

# ARUN DISTRICT COUNCIL

## REPORT TO CABINET ON 22 JUNE 2020

**SUBJECT: THE COUNCIL'S RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC SITUATION**

**REPORT AUTHOR:** Nigel Lynn, Chief Executive

**DATE:** 5 June 2020

**EXTN:** 37600

**PORTFOLIO AREA:** Corporate Support

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** This report updates Cabinet on the Council's response to the pandemic situation and our proposals for economic recovery.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Cabinet is requested to resolve to:

- (1) note the actions taken to date;
- (2) consider the way forward for this Council post-recovery;
- (3) as part of the work in (2) above, support the establishment of a Coronavirus Recovery Working Party based on the following terms:
  - (a) Terms of Reference – to conduct a review on the way forward for the Council post recovery
  - (b) Size of the Working Party – 10 Members with seats allocated as follows – Lib Dems [4]; Cons [4]; Ind [1] Green [1]
  - (c) Nominations to the seats – to be made by the relevant Group Leader and confirmed on 22 June 2020;
  - (d) Proposals for the allocation of seats if vacancies occur – to be for the relevant Group Leader to fill the vacant seat and report this information to the next Full Council meeting;
  - (e) Timescale for the work to be undertaken – over the next few months of recovery and to include whatever time is required in view of the uncertainty of Covid19
  - (f) To report back to Cabinet on 20 July 2020; and further meetings
- (4) If established, the Working Party can then:
  - (a) Review its terms of reference at its first meeting and recommend any change back to Cabinet;

- (b) Make any recommendations to Cabinet based on the terms of reference – it will have no decision-making authority; and
- (c) Meet in private unless it agrees that it will work to the Meeting Procedure Rules at Part 5 of the Council's Constitution.

## **1. BACKGROUND:**

This report is divided into two main areas – an update on what we have done so far and our proposals for an economic and social recovery.

### **1.1. Part 1. AN UPDATE ON WHAT WE HAVE DONE RECENTLY**

#### Welfare of Staff and Members

- 1.1.1. Restricted access to the civic buildings continues, with the majority of staff still working from home where they are able to, in line with Government guidance. Plans for limited return to work arrangements are underway, with consideration being given to the safety and wellbeing of staff, Members and contractors.
- 1.1.2. Considerable thought needs to be given to minimising the risk to people entering the building and a Recovery Team have been working on ideas to enable this, such as a 'one-way' route through the offices; identifying staff in 'teams' and considering 'shifts' to minimise the number of contacts. The Health & Safety team have requested a review of the risk assessments to determine which tasks are now safe to deliver.

#### Welfare of Our Residents

- 1.1.3. Covered under paragraphs 1.1.4 onwards.

#### Communications

- 1.1.4. Contact via social media continues to be a popular means of gathering information. There was a peak in demand as we approached the May Bank Holiday weekend, particularly as this tied in with the Government relaxing some of the lockdown regulations. We anticipated an increase in visitors from outside of Arun and the Group Head of Neighbourhood Services did a television interview to emphasise some of the key messages regarding social distancing. Weekly reminders of our news bulletins and social media posts are issued.

#### Homelessness

- 1.1.5. A total of 44 households have now been assisted and our focus is now on ways of accommodating those households once the lockdown status is lifted. Current arrangements for temporary housing of rough sleepers will continue until the end of July.

### Waste Collections

- 1.1.6. Waste collections continue as normal.

### Car Parking

- 1.1.7. On 13 May 2020, the Chief Executive – in consultation with Group Leaders - agreed to reinstate car parking charges with effect from Friday 15 May 2020. This was due to the need to address a possible influx of visitors following the Government's decision to slightly relax the lockdown rules, and also to inject some much-needed income into the Council's balances.

### Support to Local Businesses

- 1.1.8. A further financial support opportunity was announced by Central Government on 13 May 2020. The Discretionary Business Grant Scheme is available for those businesses who were excluded from the initial Business Grant Scheme loosely based on a Rateable Value. The grant fund is based on 5% of our expenditure of the initial Business Grant as of 24/05/20. Arun received a total of £1.539m for the Discretionary Business Grant Scheme. The grant is being administered by the Economy Team as it was felt that they would have more information regarding (and contact with) local businesses. West Sussex-wide criteria for applying for this grant have been agreed and an online application process was launched on 1 June 2020.
- 1.1.9. Business Support Grant has now been paid out to 2254 businesses, a total of £27,615,000. There are still c350 businesses who may be entitled to this grant but who have either refused or haven't applied, despite several reminders. We are also processing around 80 appeal applications where grant payments have been refused.
- 1.1.10. Arun was recently allocated £143,718 from the 'Reopening High Streets Safely Fund', which will be used to support practical measures for Arun's businesses to re-open quickly (when they are allowed to). This includes providing signage, street markings and temporary barriers to help prepare for businesses to start trading again whilst observing the social distancing guidelines, and to restore customers' confidence in being able to shop safely.

### The Council's Finances

- 1.1.11. A further financial return to the Ministry of Communities, Housing & Local Government (MHCLG) was submitted on 15 May 2020.
- 1.1.12. Further concerns arise from the reduced income from Council Tax payments as a result of residents being furloughed or losing their income. Arun District Council are still obliged to pay a substantial share of this income stream to the County Council, Town and Parish Councils, and the emergency services, regardless of whether we have received payments from residents.

### Council Decision-Making

- 1.1.13. A virtual Full Council meeting was held on 20 May 2020, virtual Cabinet meetings were held on 29 April and 1 June, a virtual Overview Select Committee (OSC) meeting was held on 9 June and virtual Development Control Committee (DCC) meetings were held on 26 and 3 June 2020.

### Parks & Open Spaces

- 1.1.14. Multi-Use Games Areas (MUGAs)/skate parks reopened from 18 May 2020. New signage is being installed which will include messages around social distancing. As the better weather continues, we anticipate increased use of these facilities.
- 1.1.15. In preparation for the summer 'season' and the recent slight relaxing of lockdown regulations, social distancing stencil markings have been painted on the promenades at Bognor Regis and Littlehampton. Banner signage has been placed in key locations to remind the public to remain socially distanced. We have also added further signage at 'pinch points' along the promenades to remind cyclists to slow down.

### Community Hubs

- 1.1.16. As at 25 May 2020, Arun had received a total of 202 referrals from the Community Hub, of which 191 had been completed (11 were in progress). The most popular request for assistance (83 out of the 202) was for medication collection, with the second most popular request (79 out of 202) being for food. Bognor Regis, Littlehampton and Rustington were the three top areas for referrals (as at 26 May 2020).

## **1.2. Part 2. OUR PROPOSALS FOR AN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RECOVERY**

- 1.2.1. The Council should now be turning its attention to what comes next for our community. The economy is an important part of a sustainable community, but it is not the only element. We also need to consider the social and environmental perspectives as well. This pandemic, whilst it has very severe negative outcomes, has created the opportunity for some positive societal change and could lead to long lasting benefits for the environment.
- 1.2.2. However, it must be recognised that the Council also has limited funds to be able to make direct interventions. Instead it is likely that the Council will need to focus on providing local leadership, policy changes to provide an economic stimulus and facilitate any necessary structural change and finally seek out external funding wherever possible. In the main, therefore, this Council will be facilitating the recovery process and helping to provide community leadership.

1.2.3. In reaction to the Government's proposals to "reopen the High Streets", the Council's Communication Team, working with the Economy Team, have been progressing a campaign to create an environment where people feel safe to return to Arun's shops, coast, parks and open spaces. This work began on 3 June with initial press releases and social media and has been escalating since to provide a broad range of positive messages. The recently allocated £143,718 (Reopening High Streets Safely Fund') which will be used to support practical measures to help with this campaign (paragraph 1.1.10).

1.2.4. Furthermore, it is not considered necessary to commission expert opinion on what initiatives the Council should embrace at this time. There is already much informed opinion available, along with the work the Council commissioned to support our recently adopted Economic Strategy, and any analysis commissioned or prepared by our partners such as the Coast to Capital Local Enterprise Partnership and the Coastal West Sussex Partnership. Ideas and initiatives which are relevant to our community should be embraced and resourced where possible as part of a recovery programme. Council Members should also play their part in advising Officers on any future initiatives to be considered.

1.2.5. The work of the Council going forward could be grouped into the short-term (less than 6 months), medium-term (6 months to 18 months) and long-term (beyond 18 months). To provide appropriate leadership and direction it is proposed that a Working Party be set up, as a "Think Tank" to help to work up feasible plans for officers to develop, subject to Cabinet support. It is anticipated that this Working Party will be politically balanced, will have 10 number of Members, plus relevant officers, and will meet between this Cabinet (22 June 2020) and 20 July 2020 Cabinet, and probably thereafter too. The Working Party will consider practical ideas, to then be considered by Officers and will reported into Cabinet.

1.2.6. Officers have already identified the following issues as a possible response to the current situation:

#### Short-term

- Work with partners to enable our Town Centres to comply with social distancing while providing a welcoming and reassuring experience.
- Develop a promotional toolkit for businesses to demonstrate their cleansing and distancing measures
- Continue to use the Arun Business Partnership to engage with local businesses.
- Explore creating an internet directory of local businesses to raise awareness of what can be sourced locally, within the Arun area.

#### Medium-term

- Develop a range of activities to stimulate footfall/visitor numbers in Arun in partnership with others.
- Consider investment in town centre infrastructure to redress long term lack of investment
- Explore the provision of free Wi-Fi in our town centres
- Identify broadband 'not spots' in Arun and consider potential solutions

### Long-term

- Focus on delivering projects which will create jobs locally, or stimulate significant investment in the area or will have major social or environmental benefits
- Consider reduction in demand for office space, student accommodation, and retail and therefore what the future of town centres should look like.

1.2.7. We are now three months into Covid-19 and are familiar with references to “New Normal” and “unprecedented times” and the issues facing local government remain very difficult. Every Council now has a relatively short window in which to resolve three main issues, all of which were discussed at the 1 June 2020 Cabinet meeting:

- Address the financial gap created as incomes fall and customer demands change. The gap is substantial in the short term and it is far from certain what the medium/long term position will be for us
- Develop new strategic targets that fit the new economic and social conditions - Community and Economy are top of the pile, but we need to consider what this really mean in terms of outcomes and investments required to deliver them
- Learn from the crisis and shape a new operating model for the Council that builds on what we have shown to be possible over the past three months.

Whilst we remain uncertain of exactly how to approach each of these dilemmas, what is clear is that these three things need to be resolved in an integrated way. The process of resolving these issues in an integrated way will give rise to some questions.

- What are our priorities now?
- What do we need to change to be a different Council?
- How can we be financially sustainable?

We cannot underestimate how hard this is going to be, because many of the things we do in the Council have been that way for many years; so this will require a more flexible and bold approach to how we do things in the future. If we are clear of our priorities, how we need to change and how we become financially stable, then we will be able to continue to deliver an economic and social benefit to the Arun community.

But, because of the financial position we are in, we need to adjust our position very quickly. The next few months are crucial. The difficulty with doing things quickly however, is that we do not know the funding which will be received and the outcomes of other measures. We need to allow for radical thinking and recognise that some very difficult decisions around our priorities will need to be taken. We will, therefore, need to work at pace, take some early decisions and remain agile in our delivery, especially as we continue to work remotely.

We must also recognise that, at some stage Central Government may well intervene and impose something around Local Government Reform (a White Paper is anticipated by September 2020), so keeping this in mind as we develop the Council priorities is also important.

The window for resolving the three-way dilemma will be relatively short and decisions taken now will shape the future of the Council for a long time into the future. Corporate Management Team's thoughts on our financial stability is based on:

- Assess commercial opportunities
- Reducing operational costs
- Reducing support costs, and
- Raising new income.

1.2.8. This process of change will continually evolve, and we certainly do not have all the answers yet.

**2. PROPOSAL(S):**

Cabinet is requested to note the updates on actions taken thus far to respond to the crisis, and to note the proposals for economic recovery.

**3. OPTIONS:**

Not to support the actions taken.

**4. CONSULTATION:**

Has consultation been undertaken with:	YES	NO
Relevant Town/Parish Council		X
Relevant District Ward Councillors		X
Other groups/persons (please specify) - Cabinet	✓	

**5. ARE THERE ANY IMPLICATIONS IN RELATION TO THE FOLLOWING COUNCIL POLICIES: (Explain in more detail at 6 below)**

	YES	NO
Financial	✓	
Legal		X
Human Rights/Equality Impact Assessment		
Community Safety including Section 17 of Crime & Disorder Act		X
Sustainability		X
Asset Management/Property/Land		X
Technology		X
Other (please explain)		

**6. IMPLICATIONS:**

The final picture regarding the Council's financial position will not be known until the emergency is over. We predict that the potential cost to the Council will be in the region of £2.9m, and we have already received £1.6m in funding from Central Government. These

figures, however, are only from our “snap-shot” Government returns in April and May; the true figure may inevitably be very different. Any future funding from the Government is unknown and is likely to be based on a more sophisticated formula this time than just population. Additionally, expenditure is difficult to predict as we don’t know how long the situation will last. Officers continue to work on the Council’s financial position using the limited data available to them.

**7. REASON FOR THE DECISION:**

This is mostly for information only but asks the Cabinet to support the establishment of a Working Party which will review the recovery work of the Council.

**8 EFFECTIVE DATE OF THE DECISION: 1 July 2020**

**8. BACKGROUND PAPERS:**

[Coronavirus Webpage](#)  
[Cabinet Report 01.06.20](#)  
[OSC report 09.06.20](#)