


Agenda Item No:	<b>9</b>	
Committee:	<b>Overview &amp; Scrutiny</b>	
Date:	<b>13 July 2020</b>	
Report Title:	<b>Council Response to COVID-19 - Future Implications</b>	

## Cover sheet:

### **1 Purpose / Summary**

- To share with the Overview and Scrutiny Committee the future implications and opportunities of the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to service delivery by Fenland District Council.

### **2 Key issues**

- The Coronavirus or COVID-19 epidemic has spread rapidly throughout the world causing over 500,000 deaths to date.
- The numerous interventions implemented to reduce the spread of the disease and the effect of the pandemic on local, national and global economies will continue to influence the delivery of services by the Council for many months, possibly years, to come.
- Following the initial 'response' mode to the pandemic, the Council is now moving into the recovery phase. The way we deliver services and support the local community will undoubtedly need to change and this period offers a unique opportunity for service transformation in the coming months.
- By working as one unified member and officer team, this Council is committed to provide every possible support to our communities, their residents, and our highly valued local businesses. By redefining our services, using new technology and reassessing traditional ways of working, we can also deliver important efficiency savings for the Council.

### **3 Recommendations**

- The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to note the content of this report.

<b>Wards Affected</b>	All
<b>Forward Plan Reference</b>	
<b>Portfolio Holder(s)</b>	Cllr Chris Boden - Leader of the Council

<b>Report Originator(s)</b>	Paul Medd - Chief Executive Carol Pilson - Corporate Director Peter Catchpole - Corporate Director Anna Goodall - Head of Governance and Customer Services Sam Anthony - Head of HR/OD Jo Blackmore - Executive Officer
<b>Contact Officer(s)</b>	Paul Medd - Chief Executive Carol Pilson - Corporate Director Peter Catchpole - Corporate Director Anna Goodall - Head of Governance and Customer Services Sam Anthony - Head of HR/OD Jo Blackmore - Executive Officer
<b>Background Paper(s)</b>	Report tabled at Overview & Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 08.06.20 - <a href="#">COVID-19 Update Report</a>

## 1 Background / introduction

- 1.1 Statistics surrounding the Coronavirus or COVID-19 pandemic are well documented and there can be no doubt that this is a highly infectious and often fatal disease.
- 1.2 At the start of the pandemic, when lockdown was first imposed in the UK in March 2020, the Council quickly mobilised its business continuity arrangements to deal with the resulting changes. This has resulted in services being maintained with the minimum amount of disruption.
- 1.3 Now that lockdown regulations are gradually being relaxed, the Council has started to plan for the recovery phase whilst using this unique opportunity to encompass potential opportunities for transformation. A detailed Recovery Plan is in the process of being drafted in line with input from all service areas within the Council.

## 2 The 'New Normal'

### Controlling the virus

- 2.1 Although we are coming through the first peak of COVID-19 cases, we know that we will have to live with the disease, and its impact on our lives, until a vaccine or treatment becomes available. This is likely, therefore, to mean many months of managing our response to the ongoing pandemic.
- 2.2 It is also a possibility we may experience a second and third wave of the disease within the next 6 – 12 months, where we will need to revert back into response mode and adjust to further lockdown measures like that which is currently happening in Leicester.

- 2.3 Our goal therefore is to implement new, relevant operating models throughout the peaks and troughs of the outbreak, to optimise the effectiveness of the services we deliver and to support and protect our communities and staff.

### **Member Communications and Repatriation**

- 2.4 Officers have continued regular communication with all members throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to existing communication (such as the circulation of press releases) weekly newsletters have been circulated to Cabinet Members and the Leader of the Fenland Independent Alliance, sharing details of services being delivered since the start of the lockdown.
- 2.5 Members have been instrumental in helping their local communities to access help available by signposting them to the services they may need as well as employing a more hands-on approach where possible. It is essential that this regular communication continues.
- 2.6 The majority of statutory Council meetings are now continuing virtually using platforms such as Zoom, which have generally proved to be very successful.
- 2.7 Some Members fall into the shielding category and will be advised to stay at home and limit their contact with others for a longer period. It is important that Members continue to shield for as long as is needed. Also, it may not be possible to allow members of the public to physically attend Council meetings due to social distancing therefore virtual meetings may need to continue for some time. This has been reflected in the revised schedule of Council meetings for the current municipal year. Further guidance is expected from Government on 'hybrid' meetings which will be reviewed when published.

### **The Council Workforce**

- 2.8 At the start of lockdown, over 60% of staff were enabled to work remotely (from home) in a matter of weeks.
- 2.9 Having the relevant IT available and staff that were able to utilise it effectively has enabled many service areas to continue their day to day work with the minimum amount of disruption.
- 2.10 Staff have also displayed great flexibility by taking on essential roles that may differ from their substantive post.
- 2.11 Any social distancing measures in place will impact on how many staff can now work in Council buildings at any one time and how many will need to remain working at home.
- 2.12 Those staff shielding for medical reasons may need to remain working from home for a longer period.
- 2.13 Large numbers of staff either temporarily working from home or engaged in flexible working arrangements may change the type of IT support required and this is being continually assessed.

### **Building on the positive outcomes from lockdown**

- 2.14 When the national lockdown was announced in March 2020, the Council quickly moved to set up the C19 Hub to provide assistance to the most vulnerable members of our local community. The C19 Hub was able to link community volunteers with those who needed assistance.
- 2.15 The Council has been working with agencies across the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough area to coordinate the community support to residents in need. A key part of this work has been matching organisations in need of volunteers with those who had recently enlisted to help.

- 2.16 As we move into the recovery phase of the pandemic, the partnership across the County will consider how best to engage with the local residents and community groups in a coordinated way to ensure those who want to continue working as a volunteer are able to do so.
- 2.17 At the start of the lockdown period, the Council successfully found self-contained accommodation for 51 Rough Sleepers and night shelter clients with associated support. Subsequently, a further 6 Rough Sleepers were found accommodation, bringing this total up to 57. A multi-agency response is now working on finding 'move on' accommodation to reduce the risk of a return to rough sleeping. Each client has a bespoke support plan to ensure they receive the support needed to reduce the risk of tenancy failure.
- 2.18 There are a number of infrastructure projects in train that could aid economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic in the local area. These include Phase 3 of the South Fens Business Centre project, the Wisbech High Street project, the Kings Dyke improvement scheme and the potential reopening of the Wisbech Rail link. These improvements, along with the Government's proposals to reform the planning system in order to provide additional housing, could see an increase in residential and business properties in the district along with the much needed improvements to transport links.

### **Corporate Assets**

- 2.19 The situation has enabled the Council to adopt a more flexible approach to corporate accommodation which has led to the greater implementation of agile working practices and could provide an opportunity to reduce the need for desk space within our buildings on a permanent basis.
- 2.20 Alternatively, if traditional working practices are maintained the available floor space will need to provide office accommodation for staff at reduced desk density to ensure we maintain social distancing measures.
- 2.21 Officers are developing an Accommodation Strategy which will integrate new working practices with the need to provide flexible and effective work spaces allowing the Council to embrace enhanced working styles.
- 2.22 The Council leases over 150 business premises to small businesses. The pandemic has forced a shift towards homeworking, virtual meetings, furloughing of staff and/or temporary closure of businesses. Inevitably this has impacted some businesses and sectors more than others, the potential impact to the Council's business premises is:
  - a) An immediate reduction in occupancy rates which could potentially continue longer term as businesses reassess their accommodation needs and seek to maintain social distancing requirements
  - b) Conference and meeting room hire income has ceased entirely at the business centres as businesses have sought to hold virtual meetings. In line with Government guidance, there is still no indication of when such activity can resume
  - c) Rental income for the business premises has been largely stable, although it is recognised that the payment of business grants will have masked the actual impact of temporary business closures and arrears levels will be monitored very closely
- 2.23 Social distancing measures will need to be implemented and maintained in Council buildings for as long as is necessary. Rooms and workspaces are currently being assessed to ensure that staff and customers are able to comply with these measures with additional adaptations, such as protective screens and appointment only schemes, being introduced where necessary.

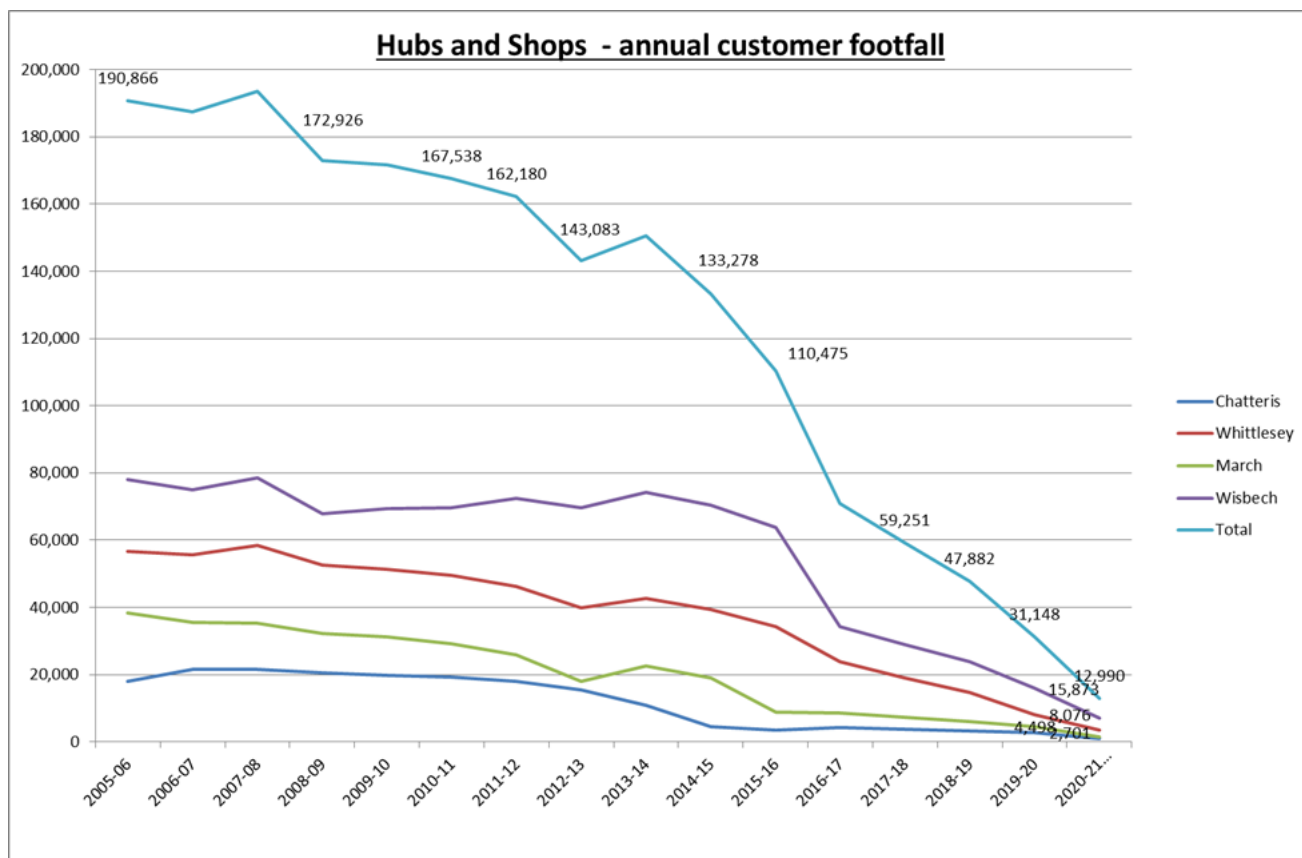
## Supporting Local Businesses

- 2.24 The newly formed Economic Growth Team have been heavily involved in a number of schemes to support our local businesses:
- a) Assessment, distribution and development of business grants schemes
  - b) Business Information Hub
  - c) Engagement with the CPCA Economic Recovery Group
  - d) Signposting the CPCA COVID-19 Capital Grant scheme
  - e) Engagement with the Better Business For All (BBFA) group
  - f) Helping to deliver improvements as part of the 'Reopening the High Streets Safely' scheme
- 2.25 The Economic Growth Team will continue to support local businesses going forward ensuring that they have the support they need during these challenging times.



## Potential Transformational Changes

- 2.26 Our customers are telling us both directly and indirectly, that they want to access services in a manner of their choice and at a convenient time for them, rather than predominantly via the current traditional face-to-face model. As a result the Council has already seen significant changes to the way in which customers interact with us in order to access services.
- 2.27 The combined footfall figure for all of our Customer Service centres in 2019/20 was 31,148. The figures for each town are shown below:
- Chatteris - 2,701
  - March - 4,498
  - Whittlesey - 8,076
  - Wisbech - 15,873
- 2.28 The total footfall figure for 2020/21 is expected to be around 12,990. This reflects the current closures and reduced post lockdown face-to-face transactions. However, should subsequent lockdown measures be introduced, this figure is likely to be considerably lower.



- 2.29 Whilst it is recognised that the change in more recent customer behaviour may have been influenced by external factors beyond their control, it is known that the requirements to comply with social distancing are likely to remain in place for many months and therefore the revised approach to how customers choose to access services is likely to continue.
- 2.30 The Council continues to make progress in relation to the My Fenland Transformation Programme. The My Fenland Programme focusses on modernising the way the Council delivers key aspects of services to our customers, ensuring we are putting the customer journey first and providing the best possible customer experience.
- 2.31 A key milestone for the My Fenland project is the implementation of Phase 1. Phase 1 of the project draws together the administrative and customer focussed roles from Customer Services with back office teams within the Communities, Environment Support Team and the Economic Growth and Assets teams into a combined team to allow for improved and cohesive service delivery. The timescales for achieving phase 1 of the project have been slightly delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic but we are now working hard to agree a date for when the teams will come together either virtually or physically. Office accommodation to help facilitate this is now in place.
- 2.32 The reopening of the Customer Service Centres and Community Hubs will involve the introduction of an individualised appointment service for our customers, rather than the previous 'first come, first served' approach. This is a mitigation measure in response to the COVID-19 epidemic and will be reviewed periodically in line with government guidance on social distancing. The proposed introduction of a wide scale appointment scheme, across all customer service centres and community hubs, builds on the successful appointment pilot scheme implemented with the Migrant population and support provided via the Migrant Population Advisors. The customer feedback from the pilot scheme has been extremely positive with customers having certainty regarding when they will be seen and having the

opportunity to have dedicated time with an Advisor without interruption or distraction from other customers.

- 2.33 Appointments will be available across all four Customer Service Centres and Community Hubs, although initially appointments will be rolled out on a site by site basis to ensure COVID-19 compliant measures are robust and instil confidence in our customers and staff.
- 2.34 The wide scale introduction of a customer focussed appointment scheme will be designed to more accurately reflect service demand with the timings of appointments devised accordingly. Appointments will be easy to book via the contact centre or via email to [Info@fenland.gov.uk](mailto:Info@fenland.gov.uk) . Appointments will initially be booked for half an hour to reflect the approach taken in the recent successful pilot scheme. Timings will be reviewed on a regular basis in line with staff and customer feedback to determine whether any changes are needed to this approach.
- 2.35 The Contact Centre will remain open on Saturday mornings, as this has proven increasingly popular with customers across the district regardless of their geographic location
- 2.36 During early summer we will introduce PayPoint. This will be a substantial improvement for our customers as it will significantly increase the number of venues customers will be able to pay a council bill by cash or card, as any PayPoint facility can be utilised either across the district or nationally, therefore increasing accessibility in a rural area. The implementation of PayPoint will be a major catalyst for meaningful changes as customers will no longer need to come into a Council building to pay a bill by cash or card and therefore once the Customer Service Centre and Community Hubs re-open to the public customer footfall is anticipated to reduce further, releasing staff capacity.
- 2.37 We are also seeking to release the remaining potential in the Bartec In Cab system used in the refuse and cleansing vehicles by improving information and service actions available automatically through the council website.
- 2.38 This improved integration between Bartec and the website will enable customers to self-serve. We will use this initially to focus on activities like reporting a missed bin, ordering a new or replacement bin, the higher demand services along with Bulky Waste requests and service requests for cleansing in due course. Again, we know that our current processes are not as efficient as they could be, being labour intensive. This improvement will allow customers to make good use of the website and receive up to date information about their waste collections and services thus reducing the number of calls to the contact centre and face-to-face visits, as customers will also be able to self-serve updates to their request, effectively managing their expectations and further freeing up existing resources.
- 2.39 An upgrade to our Contact Centre telephony software will enable us to route all customer contacts including calls, emails and web chat via one central 'My Fenland' team, better supporting customers to utilise the website as well as enabling more effective tracking and monitoring of customer transactions in a more efficient way. This will facilitate enhanced performance monitoring, in turn delivering a better experience at the point of access. The upgrade will also introduce a light touch Customer Relationship Manager (CRM) software, which will enable greater consistency, transparency and a reduction of the customer having to repeat information on multiple occasions. This will provide us with data about how and why customers contact us to help forecast future demand, project future staffing levels and manage website developments proactively.
- 2.40 As a result of the investment in technology and anticipated further changes in customer behaviour in order to access or pay for council services, we will be in a

position to undertake an analysis of the assets and resources required to deliver the future functions of the service. A further review of how the Customer Service Centre and Community Hubs are utilised will also take place to ensure opening hours reflect customer demand.

### **Mitigation against the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic**

- 2.41 On Friday 26 June, a third round of reporting was submitted to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) showing the estimated impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Council's finances.
- 2.42 The estimated direct impact on this year's revenue budget is £4.262m split £2.324 in additional cost pressures and £1.938m in lost income. Included in these totals is the agreed financial support for Freedom Leisure covering the period April 2020 to September 2020 totalling £545k.
- 2.43 To date we have received £1.088m from Central Government which leaves us with a projected budget deficit of £3.174m for 2020-21. At present it is unclear whether any further funding will be forthcoming to support this shortfall, although an announcement made on 2 July stated that a major new package to help Councils respond to COVID-19 will ensure councils' financial sustainability for the future. We are still awaiting the details of this package and what it might mean for FDC.
- 2.44 Lobbying continues on this issue and we are supporting this through the Local Government Association (LGA), District Councils Network (DCN) and the Society of District Council Treasurers (SDCT) routes in addition to communicating to the local MP via the Leader of the Council.
- 2.45 The consequences of this will stretch beyond 2020-21 as impacts on collection rates for both NNDR and Council tax will lead to deficits in the collection funds for future years.
- 2.46 A budget update will be taken to Cabinet and Council on 6 August 2020.
- 2.47 Work continues on taking the new Commercial and Investment strategy forward and, following Cabinet approval on 9 June 2020, Fenland Future Ltd was incorporated to build on and aid implementation of this strategy.
- 2.48 We are currently working on the agenda for the inaugural meeting of the Investment Board which will take place later this month.

### **3 Conclusion and next steps**

- 3.1 The 'new normal' will be different to the way we previously delivered services. However, the opportunities this presents in terms of transformational projects will be embraced, resulting in an enhanced customer experience and efficiency savings for the council.
- 3.2 As always, the Council will look to work with partner organisations to deliver efficient and effective services. This partnership working will be essential during the complex recovery phase of this global pandemic.
- 3.3 Plans will be coordinated with the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Local Resilience Forum (CPLRF) who already have several recovery work streams in place.
- 3.4 Any fundamental changes to service delivery will be communicated with Members via the usual channels with reports being brought to Cabinet and Council in line with existing procedures.





# **CORONAVIRUS** **GOT SYMPTOMS?** **GET TESTED**

**HIGH TEMPERATURE  
OR NEW CONTINUOUS COUGH  
OR LOSS OF TASTE OR SMELL?**

No one in your household should leave home if any one person has symptoms.

Find out how to get a test, and how long to isolate, at [nhs.uk/coronavirus](https://nhs.uk/coronavirus)

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