eating (e.g. proximity or access to take away shops, allotments, food stores) and being smokefree*
- 3. Social and Community networks: Will the proposal make it easier for people to interact with one another e.g. encouraging community engagement*
- 4. Living and Working Conditions: does the proposal improve work or home environments, increase job, education or training opportunities, improve access to health services or housing*
- 5. General Socioeconomic, cultural and environmental conditions: Are there any other factors that may impact the above*

Rebecca Bowers, Healthy Lifestyles Manager