

# Cabinet

25 June 2020

Is the final decision on the recommendations in this report to be made at this meeting?

Yes

## Corporate Update Covid-19

<b>Final Decision-Maker</b>	Cabinet
<b>Portfolio Holder(s)</b>	Councillor Alan McDermott – Leader of the Council
<b>Lead Director</b>	William Benson – Chief Executive
<b>Head of Service</b>	William Benson – Chief Executive
<b>Lead Officer/Author</b>	William Benson – Chief Executive
<b>Classification</b>	Public document (Non-exempt)
<b>Wards affected</b>	All

**This report makes the following recommendations to the final decision-maker:**

1. That the report be noted.

**Explain how this report relates to the Corporate Priorities in the Five Year Plan:**

This report touches all areas of the Corporate Priorities

### Timetable

<b>Meeting</b>	<b>Date</b>
Covid-19 Panel	26 May 2020
Agreed for publication by Portfolio Holder	29 May 2020
Agreed for publication by Head of Service	29 May 2020
Overview and Scrutiny Committee	08 June 2020
Cabinet	25 June 2020

# Corporate Update Covid-19

## 1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

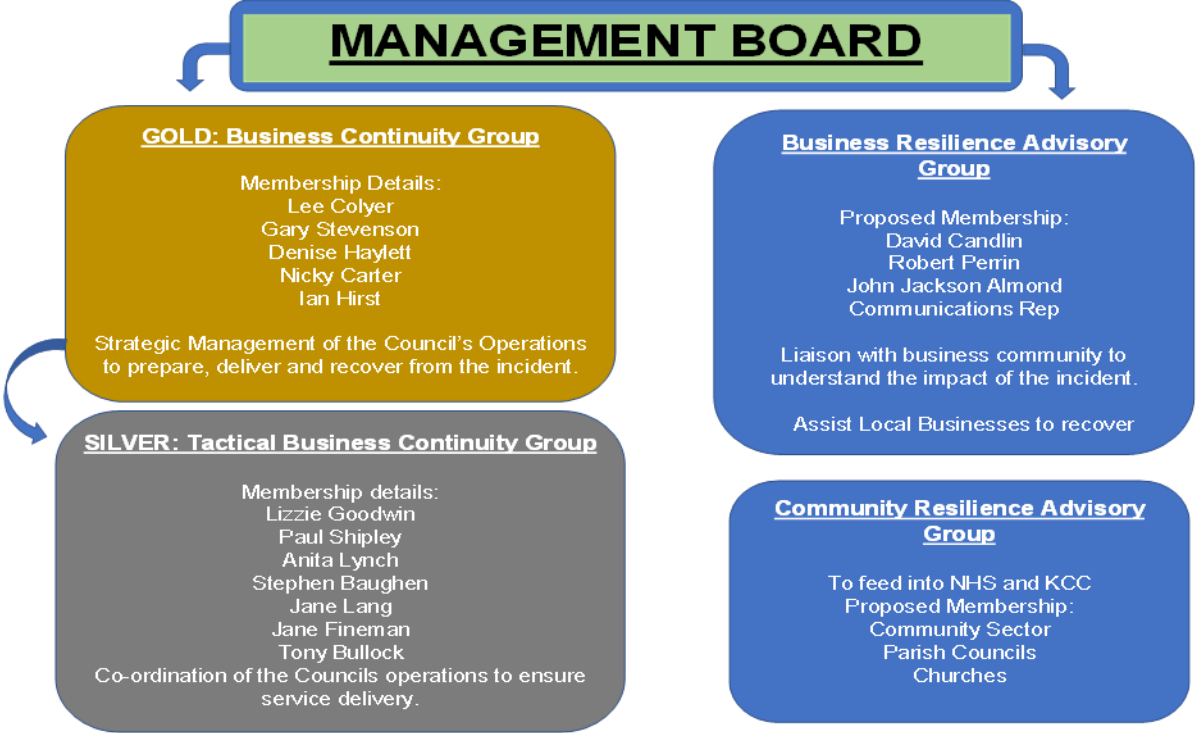
- 1.1 This report provides an overall summary of the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic for Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and the Borough of Tunbridge Wells. It provides details of how the Council responds to emergencies, the consequences of the pandemic on the Council's services, finances and on local businesses and communities, details of the Council's response to date and how the Council is planning for the next stage as the Borough begins to emerge from 'lockdown', as more businesses and services begin to open/become available and as some of the protections introduced by Government begin to be removed.
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## 2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

### How TWBC Responds to Emergencies

- 2.1 Tunbridge Wells Borough Council is a Category 1 under the Civil Contingencies Act and has specific duties regarding Major Emergencies and Business Continuity. In the vast majority of cases, it is the blue light services that take a lead on emergencies and our role is to support them and to help in the recovery. We also have a role in Business Continuity Management (ensuring that we can continue to provide services in the case of extraordinary circumstances interrupting them).
- 2.2 Emergency Planning and Business Continuity activities are co-ordinated with others through local resilience forums (LRFs) which exist across the country. In Kent, the LRF is called the 'Kent Resilience Forum' (KRF) and includes all local authorities, Emergency Services, NHS, Environment Agency, Utilities and the Coast Guard. Each organisation has its own Major Emergency Plans and Business Continuity Plan. In 'peace time' the KRF supports organisations produce and update their plans and to test them through emergency planning and business continuity exercises. When emergencies occur, individual organisations will activate their plans; in the case of significant, complex or widespread emergencies, county-wide structures will be set up under the aegis of the KRF. These structures are overseen at a strategic level by a 'Strategic Coordination Group' (SCG) and tactically by a 'Tactical Coordination Group' (TCG).
- 2.3 On 11 March, the World Health Organisation designated the Covid-19 outbreak a global pandemic. On 16 March, the Prime Minister urged residents to work from home and avoid pubs and restaurants. In response to this, the KRF stood up the SCG and TCG which met on a daily basis (7 days a week) in the initial phase of the crisis (since 6 April, they have been meeting three times a week).

2.4 Locally, the Council implemented its Business Continuity arrangements on 16 March and set up a 'Gold' group to provide strategic management of its operations and to respond to the crisis and a 'Silver' group to provide a tactical response and to coordinate the activities of the various Council departments in responding to the crisis. A graphic setting this out is set out below. Two additional groups were subsequently established focusing on responding to the community impact of the pandemic and the impact of the pandemic on local businesses.



2.5 A brief chronology of the initial events is set out below:

Date	Event
16 March	PM urges people to work from home and avoid pubs and restaurants to give the NHS time to cope with the pandemic
17 March	Chancellor announces package of £330bn loans and £20bn tax cuts. TWBC closes theatre and TIC. Staff asked to work from home is possible. Group leaders called and briefed and daily updates set up.
18 March	Announcement schools will close from 20 March. Draft Covid Bill published. PM asks Council Leaders and CExs to provide support to the extremely vulnerable people emphasising that the government will stand behind them to meet their needs.
20 March	Government orders all pubs, restaurants, gyms and other social venues to close. Key worker list published. The Chancellor announces the government will pay up to 80% of wages for workers at risk of being made redundant. SoS announces a funding package of £1.6bn for local

	government. TWBC's share is £42k (less than a day's loss of income).
21 March	Fusion leisure centres close. Business briefing held with Greg Clark.
22 March	SoS MHCLG announced the 'shielding' of highly vulnerable people.
23 March	PM announces a 'lockdown' with residents only allowed outside to buy food, exercise once a day, or go to work if they absolutely cannot work from home.
25 March	Guidance for the 'shielding' scheme is published. Garden waste collections suspended.
26 March	The Chancellor unveils a package of measures to help self-employed workers during the economic downturn, giving those earning less than £50,000 a taxable grant equal to 80 percent of their average profits.
27 March	Districts receive the first data tranche of 'shielded residents' from MHCLG
28-9 March	TWBC contacts those who cannot access support and delivers food where necessary
30 March	TWBC 'Hub' goes live
31 March	MHCLG commits to funding exceptional costs on a telephone conference with Leaders and Chief Executives.
1 April	KCC contact centre and webpage 'Kent Together' goes live.
2 April	PM admitted to hospital as a precautionary measure.
3 April	Remote Council meeting regulations published
14 April	SoS reportedly non-committal on whether further cash would be forthcoming to councils and talks of "burden sharing" in a teleconference with Council Leaders.
4 May	SoS states in evidence to MHCLG select committee "it is clear that the funding we provided is more than enough".
19 May	Environment Secretary says "local authorities will always say they need further funding and in situations like this they will have funds set aside for events of this sort ... We think the approach we have taken, with that £3.2bn injection, is the appropriate intervention from government to support them in the really important work they are doing."

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### 3 CONSEQUENCES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

3.1 From the moment the first restrictions were announced, it was clear that the Council was likely to be affected in a number of ways by the Covid-19 Pandemic including:

- An increased call on its services
- A requirement to change or close/reduce other services (such as the theatre, TIC and leisure centre)

- Pressure on its income streams and expenditure to respond to the crisis
- Reduction in staff/contractor availability due to staff self-isolating, being required to be shielded from social contact or being required to look after others (children/relatives)

3.2 It was also clear that the Pandemic was going to have a significant impact on local businesses and communities. This report provides an overview of the Council's response and the issues it faced under the following headings:

- Changes to Services
- Support for Communities
- Support for Businesses
- Staffing
- Communications
- Finance
- Democratic Engagement and Decision-Making
- Partnership Working
- Council Strategies, Projects and Priorities

### **Changes to Council Services**

- 3.3 The Council has consistently followed government advice in taking decisions on service delivery. As a consequence, a decision was taken to close a number of Council venues including the Theatre, Community Centres, the Tourist Information Centre and the temporary library/museum. Play areas were closed and a number of services that were either non-essential or non-compatible with social distancing rules were suspended including food safety inspections and taxi driver knowledge tests. Changes were also made to some customer services including the Gateway and payment services. Meadow Road Car Park and Town Hall Yard car park were closed (the latter for Health and Safety reasons) and the Council's contractor also closed the leisure centres.
- 3.4 Following issues with the availability of our contractor's staff, the Council was also obliged to suspend garden waste services from 25 March.
- 3.5 Most other services – including Building Control, Planning and the various support services have continued as normal.
- 3.6 Some services saw a considerable spike in work including Housing (which has seen a large increase in approaches and applications, and which was required to house all homeless residents), waste collection (because of people living at home) and Revenues and Benefits (because of the increased uptake of benefits and the work associated with the various Business Rates schemes). There has also been increased workloads at the Crematorium and in Environmental Health which has played a role in enforcing social distancing in the workplace and which has seen a huge increase in complaints about bonfires. Support teams have also been exceptionally busy – in particular ICT (who have been required to support over 1,000 people working from home across the Mid Kent Services Partnership).

- 3.7 Full details of all Council services and their current status has constantly been provided in real time on the Council's website.
- 3.8 Under its business continuity arrangements, the Council maintains a list of priority services. These are (in alphabetical order):
- Bereavement
  - Building Control/Facilities Management
  - Call Centre
  - CCTV
  - Communications
  - Emergency Planning
  - Environmental Health
  - Finance
  - Housing
  - ICT
  - Revenue & Benefits
  - Waste Collection
- 3.9 Given the unique nature of the crisis, the Council put arrangements in place to ensure that priority services could be maintained and that contingency plans were in place to ensure that if an entire group of staff were required to self-isolate, others could pick up where they left off. In practice, this meant staff being redeployed and re-trained to undertake essential work in priority services (see 'Staffing' section below). The Council also put in place a system to understand which staff would be unable to work if schools closed or who were themselves vulnerable or responsible for caring for a vulnerable person. A system was introduced that allowed for daily reporting of staffing levels within each service. The crisis has been absolutely unique in that it has placed total reliance on IT systems to deliver our day-to-day work and digital offer for residents and businesses.
- 3.10 The Council's website has had 66,069 page views for our coronavirus pages since 16 March, including 12,268 visits to the pages about financial support and grants for businesses and 4,371 visits to the pages about Volunteering and Fundraising.
- 3.11 Other pages on the website have seen big swings in visits compared to the same time last year, giving an indication of how demand on the Council has changed during the pandemic. As expected, a lot of interest related to business rates and Council Tax support. We can also see an uptick in Environmental Health queries including Bonfires and noise complaints. Perhaps one interesting statistic is the increase in views for the allotments page. More worryingly, queries related to those areas that drive revenue— planning, parking have decreased substantially.

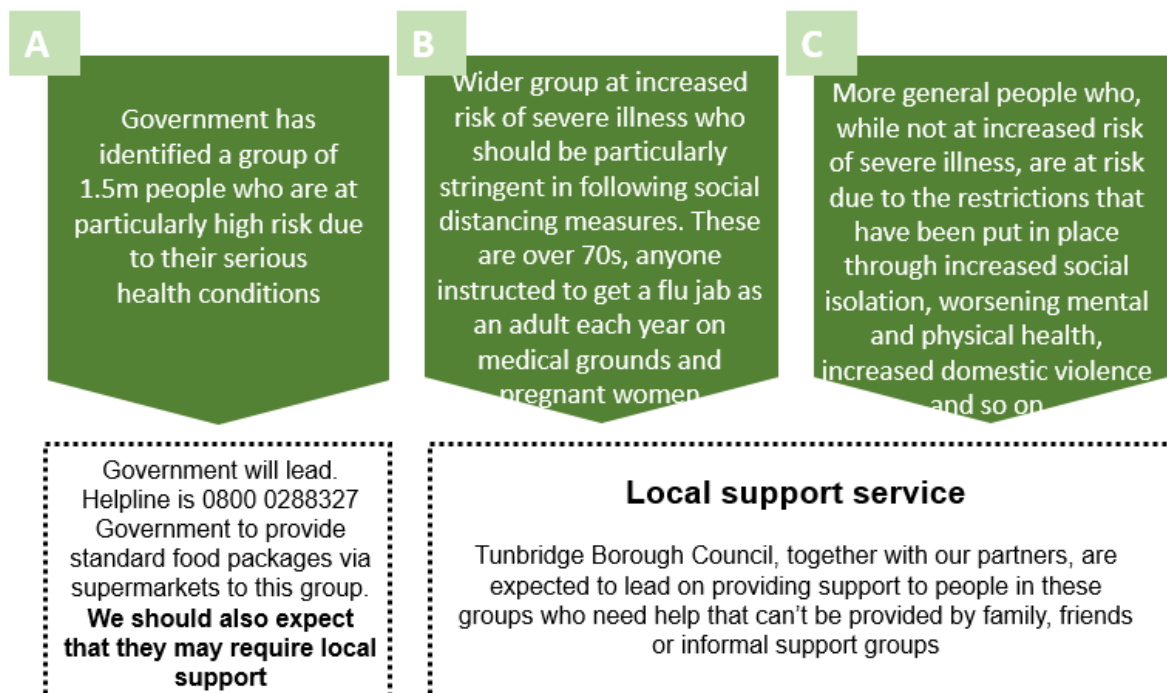
Webpage	March-May 2020	March-May 2019	Swing
Business - Support and Advice	1605	151	963%
Business Rates	2552	502	408%
Bonfires	1448	313	363%
Council Tax Support	1596	375	326%
Bin Collections	16682	5262	217%
Problems Paying Council Tax	372	132	182%
Benefits	1121	406	176%
Reducing your Council Tax bill	2366	1060	123%
Allotments	1331	646	106%
Noise complaints	587	382	54%
General Council Tax	9489	6158	54%
Homelessness	380	260	46%
Volunteering	378	278	36%
Burials and Cremations	1185	932	27%
Make a Planning Application	658	1115	-41%
Car Parks	518	1598	-68%
Car Park Season Tickets	1765	5879	-70%
Taxi Driver Licences	196	675	-71%
Play Areas	110	416	-74%
Parking Fines	2646	10010	-74%
The Camden Centre	140	888	-84%
Planning Pre-Application Advice	128	2535	-95%
Voting and Elections	151	5941	-97%

### Support for Communities

- 3.12 Throughout the crisis, the Council has been in regular dialogue with many of the Borough's voluntary and community sector organisations who have played such a vital role in supporting residents. One of the hallmarks of the Pandemic is that, alongside the terrible and tragic consequences for so many residents and businesses, there has been the most incredible outpouring of public goodwill and offers of help from volunteers.
- 3.13 The Council has supported residents and communities in a number of ways. On a purely practical level, the Council has done a number of things to make residents' lives easier – putting back Council instalments for residents who are struggling from April-Jan to June-March, allowing those with a residents' permit to park for free in MSCPs given the numbers of people working from home, allowing carers to park for free and providing help and support with housing and benefits.
- 3.14 Beyond this, the Council quickly set up a page to enable residents to offer help and assistance and to broker offers with needs.

## Supporting the Vulnerable and the 'Shielding' Programme

- 3.15 Following the government's request to provide support to the 'shielded' population, the Council – with just two days' notice – set up a 'Community Hub' in the Assembly Hall and a 7-day-a-week contact centre and sourced food and other household essentials at the peak of the time when some key staples were in short supply.
- 3.16 It was an incredibly challenging process. The government suggested that there would be around 1.5m people who would be 'shielded' nationally which, for Tunbridge Wells, could have meant between 2,500-3,000 people. Letters were sent out to residents landing on mats at the start of the week (23 March) but we didn't receive our first tranche of data until 3pm on Friday 27 March and then data was released daily in drips and drabs. The whole process also switched from the localised provision of support to a centralised system of deliveries. There have been numerous issues relating to the quality of the data, deliveries, cancellations and delays to – and changes in – the guidance from government. Staff have been absolutely incredible and in a matter of days we set up a 'hub', developed processes for managing contact with residents and the provision of support, sourced and procured food and household essentials and linked in with parish and town councils and voluntary groups. In setting it up, we had literally no idea as to what the levels of demand might be nor the nature of residents' needs.
- 3.17 In addition to the medically 'shielded' we also recognised that there would be other residents who were either vulnerable or isolated, so a three-tier model was developed (below).

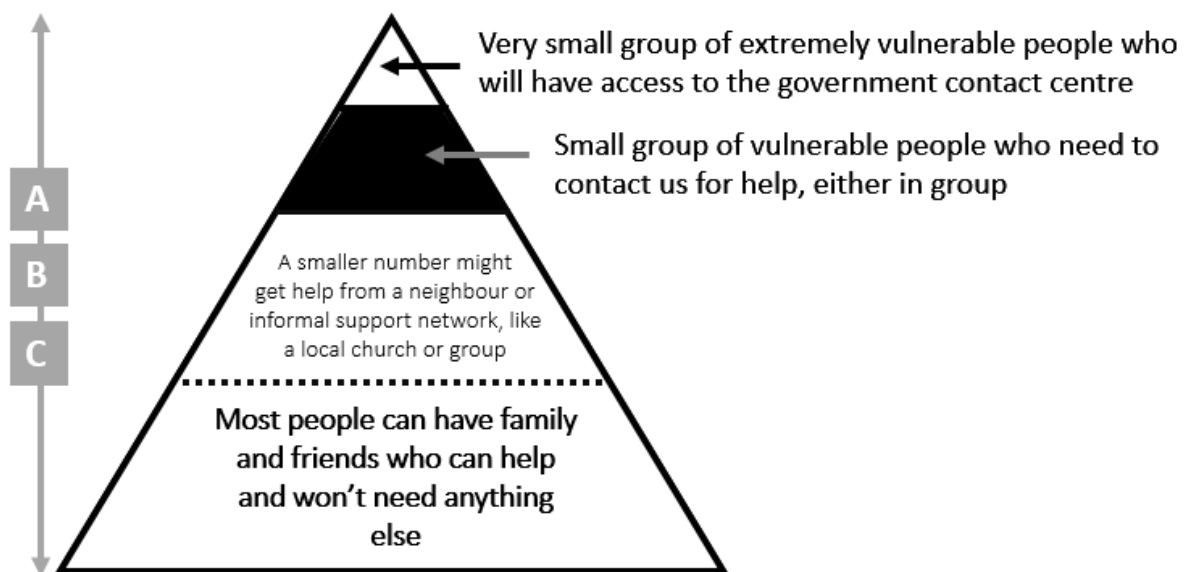


- 3.18 Our planning assumptions were that many people would source help from friends, families or community organisations but that there would be some residents who would require support from the Council. For those who want to self-serve, we have put them in touch with local food wholesalers who have



switched to residential deliveries (as high street customers who have closed) and we have also been working with government (and Defra) to secure access to supermarket home delivery slots.

3.19 Alongside the Council's helpline (01892 554497) which is open seven days a week from 9-5, KCC set up a 24/7 helpline (03000 41 92 92) and website ([www.kent.gov.uk/social-care-and-health/health/coronavirus/kent-together](http://www.kent.gov.uk/social-care-and-health/health/coronavirus/kent-together)) under the umbrella of 'Kent Together'. The Council redeployed staff from a variety of services (principally the Theatre, Museum and Programme Management team) to work in the hub and used existing contacts from the theatre to source food and household essentials. Local businesses have been absolutely fantastic and we have received offers of food, transport, logistics and much more.



3.20 In the early weeks the programme was extremely challenging – we were receiving daily updates to our data list and having to contact everyone on it to ascertain and respond to their needs.

3.21 The Council currently has 3,515 people on its list from government and is also supporting a number of other residents who have contacted us for support. As well as receiving data from central government and GPs on 'shielded' residents, the Council has sought to identify additional vulnerable and isolated residents through its own data and through contact with parish and town councils and voluntary and community organisations. It has also distributed a letter to every household in the Borough providing details of the support that is on offer.

3.22 Alongside the provision of direct support, the Council has also been working closely with local voluntary and community organisations including Nourish, Age UK, Mental Health Resource Centre, the CAB and DAVSS. It has also been using local community organisations including groups on social media and the national NHS volunteers (via the GoodSam app). In the early days of the crisis, it set up a portal for volunteers to offer their services but the offers to provide support have considerably exceeded requests for support. In the vast majority

of instances, support is being provided at a hyper-local level by neighbours, friends and relatives in our fantastic local communities.

- 3.23 The Council has also worked closely with parish and town councils who have played a vital role in identifying vulnerable and isolated individuals and providing support. The Council has disbursed the entirety of the Parish and Town Council reserve to support these efforts.
- 3.24 Many voluntary and community sector organisations have faced significant challenges. We have tried to support them in a number of ways including: running a crowd-funding campaign ('Lend a Hand for Tunbridge Wells') and putting links to individual fundraising campaigns on our website (<http://www.tunbridgewells.gov.uk/coronavirus-updates/fundraising>) and promoting them via social media; talking to KCC who have front-ended payments for commissioned VCS organisations; lobbying government (we were very pleased with the announcement of £750m for 'front line' charities and the recent announcement of support for charities supporting victims of DA and sexual violence but have been disappointed at the lack of support from DCMS for charitable cultural and music venues) and by providing guidance for volunteers. Separately, Town and Country Housing Group have seconded a member of staff who has been working to support the voluntary and community sector and who has, in turn, sourced additional volunteers to help provide support. Amongst other things, she has secured a £15k grant to keep people in employment by supporting the FutureStore. We have had some fantastic feedback to the support we have provided.
- 3.25 As the crisis has evolved and the 'lockdown' has progressed, we have turned our attention from the immediate issues of food and household essentials towards mental wellbeing and more practical concerns (e.g. broken white goods). The Council is making regular 'wellbeing calls' to residents that may feel isolated/lonely during this time. In an effort to promote positive mental health, a cross-departmental team of staff have put together (in a matter of weeks) a website ([www.twsocial.co.uk](http://www.twsocial.co.uk)) which provides an online portal encouraging community participation in activities, games and stories alongside links to wellbeing activities, podcasts and information as well as acting as a point of community contact.
- 3.26 Challenges remain with the programme. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has recently circulated a request for 10 weeks-worth of back-data that we don't hold in the format requested. We are also uncertain as to whether or not we will have to support those who have been asked to isolate themselves as part of the 'test and trace' programme. Notwithstanding these challenges, we are now giving consideration as to how we manage the support on a more proportionate basis given the reducing level of support that is being requested whilst recognising there may be a need to increase support at short notice if further restrictions are put in place.

## Support for Businesses

3.27 From the outset, it was clear that there would be enormous consequences for many businesses arising from the restrictions announced by government. As mentioned above, the Council very quickly set up a Business Resilience Advisory Group and details of the support we have provided is set out below. First and foremost, it is important to recognise that the responsibility for supporting businesses through tax and spend measures lies with government. We are a highly centralised state and, consequently, arrangements for business taxes are set (and collected!) nationally. The Council has done its best, together with the BID, to publicise details of support available via its website and social media. Details include:

- A statutory sick pay relief package for SMEs
- All retail, hospitality and leisure businesses in England to receive a 100% business rates holiday for the next 12 months
- Grant funding of £25,000 for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses with property with a rateable value between £15,000 and £51,000
- Increase in grants to small businesses eligible for Small Business Rate Relief or rural rate relief from £3,000 to £10,000
- The Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme offers loans from £1,000 to £5 million, and ensuring businesses can access the first 6 months of that finance interest free, as Government will cover the first 6 months of interest payments
- Support for liquidity amongst large firms, with a major new scheme being launched by the Bank of England to help them bridge COVID-19 disruption to their cash flows through loans
- Businesses may be able to access an interest free time to pay arrangement from HMRC
- Confirmation that Government advice to avoid pubs, clubs and theatres etc. is sufficient for businesses to claim on their insurance where they have appropriate business interruption cover for pandemics in place
- Relaxation in planning regulations to allow pubs and restaurants to start providing takeaways without a planning application.

# Coronavirus COVID-19

## FINANCIAL BUSINESS SUPPORT

● Updated 31st March 2020

The Government has set out a package of temporary measures to support business in response to disruption caused by COVID-19. We have created a factsheet to help businesses to plan and consider their next steps



ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS  
**TOGETHER**

[www.tunbridgewellstogether.co.uk](http://www.tunbridgewellstogether.co.uk)  
07808 646 758

## SUPPORT AVAILABLE FOR BUSINESSES



### JOB RETENTION SCHEME

Government grants will cover 80% of the salary of retained workers up to a total of £2,500 a month. Call HMRC's dedicated helpline on 0800 0159 599



### £25K GRANT

This will be provided to retail, hospitality and leisure businesses with premises with rateable value of £15,000-£51,000

You can check your businesses rateable value at [gov.uk/correct-your-business-rates](http://gov.uk/correct-your-business-rates)



### £10K GRANT

This will provide a one-off grant to businesses currently eligible for small business rates relief or rural rate relief



### AM I ELIGIBLE?

If your business is eligible for SBRR or rural rate relief, you will be contacted by your local authority



### APRIL 2020

Local authorities will receive the funding from the government in early April. Guidance for local authorities will be provided shortly



### FILING ACCOUNTS

Businesses will receive a 3-month extension period to file accounts with Companies House to help companies avoid penalties



### VAT AND INCOME TAX DEFERRED

VAT payments from March - end of June 2020 have been automatically deferred until the end of the tax year. If self-employed July income tax payments have been deferred until January 2021. You can also contact HMRC Time to Pay service for support for other liabilities on 0800 0159 559



### 12 MONTHS BUSINESS RATES HOLIDAY

12 months business rates holiday for all retail, hospitality, leisure, professional & financial businesses. Applied with immediate effect and the Council will resend bills showing this 100% rates exemption



### BUSINESS INTERRUPTION LOAN SCHEME

Loans from the British Business Bank will be available at [british-business-bank.co.uk](http://british-business-bank.co.uk)



### SICK PAY RELIEF

SMEs can reclaim Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) paid for sickness absence due to COVID-19



### IR35 POSTPONED

The IR35 tax reforms will be pushed back by one year for the self-employed

For regular updates contact the Government's Business Support Helpline:  
0300 456 3565 or visit their website here  
[businesssupport.gov.uk/coronavirus-business-support](http://businesssupport.gov.uk/coronavirus-business-support)

For further advice from Tunbridge Wells Borough Council please visit  
[tunbridgewells.gov.uk/business](http://tunbridgewells.gov.uk/business)

- 3.28 The Council has worked hard to support businesses moving to delivery or collection models by relaxing parking enforcement and planning rules. It has moderated its approach to other services including food safety inspections. It has also jointly funded a business helpline through the Kent and Medway Growth Hub. The hub has now taken over 4,500 calls with a 96 per cent approval rating.
- 3.29 The Council has also kept in regular touch with businesses – both directly with individual businesses, through representative bodies (including Royal Tunbridge Wells Together and the Federation of Small Business) and through networking groups. It has also sent out regular e-bulletins and provided information and advice to businesses. Four dial-in sessions have been held with representatives off the Council, the BID and with Greg Clark MP. We have no doubt that these sessions have helped inform government thinking on the support packages that have been made available and amendments to the schemes after they have been announced.
- 3.30 In terms of Business rates, the Council has facilitated the 12-month Business Rates Holiday for all businesses in the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure sectors and has paid out a total of 1,840 grants to businesses under the business support scheme worth £24.5m. 99.8 per cent of the eligible grants applied for have been paid and 93 per cent of eligible companies have applied.
- 3.31 The Council has recently received guidance from government on the new, discretionary fund for businesses and launched applications for funding last week.

### **Staffing (and Councillors)**

- 3.32 The Pandemic has clearly had a significant impact on staff and councillors. Some have been affected directly – because they have had to self-isolate, because they are shielded or otherwise vulnerable or because they are living with or caring for someone who is vulnerable or isolated. It has also had a wider impact in that the vast majority of staff and councillors have had to work from home.
- 3.33 The Council was well placed to make this switch – it had provided members with tablets, the majority of staff have laptops, we have a VOIP system (Skype for Business), we have recently introduced the ability to webcast Council meetings and we tested our capacity to work from home as part of our preparations for a possible no-deal Brexit. In the main, the move to homeworking has occurred extremely smoothly. For those staff undertaking roles that they would be unable to perform remotely, additional protective measures have been put in place including at the Gateway, Crematorium, Depot and Assembly Hall Theatre (which has been operating as our 'Community Hub').
- 3.34 As mentioned above, from the first week, the Council has received daily updates on staff absence and staffing levels within services. Steps were also taken to ensure that services could continue if a number of staff were required

to self-isolate. With some services closed or reduced and other services experiencing increased demand, a number of staff – 59 (or 18 per cent of the workforce) have been redeployed with staff from the Assembly Hall, Museum, Camden Centre, Community Safety, Gateway, BDU, GIS & Health Improvement Teams working to assist those working in the Community Hub, Finance, the Crematorium, Depot, Housing and Economic Development/administering business grants. Building Control have also implemented an agreement with Maidstone and Swale borough councils to cover dangerous structures if needed.

- 3.35 We have done our best to maintain communication and engagement with and between staff with regular (weekly) video updates from the Chief Executive, a 'wellbeing' WhatsApp Group, regular activities and advice on promoting wellbeing, virtual team meetings and a 'Pulse' survey to assess how staff are coping/feeling. We will repeat this going forward.
- 3.36 Whilst we are now considering whether and how we would re-open the Town Hall for use we are keen to ensure that we use this experience to inform future workforce/accommodation strategies and to promote modern ways of working.
- 3.37 I would like to pay tribute to the enormous professionalism, stoicism, flexibility and dedication of staff who have been absolutely exceptional in rising to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic and who have worked around the clock to respond to it.

## **Communications**

- 3.38 In emergency situations, communication is absolutely vital. The Council almost immediately changed its web front page to provide information and advice on the Pandemic – information on Council services and advice for residents or businesses that had been affected. Our digital team has worked hard to introduce streamlined processes for applying for business grants, offering support and (internally) assessing the state of Council services.
- 3.39 As well as communicating through normal channels – the press and social media, the Council has undertaken a number of other steps to promote communication. Four conference calls have been held with local businesses, The Leader and Chief Executive have held four 'Ask Me Anything' session on Facebook which have had a reach of more than 10,000 people and over 2,500 engagements. The Chief Executive is holding daily briefings with the Leader and Greg Clark, twice-weekly updates with the Group Leaders (daily initially), weekly meetings with parish and town councils and a variety of meetings with businesses (including the FSB and the BID) and the Town Forum in addition to regular daily meetings of county-wide coordination groups. Details of member engagement is set out below. As mentioned above, we have also sent out a leaflet to all households in the Borough and we have collaborated with parish and town councils to get information out through their newsletters.

## **Finance**

3.40 I won't go into too much detail on the Council's finance as I think this is a topic for a dedicated session but we are facing significant pressures in terms of additional expenditure, loss of income (amounting to around £1m a month) and cashflow given that we collect Council Tax and Business Rates but pass the overwhelming majority of these funds across to other preceptors and central government. The government's position on support for local government seems to have shifted considerably (as set out in the above timetable) and the Council is working with Kent Council Leaders, the Local Government Association, District Councils Network, SOLACE and both local MPs to raise these issues. Local government came into the crisis in a parlous situation having suffered some of the biggest reductions in expenditure in the public sector– 60p in the pound. Consequently, TWBC as with many other districts is highly reliant on income. We will bring a further paper on finance to a future meeting of the Covid-19 Panel.

## **Democratic Engagement and Decision-Making**

3.41 The Pandemic and the closure of the Town Hall have had a significant impact on our democratic processes. Some councillors have been personally affected by the pandemic and others have had to self-isolate because of potential exposure or because of Covid-related symptoms. Within 24 hours of the first restrictions being imposed, the Chief Executive set up a daily briefing with political group leaders to discuss the Council's response to the pandemic. The government announced that elections would be put back by a year and leaders, conscious that some councillors fell within categories of vulnerable groups and that staff were very busy responding to the pandemic, agreed to reduce the number of committee meetings and make changes to the way in which committee meetings run.

3.42 Following the publication of regulations to enable meetings to take place remotely, the Council has re-started some meetings including Planning and Cabinet and this has now been extended to re-starting Overview and Scrutiny with meetings starting from next months on an increased frequency. This Covid-19 Panel has been established to ensure councillors are at the heart of planning our approach to the response and recovery phases of the pandemic. As councillors become more familiar with technology and as (if?) we develop more capacity to manage them, we will explore introducing further meetings of the Council and its committees.

## **Partnership Working**

3.43 The magnitude of the Covid-19 pandemic has meant that a huge range of partners have been involved in responding to the emergency. We have kept in constant dialogue with the hospital trust and GPs, the Police, business organisations, parish and town councils and voluntary and community groups. They have all made excellent preparations and are doing everything they can be doing/should be doing to ensure that they can continue to provide key services.

## **Council Strategies, Projects and Priorities**

- 3.44 The Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on the Council's projects. The completion of the Public Realm works has been delayed because we have been unable to access some of the materials to complete the job. Work also had to stop briefly on the Southborough Hub because of lack of materials. Work on The Amelia Scott has proceeded because we re-shuffled the programme, but it is likely to lead to an increase in cost and may affect our prospects of raising income through fundraising. The carbon audit has also been delayed.
- 3.45 More generally, prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Council was looking to start work on re-visiting and re-working its vision and ambitions. This work has now been placed on hold until there is greater clarity on the recovery from the pandemic and on the state of the Council's finances.

### **It's not all been bad**

- 3.46 It is probably worth noting that whilst there have been some appalling consequences of the pandemic for many businesses, individuals, families and organisations, there have also been some positive outcomes – the power of the community response to the pandemic, the strong working relationships that we have forged with partners, the reduction in carbon emissions and a requirement to develop new ways of working and getting about. We need to ensure that we capture and promote the good points as well as mitigating and responding to the awful consequences of the crisis.

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## **4 AVAILABLE OPTIONS**

- 4.1 This report is for information.

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## **5 PREFERRED OPTION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 5.1 That the report be noted.

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## **6 CONSULTATION RESULTS AND PREVIOUS COMMITTEE FEEDBACK**

- 6.1 The Covid-19 Panel received this update at its meeting on 26 May 2020.
- 6.2 As the report is for information it is not subject to consultation.

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## **7 NEXT STEPS: COMMUNICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISION**

- 7.1 This paper is an introductory paper setting out details of our response to date. There will be a huge amount to consider and discuss going forward including:



- A focus on the immediate recovery – supporting businesses who are looking to open on 1 June and capitalising on proposals to deliver changes to highways to promote social distancing and alternatives to public transport.
- Preparing for the longer-term recovery when more businesses will be allowed to open and the relaxation of social distancing might enable events to occur (Christmas might be a particular focus)
- Responding to further changes as restrictions are removed – both operationally and in our role as ‘place-shaper’ across the Borough as a whole
- Keeping a watching brief on the financial position of the Council and understanding how any capital or revenue shortfalls are to be met
- Developing future ambitions and priorities for the Council, town and wider Borough
- Giving thought to the future shape of the Council and how it functions
- Giving thought as to how we can promote a ‘reset’ rather than a ‘recovery’ – how we can ‘bake in’ positive changes that have occurred or might occur as a result of the pandemic including changes to the way in which the country is governed (might there be moves towards greater devolution of power and responsibilities), changes to working, travel and commuting patterns, changes to the way people’s exercise regimes and trying to preserve the huge upswell in community engagement and volunteering.
- Thinking about how the Council should work in the future and how we should promote new ways of working based on our experiences over the past few months.
- Provide a brief summary of the action which will need to be taken once the recommendations have been agreed to put them into effect, including how they will be communicated. Where the report is for information only, this section may be deleted.

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## 8 CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

Issue	Implications	Sign-off
<b>Legal</b> including Human Rights Act	<i>The report is for information and contains no decisions to which cross-cutting issues would apply.</i>	William Benson, Chief Executive 29 May 2020
<b>Finance</b> and other resources		
<b>Staffing establishment</b>		
<b>Risk Management</b>		
<b>Data Protection</b>		
<b>Environment</b>		

and Sustainability		
<b>Community Safety</b>		
<b>Health and Safety</b>		
<b>Health and Wellbeing</b>		
<b>Equalities</b>		

**9 REPORT APPENDICES**

The following documents are to be published with, and form part of, the report:

- None
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**10 BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- [Title or description]: [hyperlink](#)