

## Item 5 – Response phase

1. I want to take a few moments to bring members up to speed on how the Council has responded to the Pandemic and challenges that it has faced since the beginning of the year. I have heard some criticism that the Council has been slow to react and want to put our discussions in context.
2. In February, a multi service team was convened to look at the rising issues for the Council for its safe operation and staff welfare under its Business Continuity Plans. The Council has a Corporate Business Continuity Plan and individual Service-related plans in place. Traditionally, business continuity plans reflect the plan to react to a sudden loss of resources, in this case the Council had to plan for the gradual loss of services.
3. Early issues included:
  - Enabling the workforce to work remotely – most of the Council’s staff had no facility of working from home initially and demands on external technology suppliers nationally was significant to which our IT service responded brilliantly.
  - Putting in place monitoring of service impacts and staff sickness/shielding
  - With the Board members, decisions on the early closure of Council facilities including the Civic Offices, other Council buildings (Leah Manning Centre, Playhouse etc.), playgrounds, car parks
4. The Response has also:
  - Facilitated initial set up of Community Hub service; delivered as a joint initiative between Rainbow Services and Harlow Council – this has included council staff redeployment to service the Hub on a seven days a week basis, working with rainbow services on essential food deliveries throughout lockdown, individual welfare calls to category A and B residents (3000), liaising with other agencies for referrals and dealing with significant social issues created by the pandemic that would otherwise have been dealt with by social care services.
  - Worked with County and National planning agencies to ensure a coordinated response for those shielding and residents requiring assistance – this has included a coordinated reporting mechanism and liaison, a seamless referrals process for those requiring local hub help and action with Essex Welfare Services and other partner agencies. Support for excess death plans (with Westerleigh) and more recently local containment plans.
  - The council has paid out £11.4m to 841 local businesses in a measured way. The Council has given extended retail relief to 524 business rate payers, totalling around £17.5m and paid out £933,000 of government hardship

grants to 4,800 residents receiving Council Tax support. Officers are now assessing the many applications made by businesses to the Discretionary Business Grant Scheme which aims to support small and micro businesses that are struggling due to the coronavirus shutdown but are unable to access other government grant funding. All of these things have been achieved against a payment enforcement moratorium, a remote workforce and maintaining contact with residents having difficulty in paying.

- Introduced measures to create safe working environments at the Civic Centre and Latton Bush Centre to allow critical Council and third party services (including NHS teams) to continue, this has meant that contact teams have been asked to work right through, as essential workers, using social distancing at the civic centre, works have also been done to the receptions to enable safer working and the recent successful reopening of the civic centre to the public.
- For our Housing Teams the challenge has been in meeting Housing need. During the period Housing had to accommodate an additional 36 people who were sleeping rough where previously there had been only a handful identified on regular counts. Additionally, Housing has been supporting the increased hardship being evidenced through loss of income. Housing have offered support/signposting benefit/support take up, and development of payment plans,
- The Council has a stay on legal action until the end of August. The increase in Universal Credit Claimants has led to a delay in paying but there is evidence that the reopening of the cash office has meant more have paid arrears. Face to face visits have been undertaken and staff has demonstrated a willingness to work differently to ensure service provision to vulnerable tenants. Online applications processes have been developed to aid the public and within 48 hours of the new Housing Application form going live, a month's worth of applications had been made.
- Made decisions in public interest on the short-term suspension of Council facilities and services and set in motion groundwork for recovery work to commence re-delivery. Whilst facilities such as Pets Corner and The Playhouse have remained closed, staff have been undertaking engagement work, online creative projects and accelerating maintenance works so they are ready to open when it as soon as safe to do so. Staff have also been redeployed to support other recovery activities.
- The Council has operated in a fast-moving policy environment with government guidance being issued or changed almost daily. Restrictions and relaxations of COVID 19 related guidelines have required many dynamic changes to operation of services. The Council, in its community leadership role, has also promoted the wellbeing of Harlow residents, through its communications so the resident understood the appropriate responses at

each stage of the pandemic to mitigate risk to themselves and protect safety of others. Advice and help have been given to business to reopen safely by our environment team.

- The Council has dealt with over 60,000 enquiries\* (calls, emails, online forms, applications and social media messages) during the pandemic with more than 24,000 people visiting our coronavirus support information on our website.
  - We have worked with our HTS partners to maintain their emergency responses for residents during the lockdown period, implemented safe working practices for their staff and the public they visit and worked collaboratively to bring back both housing and environmental services quickly so that impact to residents could be mitigated and services continue as close to normal as possible
  - Our Waste contractor, Veolia, and their bin crews have provided a service throughout the lockdown period and collected over 2,824 tonnes of non-recycling, 1,402 tonnes of recycling and 557 tonnes of food waste in April and May
5. The Response Team initially met daily with reporting to a daily Senior Management Board / HTS meeting. This work is now being wound down as many of the staff are involved in moving to recovery Workstream activities and as council activities recover, to their substantive roles. Measures implemented have meant that only one staff member has fallen ill to Covid 19 and recovered. Staff have adapted to new ways of working and continue to work remotely for the foreseeable future.
6. The Council has also quickly established a portfolio with specific responsibility for recovery and a mechanism for formal members involvement through this cross-party Working Group.

### **Item 6(a) – Workstreams**

The following are update notes from Workstream Leads

#### **Community Impact – Lead Jane Greer:**

The following subgroups have been established to look at impact on our community covering the following themes.

- Arts and Culture
- Homelessness, Supported Housing and tenancy support
- Third Sector, BAME, Faith, disabled and other groups community impacts

There has also been a discussion on how a cross working group subgroup needs to be set up to look at

- Data – collection of and analysis

The key points so far are:

### **Arts and Culture Subgroup**

This sub group focuses on arts & cultural venues and activities that are run by the Council or which the Council has a significant involvement in e.g. Playhouse, Gibberd Gallery, Museum, Carnival, Fireworks, Christmas Lights – also Council venues that are used by community based groups e.g. Latton Bush, Potter Street. A later stage may be to provide advice/support to non-Council linked groups/venues. Action planning to be focussed on two areas:

- Maintaining audience engagement and some activity where possible, particularly in the summer
- Preparing plans for re-opening (even if this may be many months away). Although this will feed into the internal group

### **Homelessness and supported housing and tenancy support Subgroup**

Focusing on supported housing, homelessness including rough sleepers and victims of domestic abuse, allocations and tenancy support

Areas of focus will include:

- Establishing a plan to re-introduce support visits for older persons housing
- Planning for re-opening communal areas in older persons housing
- In relation to tenancy support, the level of family support has increased during lockdown, family members have been off work or furloughed, however as this support decreases and people return to work then support services need to increase to meet demand.
- Developing further the existing Rough Sleepers Action to help mitigate the effects of Covid 19 on homeless people.

### **Third Sector, BAME, Faith, disabled and other groups community impacts**

Looking and at implementing support to aid recovering from the pandemic to the third sector, faith groups, BAME groups and others. Examples include:

- Supporting local community and voluntary groups to maintain support for the most vulnerable groups after Shielding ceases.
- Though local faith groups, identify specific support needs to assist community recovery

- Support local organisations that have links to BAME communities to identify specific recovery support needs

### **Council Business Impact – Lead Simon Freeman**

Work of this workstream has the following key points

- Vast majority of council services have been maintained throughout.
- Extremely quick response to the government decision and national crisis in March to enable the above to happen.
- Public facing services temporarily suspended to comply with guidance and protect public/staff
- Some workers unable to undertake normal duties have been redeployed to support other activity (such as Community Hub, town Centre etc.
- Corporate Covid Risk Assessment completed and Covid Certification in Civic/Latton Bush

Now focusing on bringing service to the public back including –

- Public Toilets (reopened w/c 6 July)
- Civic Centre (reopened w/c 6 July)
- Car Parks (reopened w/c 6 July)
- Museum Garden (due to open 25 July)
- Playgrounds (Due to open by the end of July)
- Playhouse – some phased opening from w/c 20 July

During lockdown lots of work on using online service access with big win on the development of Housing Applications online. Work continues to develop these points of service access moving forward.

### **Business & Economy Workstream – Lead Andrew Bramidge**

#### **1. Advice and support to businesses**

- Provision of Government grant support to Harlow businesses
- Direct businesses towards local business advisory services e.g. NWES, Growth Hub through partnership social media campaign involving Chambers of Commerce and SELEP
- Promotion of new business start-up support to include co-operatives where risk can be shared
- Improve environment in our employment areas e.g. better signage, transport
- Deliver joint Harlow Council & Harlow Chamber online business support and information event (hosted by Cllr Harvey?)

#### **2. Promotion of Harlow businesses**

- Local Purchasing – what more can the Council do in this regard?
- Local Purchasing – actively promote local purchasing opportunities e.g. by staging a (virtual?) Meet the Buyers event
- Inward investment campaign through Discover Harlow, positioning Harlow as key location in the UK Innovation Corridor
- Work with 'Anchor' institutions to support the local supply chain; learn from PHE Impact report
- Develop opportunities to create new forms of flexible business space e.g. co-working to enable new business creation, potentially using our commercial asset portfolio
- Immediately switch to active promotion of Harlow Town Centre, neighbourhood centres, retail parks and Harlow's hospitality sector. Focus of activity of 'Shop Local' e.g. through apps such as 'Shop Appy'
- Promotion of Harlow business success stories via Discover Harlow focussing on companies that are doing well at present and potentially linking them to supply chain opportunities
- Develop Covid related Business Awards scheme with Harlow Chamber and Heart 4 Harlow
- Fast track signage project to improve awareness of local shopping hatches.

#### **HTS Group Workstream – Lead Andrew Murray**

- Played a leading role in supporting the C/Hub, providing vans, volunteer resources, and storage accommodation for food parcels etc.
- Played a leading role in procuring PPE equipment ensuring "fit for purpose", establishing reliable markets/supply chain, interpreting complex/changing govt H and S guidance into adapting business processes, arranging Covid Secure office arrangements
- Established a "remote contact centre" quickly for responding to customer emergencies/enquiries.
- Worked well with local/national trade unions, in partnership, to provide support to employees thru lock down, and get people back to work safely/processes. (HSE)
- National recognition as a playing a leading role in the newly formed LATCo organisation, developing support mechanisms for members

#### **Item 6b - Development of Action Plan**

- Officers are working on producing an Action Plan layout common to all Workstreams
- It is envisaged that the first draft Action Plan will be brought to the Working Group at its August meeting.
- Work will continue on actions in the interim between meetings
- Action Plan will be a 'live' document and subject to change going forward

- Anticipated that the first report will be presented to Cabinet at their meeting in September.

Additionally, and concurrently, the Working Group will align with, inform and strengthen all high level strategic corporate activity, for example work on Harlow Gilston Garden Town, the Town Investment Plan, Town Centre Action Plan and the Corporate Plan

### **Item 6c - Short Term Measures**

This is an opportunity for the Working to suggest measures that could be implemented quickly or could be subject to more work by officers.

#### **Quick Wins for the Community Impact Group**

- Worked with Rainbow Services in the successful operation of the Community Hub
- Planning for Black History Month activities in an alternative and more suitable location
- Development of a summer school e.g. theatre workshops, dance classes, museum activities programme using open air venues
- Promoted and encourage applications for Discretionary Business Rate Scheme
- Will target BAME children and young people for participation in the summer school
- Work with partners to deliver a Holiday hunger scheme at a suitable location.

#### **Quick Wins for the Business and Economic Support Workstream**

- Delivery of joint Harlow Council & Chamber of Commerce online business briefing and engagement event
- Proactive promotional campaign of town centre, neighbourhood centres, retail parks and the town's hospitality sector and 'Harlow Shop Local' campaign
- HDC to develop and lead a local partnership on implementation of Kick Start job placement scheme
- Develop Business Awards scheme to promote and celebrate local businesses
- Dedicated edition of Harlow Times – "Harlow is Open for Business", in late Sept/ early October.

### **Item 6d - Impact on Council Priorities and Corporate Plan**

- The Council agreed its Corporate Plan in February before the onset of the pandemic
- The Plan does not reflect the recovery focus of the Council
- Proposed to add a further Corporate Priority in the next reporting round which will be the September Cabinet meeting

