

**Committee: Cabinet**

**Date: 28 April 2020**

Wards: All

**Subject: the Council's response to the Covid-19 Pandemic**

Lead officer: Ged Curran, Chief Executive

Lead member: Councillor Stephen Alambritis, Leader of the Council

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**Recommendations:**

- A. That Cabinet notes the steps taken by the Council in response to the Covid-19 Pandemic
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**1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1. This report sets out the steps the Council has taken in response to the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, working closely with partners, in order to mitigate the impact of the coronavirus on residents and businesses in Merton.

**2 EMERGENCY PLANNING ARRANGEMENTS**

- 2.1. The first confirmed cases of the coronavirus in the UK were at the end of January and all public services began planning to mitigate the impact on residents and businesses although it was not until some weeks later that the potential scale of the pandemic in this country began to be appreciated. As part of the London wide resilience forum, the Council has well-rehearsed emergency planning arrangements and these were formally initiated on 17 March.
- 2.2. Under these arrangements, a bronze, silver, gold reporting structure is established internally. The bronze activity refers to the operational activity being carried out by departments to meet the changing and increasing demands on the service. The silver role carries out the co-ordinating and tactical activity, particularly where there is a need for cross departmental support or a common approach to a particular problem. Gold takes a strategic approach both within the Council and as part of the Pan-London network.
- 2.3. The Council submits situation reports (known as sitreps) to the London coordinating body on a daily basis. These reports set out the current position against a range of critical services. Such services are ranked on a scale of 1 to 4, where 1 is a normal service and 4 represents a situation where service can no longer be safely provided (requiring mutual support). The vast majority of Merton's services are scoring 1s and 2s, 2s being a slightly

reduced service. In terms of staffing capacity, this has remained consistently above 80% in most service areas, with the exception of Children's Schools and Families where capacity is between 60 and 80% -at the upper end of that range.

- 2.4. A redeployment process has been established enabling staff whose workload has diminished as a result of the pandemic to help out in other areas either within their departments or elsewhere in the Council. This is working well so the only area where there is still a need for staff is for volunteer care workers. The need for more highly skilled workers will be met by external recruitment but staff are also being asked whether they would be willing to undergo training to take on some of the more routine tasks.
- 2.5. In order to make strategic planning manageable and coherent, London has been broken into sub regions, with Merton forming part of the South West London Region comprising Merton, Sutton, Wandsworth, Richmond and Kingston. Merton's Chief Executive is lead (Gold) chief executive for this sub-region. As is to be expected, key professional networks, such as the Associations of Directors of Social Services, Children's Services and Public Health are also working together in their respective areas and Merton's corporate management team members are playing key roles here.

### **3 SUPPORT FOR RESIDENTS**

- 3.1. One of the first actions taken by the Council was to work with the Merton Voluntary Services Council to set up a response hub, known as the Merton Covid-19 Community Resource Hub; the Hub takes inward bound calls directly from residents, or via other voluntary sector organisations, requesting support with things such as shopping, dog walking and isolation. It is staffed by a combination of council staff redeployed from elsewhere in the Council, mainly from libraries. At the time of writing 986 individual contacts had been made with the Hub. The Hub is running in conjunction with Merton Mutual Aid, a network of local volunteers providing practical support in their respective neighbourhoods.
- 3.2. As Members will be aware, the Government has established a shielding process whereby the NHS has identified a cohort of very vulnerable people on the basis of pre-existing medical conditions and has advised them that they should remain at home for 12 weeks. Councils have been given the responsibility of contacting residents in their areas who fall within this group in order to ascertain whether they require any assistance. The Government's intention is to establish direct food deliveries to these residents but that system has is not yet fully functioning and local authorities have been expected to carry out this activity in the meantime.
- 3.3. Merton has been given the names of 2877 people living in the borough and has set up a shielding hub in order to contact all the people on the list and

provide them with assistance if required. The vast majority of these residents have been contacted but only around 38% have required support as they had already made their own arrangements. It has not been possible to contact all the people on the list as in some cases they have moved, or died or are not responding to calls. Home visits are being made where appropriate and the position being kept under review. The Council has also established arrangements with community pharmacists to ensure that people can have their prescription medicines delivered to their homes.

#### **4 PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE) AND ANTIGEN TESTING**

- 4.1. As has been widely reported in the media, there has been a national problem in securing adequate stocks of PPE for staff working in settings where this is required. A prioritisation list for council staff has been drawn up based on the most recent advice from Public Health England and so far it has been possible to source enough equipment to meet the high priority areas. This work is being coordinated by staff in the Communities and Housing Department, supported by the Commercial Services Team, on behalf of the whole council. Mutual aid arrangements are in place with neighbouring boroughs and a strategic reserve has been coordinated through the London gold arrangements. At the time of writing officers have made use of this strategic reserve on two occasions to ensure adequate supply for the Council and to meet the urgent needs of approximately seventy social care providers across the borough. Daily reports are submitted on availability of stock. The most pressing need locally is for face masks where at one point, there was only enough stock to meet current demand for 3 days, although the position has now improved somewhat.
- 4.2. Officers have been exploring a variety of routes to maximise supply; as well as using the sources referred to above, direct contact is being made with suppliers and orders have been placed but these are subject to availability. There is a risk that with a move to relax any restrictions on movement, the demand for facemasks will significantly increase, both among Council employees and the general public. At present, it is hard to see how this demand will be met.
- 4.3. Very recently, the ability for tests to be carried out on staff showing symptoms of the virus has been introduced by the Government and for the South West London sub-region, this is being run by Deloittes at the temporary swab testing facility set up at Chessington World of Adventures. Criteria have been agreed for priority referral for testing and it is anticipated that over the coming weeks the numbers being tested will increase. This should enable workers who fear they may be infected but then prove negative to come back to work. The testing offer has also been made available to social care providers across the borough to support them in their continuing efforts to maintain staffing at adequate levels.

## **5 STAFF WELFARE**

- 5.1. An early decision was made to ask all staff who can work from home to do so and because of the progress which had been made on the smart working programme, a significant number of employees were able to take advantage of this immediately. The IT team worked hard and at pace to provide other staff with technology required to allow remote working and by the end of March, nearly all employees whose role permitted them to work off site were based at home. This has meant that they were able to stay safe and sickness levels have remained relatively low. A significant number of staff have needed to self-isolate but a good many of those people have been able to continue working during that period.
- 5.2. During this period, the frequency of whole staff communication has been increased, with almost daily bulletins and a weekly message from the Chief Executive. Managers have been encouraged to keep in regular contact with their teams through a variety of media, including skype meetings. Information about mental health and well-being has been posted on the intranet and staff are being signposted to other organisations for support during this period. Guidance for managers dealing with bereaved members of staff has been issued.

## **6 MORTALITY PLANNING**

- 6.1 The arrangements for dealing with excess deaths in Merton are complex as the hospital mortuary service is run by St George's Hospital, responsibility for the crematoria lies with Wandsworth Council and Merton forms part of the Inner London West coronial area which also manages mortuary and storage facilities. The Council is directly responsible for the registration of deaths and runs the cemeteries through a contract with Id Verde.
- 6.2 A council mortality planning group has been established to coordinate all the strands of work and is liaising closely with colleagues elsewhere, including local funeral directors, to ensure that there is a joined up response and that an appropriate service can be given to the bereaved. Currently it appears that there is sufficient local mortuary, burial and cremation provision available. At national level a system of pandemic multi agency response teams (PMART) has been set up to deal with deaths in the community.

## **7 SOCIAL DISTANCING**

- 7.1. Fortunately it has been possible to keep the Borough's parks and open spaces open which allows people to take exercise and get some fresh air. In order to ensure that this can continue safely, the Council has engaged Kingdom to support the Police enforcement response in our parks should

people fail to follow social distancing guidance. They report, as do the police, that overall compliance with the guidance has been very good. Over the Easter weekend, a decision was taken to decommission parking spaces in parks and near Wimbledon Common in order to discourage people from driving to them. Consideration is currently being given to the position in relation to blue badge holders and it is hoped that some parks' car parks will reopen.

7.2. Children Schools and Families have increased the capacity of the youth outreach team to enable them to make contact with young people who may be out in the public realm and to encourage them to go home and stay safe but there has minimal demand for this service in practice.

7.3. The Regulatory Shared Partnership have put in place procedures to deal with breaches of the regulations on trading and have been using their enforcement teams to monitor compliance. Most of the complaints received have been about construction sites but responsibility for those rests with the Health and Safety Executive so have been referred there.

## **8 SCHOOLS**

8.1. The Council has worked closely with Merton schools to ensure that vulnerable children and the children of key workers can continue to be provided for. As at 15 April there were 290 children in Merton schools although it is anticipated this number may increase once the formal Easter holiday period comes to an end. Children, Schools and Families are working hard to ensure that vulnerable children who are not attending schools are being safeguarded. After referrals to children's social care dropped significantly when children became less visible to the public behind closed doors, the referrals to the MASH (multi-agency safeguarding hub) are returning to previous levels.

## **9 GOVERNANCE**

9.1. The impact of the regulations restricting gatherings of more than two people other than in specified limited circumstances had meant that it was not possible to hold formal council meetings once lock down had been announced. The Council's Scheme of Delegation has allowed all relevant decisions to be taken by officers in these exceptional circumstances. With effect from 4<sup>th</sup> April, The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations ("the Meetings Regulations") have removed the requirement for meetings to happen in one fixed place, and will allow members formally to participate so long as they can hear and be heard by each other and by members of the public who would in the normal course of events be entitled to attend the meeting. Ideally, participants should also be able to be seen although this is not a statutory requirement.

- 9.2. Arrangements have therefore been made to use the conferencing software Zoom to allow meetings to take place virtually. For reasons of information security, only participants in the meeting will be invited to join the meeting via Zoom but the public will be able to observe the meetings as they will be live streamed on the Council's YouTube channel.
- 9.3. At the time of writing guides are being developed to assist participants to use the new technology and to set down some basic rules of etiquette for remote meetings, as well as some rules governing issues such as the declaration of pecuniary interests which, as members will be aware, require the member declaring to leave the meeting.

## **10 TIMETABLE**

- 10.1. This meeting of the Cabinet is the first such virtual meeting and it will be followed by a Licensing Sub- Committee and at least one meeting of the Planning Application Committee in May. It is anticipated that thereafter there will be a light timetable leading into the summer when the position will be reassessed. The Meetings Regulations allow remote participation in meetings until 7 May 2021 so as the law currently stands, if the movement restrictions are lifted, it would be possible to resume physical meetings but still have a facility to dial in remotely for those members who are shielded or self-isolating.
- 10.2. Details of the proposed schedule of meeting will be agreed in consultation with the leaders of the political groups shortly.
- 10.3. It should also be possible to include brief scrutiny meetings in that schedule for the purpose of agreeing work programmes but it is recommended that the topic workshops be cancelled with the work programming approach and priorities agreed with the Chairs & Vice-Chairs.

### **Annual Council**

- 10.4. Among other things, the Meetings Regulations remove the statutory requirement for an annual council meeting and provide that any appointments which would normally fall to be made at the annual meeting, will continue until the next annual meeting of the authority or until such time as the Council may determine.

Accordingly, it has been agreed that the annual council meeting scheduled for 20 May be postponed until a date to be agreed in the Autumn when it will be possible to have a physical meeting which gives due regard to the nature of the Mayor making ceremony. In those circumstances, the current Mayor, Councillor Janice Howard and her deputy, Councillor Edward Foley, will remain in post until their successors are appointed, as will the current members of the committees.

## 11 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1. The Government has allocated a range of funds to Councils to enable them to support their local residents and business community. A summary of the funding received to date together with progress in allocating these funds is shown in the table below:

Support	National Allocation	LBM Allocation/Cost	LBM Funds Allocated as at 16/4/20	Comments
	£bn's	£m's	£m's	
Support for LA's	1.600	4.965	Fully Allocated	Current estimate of Covid-19 costs plus lost income in excess of £25m.*
S31 Business rates relief	1.800	3.471		61% paid
Council Tax Hardship Fund **	0.500	1.480	None	Application of up to £200 per beneficiary estimated at over £1m.  Adjustments due w/c 4 May. Review by 4 June 20.
Business support grant ***		29.318	18.845	74% paid – we have identified £25.5 million due to be paid.
Business rates holiday		N/K	Fully Allocated	

- \* The Council is experiencing extra service pressures, particularly in adult social care. It is also experiencing significant losses in income, particularly in areas like car parking and leisure. We have recently provided our current best estimates of extra costs and lost income to MHCLG and will continue to press for additional support to enable the Council to provide adequate support to our residents and business community. It should be recognised that we are still working on these

figures as new issues emerge and the length of the lock down becomes clearer so that this represents our best guess at the time.

\*\* Subject to MHCLG conditions impacting on our use of the CIVICA software we use to process Council Tax.

\*\*\* Please note that the allocation of funds is increasing daily. An update on progress will be provided to the Cabinet on the night.

11.2 In endeavouring to support residents and local businesses who are suffering from the impact of Covid-19 the Council has adopted a range of measures to support the local community and businesses. These include:

11.2.1 A commitment to ensure that in most cases essential service providers will continue to receive payment for services provided despite the challenges faced in delivery.

11.2.2 Cash flow support for essential service providers by the early payment of invoices (currently within 36 hours of receipt)

11.2.3 Changing from payment in arrears to payment in advance e.g. payment of one month's supply of goods/service in advance/arrears to up a maximum of three months in advance.

11.2.4 Deferring the Council's first quarter's commercial rents and advancing the first quarter's income to the three Merton BIDs.

11.2.5 Deferring council tax instalments for residents most in need

11.2.6 Continuing the temporary suspension of Dunning and bailiff activity.

11.2.7 Suspending Leisure membership payments.

## **12 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS**

12.1. The legal implications relating to this report are considered in the body of the report.

## **13 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS**

13.1. The work being done with the voluntary sector to provide a coherent response to the current crisis and the strong sense of community which already exists in Merton has meant that there have been no reported community tensions. Work is ongoing with faith groups locally and nationally and attention is being paid to the need to have regard to cultural practices in funeral arrangements wherever possible while complying with the advice on infection control.

- 13.2. Officers are aware that introducing remote meetings could in theory mean that those people without access to information technology or who have difficulty in understanding a webcast are less able to access those meetings than others. In drawing up the guides referred to above, measures to mitigate the impact of the arrangements on people with communication difficulties will be included where possible, whilst noting that it would not currently be lawful to allow members of the public to attend physical meetings.

## **14 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS**

- 14.1. As always, the Council is working closely with its partners in the Metropolitan Police Force to ensure that there is a joined up response to crime and community safety issues. They report that crime levels have dropped and although other parts of the country have reported steep rises in levels of domestic abuse, Merton, in common with most of the rest of London, has not. There is concern that this might mean there is significant under reporting and work is ongoing to ensure that victims are able to safely report abuse and that appropriate response is in place when they do.

## **15 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS**

- 15.1. As stated in the report, the Council has been able to respond positively to the coronavirus crisis and core and critical services are proving to be resilient. The biggest concern at present is in relation to the provision of PPE and this is being kept under close review locally and at regional and national level.

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