

FAREHAM

BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to the Executive for Decision 11 October 2021

Portfolio:	Policy and Resources
Subject:	The Council's Approach to the Pandemic – A Review
Report of:	Chief Executive Officer
Corporate Priorities:	A Dynamic, Prudent and Progressive Council

Purpose:

To review the performance of the Council as it responded to the challenges presented by the pandemic and to highlight any lessons learnt which might help to shape our organisation in the future.

Executive summary:

The Council provides a wide range of public services and, when a crisis hits, there is an expectation from local businesses and residents that those services will continue to be delivered. Therefore, managers faced the double challenge of continuing with the “day job” in the face of a pandemic whilst also dealing with additional workload caused by the crisis.

Enquiries for advice and assistance increased dramatically across all service areas, putting additional pressure on staffing resources. Volumes of household waste continued to grow as people stayed in their homes, and littering became a major problem in public areas where residents were taking their daily exercise. A serious public health crisis inevitably increased the workload of the environmental health team.

In addition to these challenges, the Government also asked all Councils to take on new burdens such as issuing grants to local businesses, providing Covid Marshals to patrol the Borough, setting up testing centres, delivering food parcels to vulnerable people in the local community and securing emergency accommodation for all rough sleepers in the borough.

In simple terms, workload increased dramatically for all Council employees and the high volume of demand continued for a sustained period.

The pandemic caused a major shock to the Council's finances and there was a need for a significant call on reserves to ensure that services could be provided during the crisis. The financial impact will be evident in the Council's budgets for the next few years.

A structure was put in place to manage the Council during the crisis and individual recovery plans were formulated covering the following areas:

- Workforce Recovery
- Democratic Recovery
- Services Recovery
- Public Spaces Recovery
- Community Recovery
- Economic Recovery
- Financial Recovery

The coronavirus pandemic had a significant impact on the effective operation of the Council over a sustained period and many lessons were learnt from dealing with the crisis. Those lessons are being captured as part of the review of our emergency planning procedures but will also be evident in proposals for new ways of working in the future.

There is no doubt that the success of the Council's response over the last 18 months has been down to the commitment and hard work of a dedicated workforce who were determined to continue to provide critical services in the face of adversity.

Effective partnerships also played a crucial role in the Council's response including such bodies as the Local Resilience Forum, the Police, the voluntary sector, SLM, Fareham Shopping Centre owners, the County Council and neighbouring District Councils.

Recommendations:

That

- a) the following reviews are undertaken and presented to the Executive for decision: -
 - Future ICT provision for elected members;
 - establishing clear protocols on virtual briefing meetings;
 - new ways of working for office-based employees including more flexible home working arrangements and the future requirements for office accommodation and ICT;
 - the future of the Cash Office;
 - the Council's approach to seasonal planting in the light of the lessons learnt from the pandemic period;
 - future parking need in Fareham Town Centre; and
 - service level agreements with One Community and Fareham CAB to reflect the lessons learnt from responding to the pandemic.
- b) An Economic Development Strategy for the Borough be produced.
- c) The proposal that future deputations can also be made in writing, or by a video or audio clip, be approved.

Reason:

To act on the lessons learnt from responding to the pandemic, to ensure resilience and preparedness for dealing with a similar emergency situation in the future.

Cost of proposals:

The known costs of responding to the pandemic are on record as part of the Council's budget reporting process. These costs are likely to increase as we assess the long-term impact on income streams.

Background papers: None

Reference papers:

- Covid-19 Recovery Plan (Framework) – Executive 3 August 2020
- Covid-19 Public Spaces Recovery Plan – Executive 3 August 2020
- Covid-19 Community Recovery Plan – Executive 3 August 2020
- Covid-19 Economic Recovery Plan – Executive 7 September 2020
- Covid-19 Emergency Revised Budget and Financial recovery Plan – Executive 7 September 2020
- Covid-19 Emergency Decisions and Democratic Services Recovery Plan – Council 22 October 2020

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BOROUGH COUNCIL

Executive Briefing Paper

Date:	11 October 2021
Subject:	The Council's Approach to the Pandemic – A Review
Briefing by:	Chief Executive Officer
Portfolio:	Policy and Resources

INTRODUCTION

1. In early March 2020, the Council started to put emergency planning arrangements into place as a response to the emerging pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus. Those emergency planning arrangements effectively continued for a period of nearly 18 months.
2. The purpose of this report is to review the performance of the Council as it responded to the challenges presented by the pandemic and to highlight any lessons learnt which might help to shape our organisation in the future.

OVERVIEW

3. The Council provides a wide range of public services and, when a crisis hits, there is an expectation from local businesses and residents that those services will continue to be delivered. Therefore, managers faced the double challenge of continuing with the “day job” in the face of a pandemic whilst also dealing with additional workload caused by the crisis.
4. Enquiries for advice and assistance increased dramatically across all service areas, putting additional pressure on staffing resources. Volumes of household waste continued to grow as people stayed in their homes, and littering became a major problem in public areas where residents were taking their daily exercise. A serious public health crisis inevitably increased the workload of the environmental health team.
5. Support services such as ICT, Human Resources and the Facilities Team were inundated with requests from managers trying to provide employees with the right equipment, advice and guidance to allow them to continue to provide services to the public in a safe working environment.
6. In addition to these challenges, the Government also asked all Councils to take on new burdens such as issuing grants to local businesses, providing Covid Marshals to patrol the Borough, setting up testing centres, delivering food parcels to vulnerable

people in the local community and securing emergency accommodation for all rough sleepers in the borough, in line with its “Everyone In” policy.

7. In simple terms, workload increased dramatically for all Council employees and the high volume of demand continued for a sustained period.

STRUCTURE

8. When a crisis hits, it is important that the Council puts a clear decision-making structure in place. As such, emergency planning procedures were implemented in March 2020 with the establishment of a special crisis management group under the leadership of the Chief Executive Officer. The Response and Recovery Group met “virtually” via Microsoft Teams on a regular basis throughout the pandemic, following a set agenda which ensured that all aspects of crisis management were covered.
9. A special intranet site was established to ensure that the team could share real time information, and a Covid-19 dashboard was also created to monitor infection levels in the Borough and amongst the workforce.
10. Decisions need to be made at pace during a crisis, and the Chief Executive Officer was able to maintain regular telephone contact with the Executive Leader to discuss the key issues and challenges being addressed by the Response and Recovery Group. This allowed timely decisions to be made whilst maintaining a democratic overview.
11. The Group established a set of objectives to assist the emergency planning process and these were reported to a virtual meeting of the Council’s Executive on 3 August 2020. The objectives are set out below: -

Response Phase Objectives

- Maintain essential/critical services and decision making.
- Protect and support employees.
- Support our residents, particularly those who are vulnerable.
- Support our business community.
- Stabilise the Council’s operations during lockdown.
- Re-establish Council’s operations wherever possible and practical

Adjustment Phase Objectives

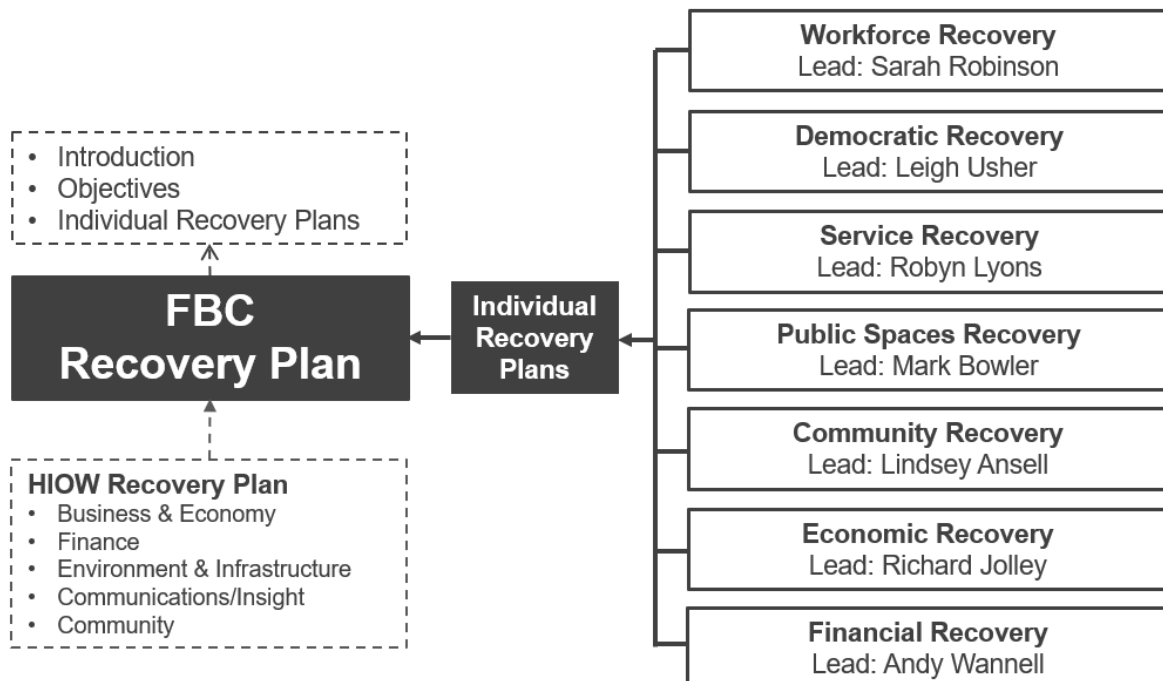
- Prepare and plan for the repopulation of employees to Council buildings.
- Prepare and plan for customer visits/appointments to the Civic Offices.
- Consider appropriate PPE where relevant, plan accordingly.
- Continue improvement to working from home functionality.
- Continue improvement to workplace functionality.
- Undertake necessary measures to allow democratic decisions to continue.
- Fully understand and plan for peaks in work as we move into ‘Recovery’.
- Further develop and refine the Council’s Recovery Plan.

Recovery Phase Objectives

- Seek to restore social, economic and political wellbeing.
- Seek to restore access to public spaces.
- Assist the Borough’s communities and businesses to recover.

- Appropriately recognise and address the trauma caused by the pandemic.
- Appropriately recognise the positives that arose from the pandemic.
- Develop a clear action plan on how the Council will address the financial impacts of Covid-19.
- Establish environmental positives arising from the pandemic and what can be carried forward.
- Learn from the incident, revisit Business Continuity and Emergency Plans.
- Review the Council's Corporate Strategy to take account of the post Covid-19 position (if required).
- Keep the objectives and actions of the Covid-19 Recovery Plan under review in order to adapt to any further Covid-19 related issues that arise.

12. A Recovery Plan Framework was also put in place, and individual recovery plans were presented to the Executive during the first six months of the pandemic. The Recovery Plan Framework is illustrated below: -



13. These will be reviewed later in the report.

14. It is considered that, overall, the emergency structure outlined above worked well, providing a robust framework for decision making and planning for the duration of the crisis.

COMMUNICATION

15. Good channels of communication are an essential part of the Council's emergency planning framework. The nature of the Covid-19 crisis meant that many employees, councillors and residents were isolated at home and were unable to tap into their usual communication networks. Understandably, they wanted to know what was happening or how they could help to contribute to the Council's overall response.

16. Internally, the main method of communicating the work of the Response and Recovery Group was the special coronavirus e-bulletin produced by the Chief Executive Officer on a weekly basis. An early decision was taken to also copy the bulletin to elected members avoiding the need for duplication by producing a special members newsletter.
17. The Executive Leader also took the initiative to set up virtual on-line briefings for all councillors. This provided an opportunity for elected members to be briefed by the Executive Leader and Chief Executive Officer and to ask questions and raise issues. Following the first national lockdown, these changed to briefings on a political group basis.
18. In addition, managers were encouraged to hold virtual team meetings with groups of employees, and individuals, on a regular basis to ensure that staff did not feel isolated and were well informed of developments taking place across the Council.
19. Of course, there were many depot-based employees who could not undertake their duties from home, and they were able to have regular face to face briefings with their managers.
20. From a public perspective, the Council's website provided the main source of information and guidance on all issues related to Covid-19 and this was supported by an ongoing social media presence. The Council Connect stand in Fareham Shopping Centre, public noticeboards and the bus shelters located across the Borough proved to be valuable assets for the display of important poster information.

DEMOCRATIC RECOVERY

21. The Council is a democratically led public organisation, so it was important to set up a process to allow Councillors to meet and take decisions. Initially, this was achieved through the Executive Leader delegating individual decision-making powers to individual Executive members, but as soon as the technology was available this moved quickly to virtual meetings of the Executive and Full Council.
22. Unlike other non-Executive Committees, the Planning Committee continued as did the planning system nationally, following advice received from the Government's Chief Planning Officer in March 2020. The Planning Committee meeting held on the 13 May 2020 was Fareham Borough Council's first ever virtual committee meeting.
23. There was less urgency to set up the Scrutiny Panels as they were not decision-making bodies. The postponement of these Panels between March and September was of significant benefit to officers, who needed to focus on delivering services during the early stages of the pandemic. Arrangements were in place to set up a meeting of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Panel should the need for a call-in arise.
24. Guidance was issued to all councillors regarding their role and the need to operate in a Covid secure manner. This was regularly updated throughout the period of the pandemic.
25. As the pandemic progressed, it became clear that the technology being used by some elected members was struggling to cope with virtual meetings and a new way of working. A review of members ICT was therefore undertaken, and the results are presented in a separate report on this agenda. This includes a proposal to move to

paperless committee meetings given the success of virtual meetings.

Action: Undertake a full review of ICT provision for elected members

26. There is no doubt that the availability of Microsoft Teams technology made a major contribution to the way that the Council could continue to operate during the pandemic. The technology enabled councillors to participate in public meetings from the safety of their home. Live streaming of meetings to the public also meant that the debates and decisions could be transparent, avoiding the need for the public to physically attend meetings. The decision to allow deputations to be made in writing, or by video or audio clip also proved to be popular and it is recommended that this facility be retained in the future.

Action: It is recommended that deputations can be made in writing, or by video or audio clip in the future

27. There are environmental benefits to keeping officer/member briefings as virtual meetings in the future as these are clearly more efficient in terms of time management and they also reduce the need for car travel. Councillors will be asked how they wish to use virtual meetings in the future.

Action: Undertake a review setting out the issues regarding live streaming of public meetings and establishing clear protocols on virtual briefing meetings.

28. The other major challenge faced by both officers and members under the heading of “democratic recovery” was the need to organise local elections during a pandemic. Members will be fully aware of the constraints that they faced in campaigning for the elections. Similarly, Officers had to be as agile as possible in delivering a safe, transparent, and fair election process helped by a virtual army of paid volunteers. The combined efforts of many people fortunately led to a successful set of elections in May 2021.

WORKFORCE RECOVERY

29. The Council employs over 400 people in a variety of different roles. It was important from the outset to provide clear direction and guidance on safe working practices. Detailed risk assessments were undertaken by individual managers and the results were brought together in corporate “Covid Secure” guidance documents. These documents were regularly amended and updated to reflect new Government announcements.
30. Working relationships with the Trade Unions remained positive throughout the period of the pandemic and this allowed timely decisions to be made regarding staff welfare and safe working practices because of the good levels of trust that have been established on both sides.
31. The HR Team placed a heavy emphasis on supporting the mental well-being of our employees, particularly those who were clinically vulnerable or had family members in that category. By working together to understand personal circumstances, HR Officers were able to provide tailored and supportive measures. Effectively, we

sought to maximise the capacity and performance of our workforce at a time when we needed them most.

32. Inevitably, we learnt a great deal from managing the crisis. Whilst many front-line employees were unable to work from home they did not complain. They demonstrated a clear loyalty and commitment to the Council and were determined to maintain public services such as bin collections, building control inspections, housing repairs, sheltered housing visits, cleansing and grounds maintenance throughout the crisis. The enforcement officers took on extra responsibilities as Covid Marshals to help provide support and reassurance to local people.
33. The fact that these services are all provided by “in house” teams is worthy of note. They all demonstrated flexibility and were prepared to undertake a range of different duties to help the Council provide services throughout the crisis. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some of those Councils who contract out most of their front-line services struggled to achieve such flexibility as the new duties required were “not part of the contract”.
34. The crisis also helped to identify a set of “core staff” required to keep the Civic Offices open. This was an important learning point which will be built into future business continuity plans. Future plans also need to recognise that our tenants require access to the building during a crisis.
35. The majority of our employees were asked to work from home. Initially this placed enormous strains on the technology required to support home working. ICT equipment was in short supply and many struggled with adequate network connections. However, gradually, all employees were furnished with the right ICT equipment, connectivity and furniture to undertake their duties from home.
36. As the pandemic progressed, it became clear that it was possible to still provide a full range of Council services with a mixture of home and office working. Employees also recognised that such an arrangement was a positive experience in terms of work/life balance. The Deputy Chief Executive Officer was therefore asked to lead a corporate group to look into the future options for more flexible working arrangements. The group was also tasked to look at the Council’s future requirements for office space and ICT equipment.

Action: To undertake a review into “new ways of working” for office-based employees including more flexible home working arrangements and the future requirements for office accommodation and ICT.

37. The results of the review are presented in a separate report on this agenda.

SERVICE RECOVERY

38. The Council continued to deliver a wide range of services throughout the period of the pandemic although some adjustments needed to be made to comply with Government guidance. For example, Leisure Centres, the Museum and Community Centres were required to close. There were also some limitations placed on outdoor play areas, sports pitches and outdoor gyms, all at the request of the Government.
39. In the early stages of the pandemic, it became clear that managers needed to prioritise services to ensure that resources could be used on critical services. A good

example of this was the need to suspend the garden waste collection service for a few weeks to enable a concentrated effort on dealing with very large volumes of household waste. It was also necessary to deploy staff to different areas of the Council to assist with excessive workload, such as the issuing of emergency grants to local businesses.

40. This prioritisation was carried out by the Chief Executive's Management Team at an early stage when it became clear that our business continuity plans were not fit for purpose to deal with this particular crisis. A major learning point from the last year is that managers need to review and amend these business continuity plans in the light of their recent experience.

Action: Review and rewrite all of the Council's business continuity plans

41. The prioritisation process has proved useful in highlighting those critical services with high community impact, as well as those services which are nice to have but not essential. The latter will be reviewed over the coming months to determine whether there are opportunities to achieve future savings in these areas.
42. For example, the cash office in the Civic Offices was closed for many months, and customers reverted to paying their bills on-line or by telephone. Since reopening the Civic Offices the number of transactions through the cash office has been very low, so it is proposed to undertake a full review into the possibility of closing the facility in the future.

Action: Review the future of the Cash Office

PUBLIC SPACES RECOVERY

43. A Public Spaces Recovery Plan was presented to the Executive on 3 August 2020. The report focused on the impact of the pandemic on urban and green spaces in the Borough.
44. The plan recognised that public spaces form an important part of our Borough's infrastructure and that they could be affected as a result of the pandemic, due to: -
- Public concerns that the areas are crowded and likely to increase the risk of virus transmission;
 - public concerns with the cleanliness of public spaces;
 - a lack of public toilet facilities could prevent people from using public spaces; and
 - a reduction in the use of facilities such as public car parks would result in low footfall for retail outlets and a loss of income for the Council.
45. Working with partners such as Fareham Shopping Centre and Network Rail, actions were taken to manage the risks, including signage and improved cleaning regimes.
46. Generally, the plan proved to be successful. Excessive littering of public spaces was

a problem, but this was down to sheer volume of usage rather than the lack of bins or an adequate cleaning regime. The closure of skate parks also proved to be problematic as the users continued to pull down perimeter fencing erected by the Council.

47. New seasonal planting arrangements were put in place as a temporary measure because of the difficulties in sourcing planting material. The new approach appears to be more sustainable and environmentally friendly and the Streetscene Team will continue to review whether the changes should be implemented on a more permanent basis.

Action: Review the Council's approach to seasonal planting in the light of the lessons learnt from the pandemic period.

48. There is no doubt that the pandemic has had a major impact on the usage of public car parks in Fareham Town Centre. Usage has started to increase over recent months but is nowhere near pre-pandemic levels. It will therefore be necessary to undertake a review of the future parking need required in Fareham Town Centre.

Action: Review future parking need in Fareham Town Centre

COMMUNITY RECOVERY PLAN

49. The Council's strong working relationship with the voluntary sector proved to be invaluable during the pandemic. Established organisations such as One Community and the Citizens Advice Bureau provided an essential safety net for local residents struggling with the impact of the national lockdown. Other voluntary organisations, such as Acts of Kindness, Portchester Community Association and Waypoint Church came forward to help with shopping and food delivery to vulnerable people in the local community. They were supported by hundreds of local residents volunteering their time to help during the crisis.
50. This voluntary network was coordinated by the Council's Leisure and Community Team and proved to be a very resilient and successful model. Those residents who needed support, or wished to volunteer, contacted the Council and were then signposted to the relevant voluntary agency who were happy to provide effective support. The lessons learnt from the crisis will be built into future Service Level Agreements with relevant community organisations.

Action: Review Service Level Agreements with One Community and Fareham CAB to reflect the lessons learnt from responding to the pandemic.

51. The Executive Leader and the Mayor sent letters to hundreds of volunteers in recognition of their services to the local community, and the Council has also introduced a Covid hero award scheme for 2021.
52. Leisure and community venues were severely affected by the crisis. The Government required leisure centres, theatres, museums, gyms, sports pavilions and community centres to close for a long period of time. This threatened the financial viability of

those venues but, fortunately, the Council was able to provide support through the distribution of local and national grants. In the case of the two leisure centres in the Borough, the Council needed to renegotiate the terms of the contract with SLM to ensure the future financial stability of the venues.

Action taken: A report was presented to the Executive outlining the new terms of the contract with SLM to operate Fareham Leisure Centre and Holly Hill Leisure Centre

53. The future viability of the new arts and entertainment venue “Fareham Live” needed urgent consideration and a report was presented to the Executive suggesting that the project was put on hold for a few months to assess the impact of the pandemic on the theatre industry. New terms have been negotiated with BH Live, the proposed operator of the new venue, to help spread the level of risk in the future. A report was presented to the Executive in September 2021 giving the project the green light to move forward.

Action taken: A report was presented to the Executive reviewing the viability of the “Fareham Live” project and the contract terms with BH Live, the proposed operator.

54. The Council also recognised the impact that the pandemic had on small community groups in the Borough. As a result, we introduced a new Fareham Lottery as well as a special small community grant scheme to help groups to get back on their feet.
55. We can all recognise that one of the lessons learnt from the pandemic is the importance of access to a network of local leisure and community facilities. People need places to socialise as well as exercise and the sudden closure of these facilities had a significant impact on the lives of many local residents.

ECONOMIC RECOVERY PLAN

56. Clearly, the pandemic has had a major impact on the UK’s economy. The impact on the Borough’s economy will take time to measure but the obvious signs can already be seen in Fareham Town Centre with the permanent closure of a number of retail and restaurant units. The High Street was facing a number of challenges prior to the pandemic and it appears that the crisis has accelerated some of the changes that we expected to see over a much longer time period. The emerging Local Plan recognises the need for the regeneration of Fareham Town Centre.
57. One positive story from the pandemic has been the growth of Fareham’s Monday Market. Some forms of outdoor trading were allowed under lockdown rules and this emphasised the importance of the open market in Fareham Town Centre. The Council was able to offer incentives to market traders through the payment of grants and this resulted in a greater variety of produce which has proved to be popular with local residents.
58. A report was presented to the Executive on 7 September 2020 setting out the Council’s Economic Recovery Plan. The Plan was informed by a detailed data and baseline analysis review of the Borough’s economy and set out recommendations on actions required to guide the economic recovery of the Borough over the short term (12-18 months).

59. The Plan is the first of a two staged economic development programme for the Borough. The second stage will be a more detailed Economic Development Strategy for Fareham, which will set out a long-term vision for jobs, investment and sustainable growth.

Action: Produce an Economic Development Strategy for the Borough

60. The purpose of this report is not to repeat the actions set out in the short-term Economic Recovery Plan but it is worth noting that, in response to the pandemic, the Council has created a new post of Economic Development Officer within the Planning Strategy Team. This post will support the Head of Service in developing and delivering the Economic Recovery Plan and Economic Development Strategy for the Borough.

FINANCIAL RECOVERY PLAN

61. An Emergency Revised Budget and Financial Recovery Plan was presented to the Executive on 7 September 2020. As well as recognising the extraordinary costs that were incurred to enable Council services to continue to operate effectively, the Plan also highlighted the widespread disruption to those services which generated significant income streams. These included, for example, car parks, trade waste, and commercial property. The costs associated with the leisure centre contracts were significant, and treasury investment income was affected by adverse cash flows and reduced interest rates.
62. The impact of measures taken to support individuals and businesses were also evident in the Council's cash flow position, with relaxed payment terms, immediate payment to suppliers, suspended debt collection activities etc, all reducing the net cash available on a daily basis.
63. In recognition of the potential scale of the impact, the financial management and governance arrangements were strengthened, particularly in relation to
- Cashflow monitoring
 - Service financial performance
 - Covid-19 response expenditure
 - Income collection and arrears performance
 - Government funding opportunities
64. Weekly monitoring and reporting to the S151 Officer were instigated, together with regular reporting to the corporate Covid-19 Response and Recovery Group. These measures ensured a high degree of awareness and enabled the corporate team to closely manage the financial risks.

Action taken: Financial Management and Governance arrangements were strengthened to closely manage financial risks

65. In addition to managing the enormous shock to the Council's finances, the Finance Team were also required to administer Government grants to local businesses as a matter of urgency. This put a great deal of pressure on the team and staffing resources were redeployed from other areas of the Council to help deal with the large volume of work.
66. It also became apparent that the different funding streams being offered by the Government required a significant level of officer resource to apply for the funding, spend the money quickly to ensure that it benefited the local economy, and monitor the outcomes. Whilst this was managed effectively, a lesson learnt from the crisis was that, in future, we should allocate a named individual to take responsibility for each funding stream to ensure that we have the right controls in place.

Action: In future emergencies, allocate special funding streams to named individuals.

67. The impact of the pandemic on the Council's finances were subsequently reported through the normal budget setting process and end of year accounts, so will not be repeated in this report. In summary, the crisis put massive pressure on the Council's budgets and financial management processes requiring a heavy call on financial reserves. Finance staff were under enormous pressure to deliver grant funding according to Government guidelines but successfully managed to juggle their day job with additional duties for a sustained period of time.

CONCLUSION

68. As can be seen above, the coronavirus pandemic had a significant impact on the effective operation of the Council over a sustained period and many lessons were learnt from dealing with the crisis.
69. Those lessons are being captured as part of the review of our emergency planning procedures but will also be evident in proposals for new ways of working in the future.
70. There is no doubt that the success of the Council's response over the last 18 months has been down to the commitment and hard work of a dedicated workforce who were determined to continue to provide critical services in the face of adversity. Councillors, quite rightly, have acknowledged the efforts of the workforce on a number of occasions and demonstrated their support by allocating additional leave to all employees.
71. Effective partnerships also played a crucial role in the Council's response including such bodies as the Local Resilience Forum, the Police, the voluntary sector, SLM, Fareham Shopping Centre owners, the County Council and neighbouring District Councils.

For further information on this report please contact Peter Grimwood (Ext 4300)