

**Report to:** Cabinet

**Date:** 7 May 2020

**Title:** Council response to Covid 19 - the establishment of a Community Hub and wider business impacts on service delivery

**Report of:** Ian Fitzpatrick, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Regeneration and Planning

**Cabinet member:** Councillor Zoe Nicholson, Leader of the Council

**Ward(s):** All

**Purpose of report:** To update Cabinet on the establishment and operation of a Community Hub and other changes in business operation to respond to community needs as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic.

**Decision type:** Non-key

**Officer recommendation(s):** Cabinet is recommended to note the report

**Reasons for recommendations:** The Community Hub has been an important part of the council's response to the Covid 19 pandemic locally and this report updates the Cabinet on progress, performance and next steps in this work. The report also provides a summary of the impact of the pandemic across the council's business, focusing on the support provided to staff and on those areas most affected by current circumstances.

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## **1 Summary**

- 1.1 The reach of the Covid-19 crisis and the pace at which it changed everyday life as we know it has been unprecedented. In a matter of days, the council had to completely refocus operations to meet the multiple and complex challenges posed by the pandemic. It has been without doubt the most demanding chapter in the history of local government in living memory.
- 1.2 The council moved quickly to activate contingency plans, ensuring the frontline services that residents rely on are maintained and enabling both authorities to

fully respond to the challenges of the coronavirus crisis. Members and officers have worked in collaboration with key local partners including East Sussex County Council, other Boroughs and Districts, Sussex Resilience Forum and participated in national networks such as the Local Government Association, District Councils Network, liaising with relevant central Government departments and briefing local MPs.

- 1.3 A key strand of our response was preparing for staff redeployments across business critical areas. We undertook assessments of skills and experience and were overwhelmed with the flexibility staff have shown in their agreement to change roles. 110 council staff were identified who could be redeployed from their normal day-to-day duties to other roles.
- 1.4 While the intensity of the emergency has abated to some degree at the time of writing this report, the need for the council to remain in a state of high alert and preparedness has not changed. Supporting residents, especially the most vulnerable, and our business community through the crisis is being achieved alongside the maintenance of day-to-day services, albeit with adaptations in some areas.

## **2 Background**

- 2.1 In late March the Government announced that it would be setting up a centralised system of help for those it categorised as 'extremely vulnerable' and who would need to self-isolate for 12 weeks. This help would include provision of food, delivery of medicines and other social support. Alongside that central provision for the most vulnerable, local authorities were asked to establish 'Community Hubs' which would complement this, focusing on others in the community who might also be vulnerable, isolated, without support networks or suffering financial hardship.
- 2.2 The 'extremely vulnerable' category has now come to be known as the 'shielded group'. In the Lewes district we currently have 1,857 people who have registered for help in this category. However, we are aware that there are many more people in the district who are experiencing hardship or who are isolated and without local friends, relatives or neighbours who are able to help.
- 2.3 In response to this need, the local Community Hub was established and has been operating since 30 March 2020.

## **3 The Community Hub**

- 3.1 The Hub is for people who are vulnerable, isolated and without friends, family or neighbours near by to support them, and for those experiencing financial hardship at this time. The purpose of the hub is to connect these people to local voluntary and community organisations who can provide the basic help they might need. This could include doing shopping for them, collecting medicines, just keeping in touch so they do not feel alone, or providing food parcels where money is a problem.

### 3.2 Setting up the Hub

The council has redeployed and trained a team of staff who can deal with requests coming in through our website via an online form, or via our dedicated phone line. This team is made up of people who were previously working in the council's contact centre, along with other staff redeployed from teams such as tourism.

3.3 They have had to familiarise themselves with a huge amount of new information about voluntary sector services very quickly, as well as navigating their way around the complex landscape of needs assessment and eligibility. As well as receiving calls they also pick up requests submitted by e-form and call these people back to discuss their needs further. The volume and complexity of the calls together with the sometimes difficult and harrowing circumstances of the customers have put considerable pressures on this team. To ensure their wellbeing, a range of support measures have been put in place including free phone counselling for any staff needing it.

3.4 The on-line form and other technology needed (including a new dedicated phone line) was very quickly put in place in late March so that the hub could be operational with the short timescale required. The Service Design team worked extremely quickly at the outset to put IT systems in place enable the hub to start its operation. With this technical backup, the front line Customer First team have then been able to take calls from those requesting help and find out what they need.

3.5 A script for staff prompts them to ask key questions of callers, to make sure they have a real need of support and to check that they are not part of the Shielded (Extremely Vulnerable) group (whom they redirect to ESCC services). Call handlers then use a directory of community contacts to choose the best local service for the caller to be in touch with, and give them details about when that group operates and how to get in touch. The caller is then able to contact their local group to get the assistance they need.

### 3.6 The role of the Community and Voluntary Sector

Staff from the Business Planning and Performance team worked quickly at the outset to build up a directory of around 70 different voluntary and community groups across Eastbourne and the Lewes District who have agreed to help with this work. Some of these groups have been established for many years, and others have formed recently, specifically to help people in need through this crisis. Putting the directory together required some considerable effort and investigation, as many groups were just a Facebook presence or a local phone number or email address. By making personal contact and using local networks (including Councillor and town and parish clerk knowledge) a pretty comprehensive support network was unearthed. Some groups just cover an individual neighbourhood or village whilst others work across wider areas. Most are run entirely with volunteers, although a few of the larger groups have some paid staff as well. In all cases, their enthusiasm and commitment have been extraordinary.

3.7 The council is working in a close and strong partnership with 3VA, a local voluntary sector 'umbrella' organisation, whom the council already funds on an annual basis. 3VA put out a call for new volunteers and have had almost 200 sign up to help. Three council staff from the Business Planning and Partnerships team have been seconded to 3VA at this busy time and are making contact with all those volunteers to make sure they can be matched up with appropriate voluntary work. Council and 3VA staff are also talking regularly to the 70 community and voluntary organisations to make sure they have all the help, advice, guidance and volunteers they need to keep delivering local help. In the initial stages this also involved ensuring all groups were aware of safeguarding and safe food handling advice, and were following safe practices, both for themselves and the people they were helping.

### 3.8 Provision of Food

There was real concern at the outset that people might run short of food during this difficult time. The shielded group are able to request a regular delivery of food from the government but we were aware that others may also be struggling financially, or for other reasons have an urgent need for food. We have worked closely with the network of local Food Banks who have been helping to provide food for these people.

3.9 In response to the initial 'emergency' phase of the response, to ensure the Food Banks had enough supplies, the council's Tourism and Enterprise team used its existing supply chains to source food to provide a local resource. Within a couple of days they had a fully set up food parcel assembly line at the new Welcome Building in Eastbourne and have, since then, amassed a central store of over 2,500 food parcels.

3.10 The council now keeps in regular contact with the 12 local Food Banks to check on their stocks. Where these are depleted, then the council's Neighbourhood First team make regular deliveries of batches of food parcels to them, for local distribution as needed. So far 885 parcels have been distributed this way. In addition, when the Food Banks are closed the Neighbourhood First team have undertaken direct deliveries to people in urgent need of food. For the first three weeks of the Community Hub operation, the Neighbourhood First team also provided all the deliveries for Eastbourne Food Bank, until other volunteers and vehicles could be found.

3.11 In addition to the core food parcel provision, the council has also sourced household cleaning and personal hygiene items for distributions by some Food Banks, where this has been needed.

3.12 As other councils came to hear about the food parcel operation in Eastbourne they also approached us to prepare parcels for them, which we have been able to do and sell to them at cost. 800 parcels have so far been prepared for other councils in East Sussex.

3.13 It was noted early on in the Community Hub's operation that a large proportion of calls were from people needing food but unable to access delivery slots at supermarkets. Having noted that a number of local food shops and other businesses were offering delivery options, the council has developed a directory for local people to search to find suitable services. Initially this was hosted on the councils 'Visit Lewes' tourism website, but now a separate 'Eat Local' website has been set up [www.eatlocal.info](http://www.eatlocal.info).

3.14 We have also monitored the changing offers being made by supermarkets and have provided up-to-date information through our helpline, where possible, about priority delivery slots, basic boxes and other new shopping options. In addition we have been accepted by DEFRA to participate in a new pilot scheme which, we hope, will enable the Community Hub to directly allocate a limited number of supermarket priority delivery slots to those who are vulnerable and isolated, without support networks.

### 3.15 Communication

We have promoted the Community Hub through our website, through press releases and through Facebook Live broadcasts. ESCC produced a leaflet for all the Community Hubs in East Sussex which we have distributed widely. People have been encouraged to make use of the on-line form in preference to the phone line where possible, although over time the phone line has had heavier usage.

3.16 In addition, a letter (see appendix A) was sent to all residents from the Leader of the Council providing information about support available, and including a copy of the Community Hub leaflet (appendix B). This has resulted in an increase in calls to the Community Hub helpline. It is hoped that the letter has ensured those who do not have access to digital media are now aware of the support available to them. Very positive responses have been received to the letter, one of which is attached (appendix C).

## 4 **Hub Performance**

4.1 The Community Hub, at the time of writing, had received over 2,000 calls and on-line requests for help since it started its operation on 30 March 2020. Over time the types of requests have varied, but in general the greatest demand has been for food (up to 90% of calls on some days). This has either because someone needs assistance with shopping, or for financial reasons, they need a food parcel delivered. The second most frequent request has been for help with collecting medicines from pharmacies. Over time we are also starting to see an increase in requests for social contact and befriending.

4.2 Data on Community Hub usage is collected and reported both to management and ESCC on a daily basis. Trends are being analysed and discussed with community and voluntary sector partners to ensure that local provision is still able to meet changing needs. So far providers are proving able to keep up with demand but support is also being given to community organisations to help them source grants and other funding to help support their work.

## **5 Next steps**

- 5.1 It is intended that the Community Hubs will continue to operate for the duration of 'lock-down'. However, as it is not known how long this will be, or how the exit will be facilitated or phased, future planning is difficult. Partners meet on a regular basis to discuss next steps and to check that the system is still able to operate and to be sustained.
- 5.2 When considering our exit strategy, the council needs to be mindful of not doing this too quickly, or without careful consideration of the potential impact on both vulnerable people and the voluntary and community groups with whom we have been working.
- 5.3 Based on the trends we are seeing already, demand for food provision, above the 'normal' levels experienced by Food Banks, in particular, may well continue beyond 'lock down' as a result of the changed economic conditions. The council will need to consider, therefore, at what point it ceases to offer supplies of free food. In anticipation of this challenge, the council is working closely with Food Banks to explore other ways in which food can be sourced for their use in the longer term. The council would not want to encourage long term reliance on food banks.
- 5.4 The Community Hub operation will continue to be closely monitored and its performance reported as part of wider covid-related performance management information reports which are currently under development.

## **6 Impacts on Service Delivery**

- 6.1 The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the council has been much wider than setting up the Community Hub response. Services across the council have been impacted and have responded fast and effectively. Such responses have included in the customer contact centre, housing benefit, Homes First and Environment First. A summary of these areas is set out below.

### **6.2 Customer First**

Since the Covid-19 crisis began we have seen a significant increase in contact with the public on the telephones and online via email and webchats. This is at the same time as dealing with staff self-isolating; staff shortages have been mitigated by redeployments of council officers from others service areas to Customer First. As a snapshot, between 20 and 23 April, 2,500 contacts were received with 98% of those calls answered within 27 seconds.

- 6.3 Our external communications have consistently encouraged a greater use of online contact. Increasing interactions through email and webchats clearly show an encouraging channel shift from the main telephone line, which has enabled us to deal with a larger volume of enquiries despite the staffing pressures.

- 6,663 emails received between March 23 and April 19 - a 70.63%

increase since Jan 27.

- 4,103 webchats carried out between March 23 and April 17 – a 1557% increase since January 27.

#### 6.4 Housing Benefit

Significant increases of new housing benefit claims and change in circumstances enquiries continue to be received, however, existing staff supported by colleagues redeployed from other services with relatable experience are managing the increased caseload effectively. Again, as a snapshot, between 20 and 23 April 225 new benefit applications were received in Lewes district along with 971 claimants reporting a change in circumstances needing to be processed. Despite this significant workload, new benefit claims are being dealt with in an average of 11 days and changes in circumstances eight days.

#### 6.5 Business Grants

The Business Grants Portal went live on April 9. The automated system put in place ensures payments are made between three to four working days from registration. It automatically checks submitted information with the Council's and Government's databases to assess eligibility, thereby reducing the need for time consuming manual verification. At 28 April, 1,467 businesses in Lewes district had taken advantage of the scheme, equating to the payment of £18.1m in grants. All business which applied at the time of writing have been paid, some 68% of the total eligible. Council officers have written, emailed and telephoned qualifying businesses to encourage them to register and we await a further 670 to sign up. A dedicated team of eight officers have been making calls to this outstanding cohort of businesses. Given the significant progress made all eligible businesses that apply before the end of the month will receive payment in three days.

#### 6.6 Homes First

There have been two particular focus areas in Homes First. One being our response to the national directive relating to the housing of the street homeless (through the Rough Sleepers Initiative), and the second being consideration for our older and more vulnerable tenants.

#### 6.7 *Support for Tenants*

Daily welfare calls are being made to tenants in sheltered accommodation and calls to all tenants over the age of 69. Regular newsletters with help and guidance for tenants have also been distributed. Additional cleaning of sheltered accommodation has continued over the last six weeks. Cleaning staff who previously cleaned public toilets (now shut), have been redeployed to support our higher frequency cleaning regime. Our contractor is continuing to carry out essential repairs in our properties, ensuing appropriate social distancing arrangements are in place.

## 6.8 *Rough Sleeper Initiative (RSI)*

Since the Covid-19 government request to find accommodation for all rough sleepers by 29 March, we have made nine placements in the Lewes district. The RSI team is focused on working closely with the voluntary sector to provide support packages and shopping deliveries to those we have placed. We are working hard to ensure that those who were previously rough sleeping are now offered support in line with social isolation guidance.

## 6.9 Environment First

Our teams have received very positive feedback from residents as collections have continued as normal. Recycling and garden waste collections have continued uninterrupted. Only bulky waste isn't being collected at this time and this is under constant review.

6.10 We have taken every step possible to keep every member of Environment First staff safe at this time by introducing a range of heightened safety and hygiene measures. Vehicle cabs and door handles are being regularly wiped down and alcohol wipes and sanitising gels have been given to staff, in addition to their normal health and safety and protective equipment. We continue to keep up-to-date with all government advice and liaise on daily basis with our health and safety advisers.

## 7 **Looking after our staff**

7.1 The safety and wellbeing of staff has been paramount throughout this period. Particular focus on staff communications has been central to this, given the high proportion of staff that are now working from home. We have been sending communications to staff and managers regarding Covid 19 since early March and initially, given the evolving situation, these were daily. By the time of the government announcement regarding restrictions on 23 March we had:

- Individually contacted all staff aged over 60 or known to have what might be considered a high risk health condition to ensure that we were supporting them and signposting to relevant advice and information
- Ensured the offices were stocked with increased supplies of hand sanitiser, soap and wipes. The cleaning at all offices was also enhanced so that desks and phones were cleaned every night and door handles twice a day.
- Displayed the Public Health advisory posters in all of our offices and updated staff daily regarding information we were receiving from them.

7.2 Following the government announcement on 23 March we have:

- Published information to staff about; support available for their mental health and wellbeing during this time, working from home. resources for those who are home schooling as well as working from home with



children.

- Eased the terms of our agile working policy (which states that working from home is not a replacement for childcare) and said that staff can work from home with their children if appropriate and also eased the terms of our flexi time policy so that staff can work between 7 and 10 pm (instead of between 7 am & 7 pm) which hopefully gives them greater flexibility around their working hours.
- Adjusted our working environment in the office to ensure that only every other desk is being used (every other not being used) so that we are complying with social distancing. Wherever possible we have enabled customer service advisors to work from home with phones acquired so that work can be done from home.
- Encouraged the public to use web chat redeployed staff from other areas to help with the increased numbers of these. We have a rota whereby we can manage with just 10 customer service advisors in the office and their office space has been increased to ensure they are socially distanced.
- Ensured that our managers have regular contact with their staff and HR so that we know daily which of their staff are well and working and which may be isolating either as they have symptoms themselves or a member of their household does.
- Reminded our staff of the employee assistance programme which provides confidential counselling 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. We have also reminded staff of the details of our mental health first aiders, we now have about 20 of these (all trained) in the workplace)
- Added to our On line learning platform some specific course on how to work successfully from home; managing teams remotely; personal resilience; Mental Health awareness; stress awareness and fun things like 5k project
- Sent a regular weekly message from the Chief Executive thanking them, acknowledging the challenging environment and the exceptional work they are doing as well as reminding staff how valuable their contributions are and how much they are valued
- Communicated with staff regarding the government's changes to annual leave for keyworkers.
- Regularly asked staff for feedback of their experience of work during this time and about our communications and anything else they might consider would be helpful.

### 7.3 Redeployments

We have been asking all managers to identify those of their staff who are not

business critical for either some or all of their hours to support our effective delivery of the Covid 19 response. We undertook assessments of skills and experience and have been overwhelmed with the flexibility staff have shown in their agreement to change roles.

7.4 We have about 120 that we can consider redeploying, based on their skills and experience to business critical matters as needed. Part of this redeployment means that staff may be working at another location, including at their own home and doing a different kind of work to what they would normally – but it is all essential to the current crisis. This information is updated by managers daily and all requests for additional help are responded to within hours.

7.5 We also have some staff that have volunteered to work outside of their normal hours to help our response and support our communities, again these are recorded for when an appropriate request may be received.

7.6 This is being managed centrally and has enabled us to provide help to the voluntary sector as well as internally moving staff as needed. To date some of the examples of redeployment have included Theatres Staff working on the production of food packages for our vulnerable residents, Tourist Information centre staff helping customer services to deal with increased calls and web chat as well as answering calls to our Community Hub, Democratic Services staff making phone calls to our local businesses regarding the grants available and a Fraud Investigator going to the Crematorium to assist the team working there.

#### 7.7 Covid related sickness

We have been recording information about our workforce daily since Mid-March in a number of ways for example (but not exhaustive) – those that are off sick with Covid symptoms those self-isolating with symptoms and those self-isolating as someone in their household has symptoms. At its 'peak' this figure was 85 staff but has now reduced to 11 whilst we accept this may continue to fluctuate daily.

7.8 Fortunately a large number of our staff are able to work from home. For some this is neither appropriate nor possible, so we are continuing to redeploy staff and they are able to continue to work from the office as long the social distancing guidance is adhered to alongside the hygiene requirements. Some teams are working on a rota basis, allowing some minimal staff numbers in the office once or twice a week. Managers and HR speak to each member of staff before they return to work (after a period of absence or self-isolation) to ensure they have followed the NHS guidance on this.

## **8 Financial appraisal**

8.1 The Community Hub has been an important part of the Council's response to the Covid 19 and the financial costs regarding core food parcel provision are being set out in the other report to be presented for consideration at this meeting. Any other direct cost and financial implications that arise as part of the establishment and operation of the Hub will be contained within future reports to Cabinet.

8.2 Staff time and other immediate indirect costs arising from the Community Hub establishment and operation will be met from existing revenue budgets within the Regeneration and Planning.

## **9 Legal implications**

9.1 In carrying out the activities detailed in this report, the Council has had due regard to the 'Coronavirus (Covid-19): guidance for local government' issued by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

9.2 For data privacy reasons, the sharing of residents' personal data with the voluntary sector must comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The grounds under which sharing of this data is considered lawful under the GDPR are as follows.

(i) Sharing of confidential patient information for purposes relating to the Covid-19 Community Hub is a legal requirement under the Secretary of State's 'Covid-19 – Notice under Regulation 3(4) of the Health Service Control of Patient Information Regulations 2002' issued on 20 March 2020.

(ii) For the less sensitive data (names, addresses, contact details and non-medical needs), sharing with the voluntary sector is necessary in pursuit of a legitimate interest (i.e. the customer's best interests) and, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, doing so would be a reasonable expectation of those customers who qualify for Community Hub support. The Council's use of this personal data is proportionate to the benefits likely to stem from that support.

*Lawyer consulted 29.04.20*

*Legal ref: 009159-LDC-OD*

## **10 Risk management implications**

10.1 The following risks have been identified and are being managed/mitigated in relation to the Community Hub. The Strategic Risk register has been updated and risks within other service areas are being closely managed as service demands change over time;

- a. That those most in need will not be aware of the Community Hub – this is being mitigated by wide promotion of the Hub through a range of media both electronic and paper based.
- b. That insufficient food will be available to meet local needs – this in part has been mitigated, in the short term, by establishing a council stock from which Food Banks can be replenished but in the longer term this may still be a risk.
- c. That the Community Hub helpline will not be able to respond to the level of need in the community – this has not been the case. All requests for help have been responded to, and the wait times have continued to be very short on the phones.
- d. The voluntary and community sector would not be able to meet the level of demand – this has not been the case. Three council staff seconded to 3VA have kept in regular contact with local organisations who have

confirmed that they continue to be able to respond to local needs.

## **11 Equality analysis**

- 11.1 A full E&FA of the Community Hub will be undertaken shortly. However it should be noted that in setting up the Community Hub operation consideration was given to ensuring it was accessible to all by providing both telephone and on-line options. The promotional leaflet produced by ESCC about the Community Hubs across East Sussex has been translated into multiple languages and this is available on our website. Hub performance data is monitored on a daily basis.

## **12 Environmental sustainability implications**

- 12.1 This report contains no direct environmental sustainability implications although it is worthy of note that current ways of working, with most staff working remotely, has a positive impact in terms of the council's carbon emissions with significantly reduced car usage.

## **13 Appendices**

Appendix A – letter from the Leader to all residents

Appendix B – Community Hub leaflet

Appendix C – response from a resident

Appendix D – summary of service delivery across Lewes District and Eastbourne Borough Councils

## **14 Background papers**

None