Covid-19 Organisational Recovery Strategy:

This Report sits alongside the impact assessments and action plans for the Council's other two strands of activity to promote a local recovery (business and community)

Background and introduction

As we have emphasised in the various reports to Cabinet, none of us have ever faced a public health challenge of the scale presented by the Covid-19 pandemic in our lifetime. The crisis has, is and will continue to impact on residents and businesses in the Borough as well as having a dramatic impact on the Council – its services, staff, budgets, capacity and priorities.

Our main initial focus was on our response to the crisis; we then turned our attention to the recovery and responding to the various 'unlocking' measures and doing all we could to support local businesses and residents. More recently, with numbers ticking up, our focus is increasingly on supporting Public Health England and KCC in preventing the spread of the virus and enforcing the various restrictions that have been re-imposed and on preparing to support residents, businesses and the voluntary and community sector if further additional restrictions are put in place and if support is required for shielded, isolated or vulnerable individuals.

In managing its response to the Coronavirus Pandemic, the Council has put together impact assessments and action plans for activity to support business and residents through the recovery. This Strategy sets out the impact on the Council's services and how we propose to plan for the recovery.

The Council's move from response to recovery

Details of the Council's initial response to the Covid-19 Pandemic are set out in a report to Cabinet on 25 June.

Since that date, a number of further changes have taken place in response to the changes to government guidance.

The Council's Services

The vast majority of the Council's services have now been restored since the report was considered by Cabinet including garden waste collections, the Council's leisure centres all town centre car parks and planning committee. The Assembly Hall Theatre successfully reopened in mid-October with a significantly reduced capacity and new safety arrangements in place and this reopening was bolstered with the announcement of a successful bid for £500k from Arts Council England. The way in which services are delivered has changed considerably with many services being delivered virtually and with restrictions placed on face-to-face meetings to ensure the safety of staff and members of the public.

Staff and councillors

The Council developed a three-stage approach to access to the Town Hall. The first stage (in line with government advice) saw only essential staff working in the Town Hall enabling it to be used as the Borough's Emergency Centre if so required. The second stage saw a limited range of staff who were either unable to work from home or who needed to be in the Town Hall. The third stage saw a greater number of staff able to return if they wanted to work from the Town Hall (up to a number that was assessed to be Covid-secure).

Since the Cabinet report was drafted, the vast majority of Committee meetings have been reinstituted. Whilst Committee meeting continue to be held through Skype, Teams or Zoom, the Council has permitted a limited number of councillors to (virtually) attend meetings at the Town Hall where there is a need to do so – for example inadequate broadband in a rural area.

The Council continues to engage heavily with staff, councillors and partners with fortnightly all-staff briefings presented by the Chief Executive and weekly all-councillor briefings. The Council has also successfully held a virtual alternative to its staff awards ceremony 'Celebrate'. Externally, the Council continues to engage actively with parish and town councils, voluntary and community sector organisations, businesses and resident associations.

The Council's Finances

The Council's ability to deliver services has been significantly impacted by the strain on its finances (both increased costs and loss of income). Details of the financial consequences of the pandemic are set out elsewhere on this agenda.

Setting a Course for the Future

Whilst it is clearly important for the Council to chart a course for the future, it is very difficult to do this when things are so uncertain in terms of the context in which we will be operating, the evolution of the Covid-19 Pandemic, the impact on the local economy and society and our financial position. As ever, there will be some things that we can control, some things we can influence and some things that we will simply have to accept.

This Organisational Recovery Strategy considers what the Council should be doing and thinking about in terms of its plans and priorities, its services, its staff, structures, premises and how it works. It looks at three phases: the 'now', the 'next' and the 'new normal'.

We need to accept that this is not going to be a normal strategy. We can't write it, consult on it, amend it and implement it. We will be operating in a fast-moving, dynamic environment – one in which we will have to respond to external events, decisions and situations. The Strategy will change and adapt to these events and circumstances

Context

Normally, a Council strategy would set out the context in which it has been developed and in which it will be delivered. With the uncertainty surrounding the country and the local area's public health and economic situation, it is almost impossible to predict with any accuracy what will happen. Nationally, the UK is clearly in the midst of a 'second wave' of the Covid-19 pandemic with numbers of cases, hospitalisations and deaths all increasing. Whilst numbers are significantly higher in the North East, North West and Midlands, there have been increases across the country (including Tunbridge Wells) and some surrounding areas have seen sharp upticks which have led to increased restrictions being imposed under the Government's new 'three tier' model. We look set to have a difficult Autumn and Winter ahead of us with some further restrictions on residents and businesses seeming inevitable. It also seems inevitable that these restrictions will have a longer-term impact on residents and businesses with higher levels of unemployment, debt, mental health conditions and other issues (set out in the various Covid-19 impact assessments that the Council has produced). The local economy also looks likely to be affected with some businesses already closed and the restrictions on social interaction likely to take a particularly heavy toll on leisure and hospitality businesses. As a destination town and key employment centre this will have a significant impact on Royal Tunbridge Wells and the Borough more generally. Set against this, businesses have worked very hard to adapt to new models of service delivery and to meet the needs of local residents and more residents are working locally and showing loyalty to businesses that supported them so successfully in the early days of the pandemic.

Looking to the Future: External Issues

<u>Customer Demand</u>

For the Council, we are likely to face both further reductions in income and peaks in demand. The financial consequences of this are set out elsewhere on this agenda but we are likely to see significant pressure on our Revenues and Benefits service, our Housing service, Environmental Health service, Economic Development service, Gateway and a number of 'support' services including Finance, Communications and Digital. Our experience has also been that funding has changed from planned, predictable allocations to short-term, targeted interventions that often require either complex application or administration processes with frequent changes to guidance. Based on our experience on the previous 'lockdown', other services are likely to be affected including Waste and potentially Leisure Centres and the Theatre. The Council has already stood its Community Hub back up in anticipation of increased demand (relocated from the Assembly Hall to the Gateway) and is in frequent communication with voluntary and community sector organisations and parish and town councils.

<u>Policies</u>

The Council will also need to keep its various policies and procedures under review. The Council has already made a number of short-term changes to its policies (for

example so as to facilitate changes of operation for businesses who have moved to collection or delivery services or to allow for outside seating) but more fundamental changes will be required. The Council had intended to undertake a comprehensive engagement exercise to inform the drafting of a new Five-Year Plan but, with restrictions on social interaction, capacity focused elsewhere and a highly uncertain operating environment, we have replaced this with an interim Strategic Plan (set out elsewhere on the agenda). Given the impact of the pandemic on the High Street, the Council has also commissioned some further work on this as part of the process of developing its Local Plan and whilst the Council has already recognised the need to update its Cultural Strategy, the impact of the pandemic on the cultural and leisure sectors will accentuate the need for this to be reviewed and revisited. On the issue of transport, the Council published a paper entitled 'Transport Strategy – Context and Review' as part of its Regulation 18 consultation. It was always our intention to turn this into a more comprehensive Transport Strategy and we will ensure that the Strategy takes account of the current and likely future changes that will arise because of the Pandemic. Other plans and strategies may also need to be reviewed and updated.

<u>Performance metrics</u>

Clearly with such a significant and rapidly evolving challenge as Covid-19 we need to keep a close eye on performance indicators to help us understand how the pandemic and associated restrictions are impacting on residents and businesses and how the Council is performing. In addition to the Council's normal suite of performance indicators, we have pulled together a suite of performance information that helps us understand the impact of the pandemic. We report these indicators to the Covid-19 Panel on a regular basis.

<u>Communication and engagement</u>

The Council has worked hard to ensure that it has communicated widely and effectively throughout the pandemic. Full details were given in the June update to Cabinet and, since then, the Council has continued to communicate both internally and externally including further business briefing sessions, regular meetings with parish chairmen, the BID and councillors. The Council has also refreshed and relaunched its website which has seen demand grow significantly throughout the pandemic and is using its 'Local' magazine as a backstop to ensure that residents who are unable or unwilling to access the website are kept informed. The Council will continue to engage and inform residents using all its communication channels.

Looking to the Future: Internal Issues

<u>Background</u>

As noted in the June Cabinet report, it is worth noting that we were well positioned to cope with the changes to working practices that were required as a result of the pandemic – we had moved a long way to promote flexible working (in terms of both HR policies, ICT equipment and organisational culture), we had an enterprise-wide

digital telephony solution and we were in the process of introducing webcasting for Committee meetings. Most importantly, the Council has incredibly dedicated and flexible staff who have been extraordinary in coping with and responding to the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Accommodation and Facilities

Throughout the pandemic, the Council has been adhering to government advice. It has adopted a three-stage approach which saw only a skeleton staff retained within the building during the initial phase of the lockdown followed by a move to allow staff who struggled to work from home or who needed access to Town Hall facilities to return followed to a more general return (up to numbers that could be maintained in a Covid-secure way). The Council will continue to follow government advice in this area. It seems likely that the majority of staff will be working from home or largely from home for the next six months.

More generally, the Council has been looking at the issue of staff accommodation for some time given the fact that the Town Hall is too large for our needs and expensive to run and maintain. Following the decision not to proceed with new accommodation as part of the Calverley Square scheme, a cross-party group of councillors was looking into this issue. A brief for consultants had been prepared and was due to be taken to Cabinet in June but, following the 'lockdown' in March 2020, meetings were suspended and have only just been reintroduced.

The pandemic has hugely accelerated pre-existing trends for organisations (including the Council) to move to more flexible patterns of working. In a recent survey of staff, the proportion of staff who saw themselves as being solely office based had decreased from 35 per cent to five per cent and the proportion who saw themselves as working flexibly increase from 17 to 40 per cent and the proportion who wanted to work mainly from home increased from six to 29 per cent. It is clear that the Pandemic has accelerated changes to working patterns by some years. We need to take this opportunity to redefine the Council's accommodation requirements in light of the increased demand for flexible and home working and the successful way in which the Council has adapted to new ways of working throughout the Pandemic.

ICT

As noted in the June report to Cabinet, the Council was well prepared for the switch to homeworking and, in the main, its systems have performed well. The charts below show the significant increase in the use of audio and video conferencing with a 500 per cent increase in audio calls and instant messaging, a 3,147 per cent increase in video and a 2,651 per cent increase in screen sharing. The Council shares its ICT services with Maidstone and Swale councils and we have only recently adopted an ICT Strategy which placed users and flexible working at its core. Working with Mid Kent Services partners, we will need to keep our Strategy, systems and performance under review and align them with any future changes to accommodation or working practices.
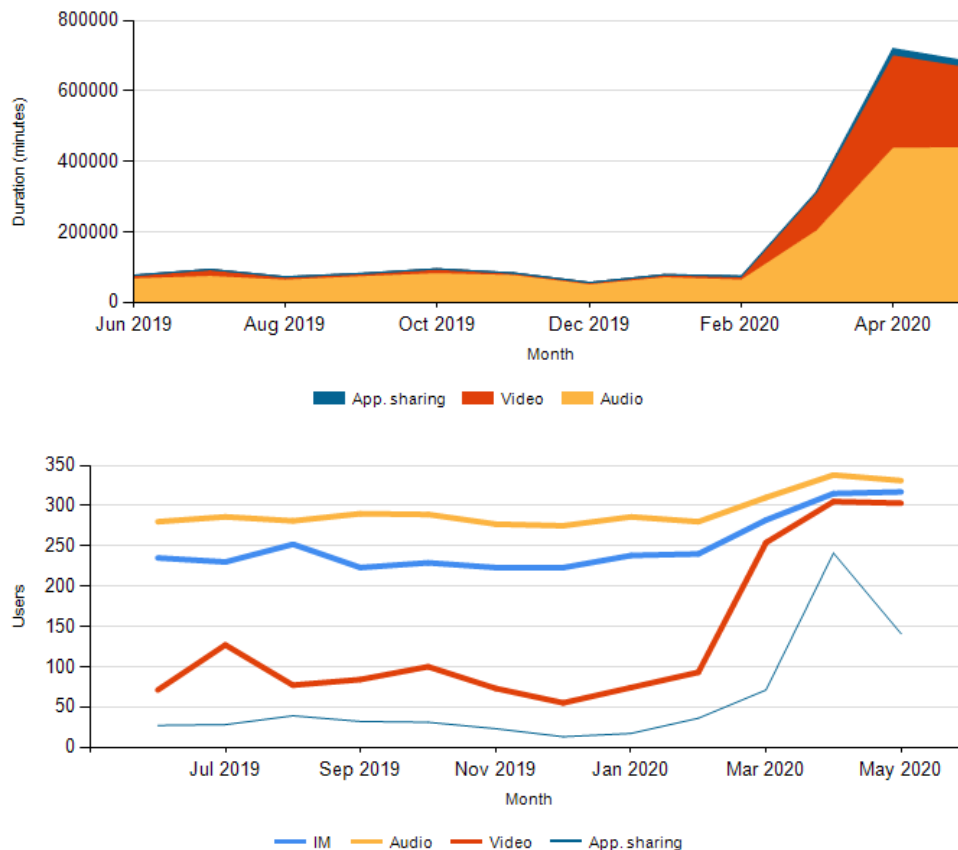
Staffing-related issues

As mentioned above and as set out in the June report, the Council has, in the main, adapted well to homeworking. Regular pulse surveys have shown that the majority of staff are coping well and have the right technology and equipment to work. However, as the length of time spent away from the Town Hall has increased, many staff are increasingly missing the social dimension of work and the physical interaction that has been a large contributory factor to the Council's successful culture of collaboration and innovation. Some staff are also struggling with homeworking because of a lack of space, broadband connectivity or (during lockdown) because of childcare responsibilities.

The changes have also had a big impact on the Council's environmental footprint. Extrapolating the changes we have seen across the course of the year means that we will have saved £84,360 in travel expenses and 48.75 tonnes of CO_2 over the course of the year. Other specific changes include: a massive reduction in printing, a switch to remote meetings and briefings, a large increase in online transactions and a reduction in cash payments.

Looking to the future, the Council was already working on a raft of changes to the way in which the Council operates under a 'Modern Ways of Working' programme put in place to support the move to new, smaller, more flexible office accommodation as part of the Calverley Square project. The programme had a number of principles, namely:

- Management by outcomes

- Empowered by technology
- Digital by default
- Paperless
- 'Flexibility first'
- Work takes place at the most effective locations and times
- Culture – trust-based relationships

The programme had initially been paused in the aftermath of the decision no longer to proceed with Calverley Square given the absence of firm plans and requirements for office accommodation but the Council's senior management team have since agreed to continue work on a number of the principles of the programme and work is under way to re-assess what the Council might need in terms of office accommodation in light of our experience over the past six months and a greater desire on the part of staff to work more flexibly. It also seems highly likely that a combination of financial pressures and political imperatives will lead to decision to re-appraise the Council's occupation of the Town Hall.

Looking forward, the Council will continue to engage with staff (see below) and, in particular, explore ways in which it can respond to concerns about wellbeing. It will also explore how learning and development can be delivered as effectively as possible in a remote environment and will consider what policies need changing or introducing in response to new ways of working (both now and into the future).

Communication and engagement

The Council has performed pretty well at communicating throughout the crisis. The regular 'pulse' staff survey demonstrates the importance of talking to staff and the fact that staff believe we have done this well (managers scored very highly with their efforts to engage staff). Clearly we will need to keep this under review going forward.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As noted above, this report is the third 'pillar' of the Council's recovery strategy (the other pillars focusing on business and the community). It also needs to be read alongside the Council's Strategic Plan and Budget Strategy and the regular updates to our financial position. With our operating environment being so uncertain, it is difficult to set precise objectives or plans in place but the above narrative coupled with the attached action plan sets out the key priorities for the Council in navigating our way through and beyond the pandemic.

Council Recovery Strategy Action Plan

Action	Lead	Completed
Assess and prepare for increased demand on the Council's services including assessing staff who might be redeployed to support work needed on the Community Hub and in disbursing grants to businesses.		
Review and update the Council's Strategic Plan	JC	✓
Review and update the Council's Cultural Strategy	NC	
Ensure that the emerging Local Plan and Transport Strategy take account of changes likely to be brought about as a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic	SB/HS	In progress
Continue to engage and communicate with residents, businesses and councillors. Promote key messages through Local and the Council's website and other communication channels	WB/IH	
Continue to survey staff through 'pulse surveys' and more detailed working preference surveys	NC	In progress
Survey councillors on future meeting preferences	JC	
Support councillors in assessing the Council's future accommodation requirements and considering the future of the Town Hall	DC	In progress
Keep the ICT Strategy and ICT hardware/software/support under review to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of the organisation	CW	In progress
Continue to take forward the Council's Modern Ways of Working Programme	PT	In progress
Continue to engage staff through regular all-staff briefing sessions, pulse surveys and other mechanisms	WB/IH	In progress