

REPORT TO EXECUTIVE

Date of Meeting: 7 April 2020

Report of: Chief Executive and Growth Director

Title: Update on Council's Response to the Coronavirus Epidemic

Is this a Key Decision?

No

Is this an Executive or Council Function?

Executive

1. What is the report about?

- 1.1 A summary of how the council is responding with its partners and stakeholders to the coronavirus outbreak.

2. Recommendations:

- 2.1 Recommended that Members note the activity and progress in the report; and thank: the organisations, staff and volunteers supporting the Exeter Community WellBeing project; the Exeter Chiefs Foundation for the prompt and generous support; Strata for the outstanding support for the significant ICT and telephony requirements; the residents and businesses of the city, the NHS, Devon County Council, the Police, Fire & Rescue Services and all the institutions of the city playing their part in our collective response to COVID-19.

3. Reasons for the recommendation:

- 3.1 The COVID-19 Crisis is unprecedented and events and government pronouncements have moved at such a pace that it is appropriate to provide members with an opportunity to take stock and to acknowledge the work that is taking place. Business as usual has taken a secondary role to the urgent response to COVID-19. The Strategic Management Board has rapidly responded to the task in hand and we are conscious that the normal rhythm of communication with members will have changed. The council is not immune to the financial challenges faced by private business, cash flow can change dramatically as income from established sources are turned off as a consequence of the Government statements. It is appropriate that members consider the immediate unfolding events and have regard to the issues officers and members will need to confront in coming weeks.

4 What are the resource implications including non-financial resources?

- 4.1 As set out in the report.

5 Section 151 Officer comments:

- 5.1 The funds set out in the report are either being diverted from existing budget (Grants) or for some of the additional activity, being funded from additional Government Grant

(support for street homeless). The wider implications have been set out in the Budget Monitoring report later on the agenda.

6 What are the legal aspects?

6.1 None identified.

7 Monitoring Officer's comments:

7.1 The report raises no issues for the Monitoring Officer.

8 Report details:

8.1 The coronavirus outbreak has been described as the most significant incident affecting the country since World War 2. This has placed unprecedented, new and significant demands on the council as it has responded to national, regional and local needs, whilst continuing to deliver and adjust local services and facilities and support members and staff.

8.2 At the outset of the outbreak, the Secretary of State set out the role and priority functions of local government in supporting the country through the coronavirus pandemic as:

- Maintaining and supporting the social care system (including additional support to help free up capacity in hospitals)
- Supporting the vulnerable during extended period of self-isolation
- Supporting the economy

8.3 The following is a summary of the council's response to date its role and priorities, together with details of key activities for managing existing business:

Community support and Exeter Community Wellbeing

8.4 The Exeter Coronavirus Updates Facebook page has been running for several weeks, promoting government announcements, answering queries and linking users to advice. On 26th March this page had nearly 6,000 likes.

8.5 Exeter City Council and Wellbeing Exeter has launched a support service in Exeter to help people through the coronavirus outbreak. Exeter Community Wellbeing offers help and support to communities, including those individuals who are self-isolating as a result of the virus.

8.6 At the same time a £1 million community action fund is being launched by Exeter City Council, with external funding of £100,000 already committed by Exeter Chiefs Community Foundation. This will enable community groups and organisations to keep going and to get rapid access to small grants to allow them to work on local projects to support those people and communities most affected by the pandemic. Applications are already being received and will be processed within days from receipt of information.

8.7 A call centre has been set up and a website and telephone hotlines will gather information from people and organisations who want to offer their help and support to the community response. This is a light touch 'matching' service linking people who need help with local people and groups who want to help

8.8 The new service was set up in approximately 7 days, went live at 1pm on Wednesday 26th January and is already having a huge impact:

- Over 200 requests for help and offers of support have been received in the first 36 hours of going live
- Over 100 volunteers have come forward to help local communities
- Most requests for support are for practical help with shopping and medication collection
- Teachers, nurses, health workers, security firms and other professionals have pledged their support to help
- Self-organising groups launched in response to the virus have contacted to ‘handover’ volunteers
- Community Builders and local volunteering organisations have already matched residents with volunteers within 24 hours of the service opening
- Exeter City FC City Community Trust have released staff to help with deliveries to people requesting help

8.9 Colleagues from across Exeter City Council have come together to launch the programme with staff being redeployed from non-critical services. Strata have provided outstanding support for the significant ICT and telephony requirements for this project and the Digital Services Team have excelled in delivering the website and online delivery of the service.

Local support system to shield the most medically vulnerable

8.10 In his speech on Monday 23rd March the Prime Minister set out that “*by this coming weekend*” those with the most serious health conditions should be largely shielded from social contact for around 12 weeks. In the period since this announcement the City Council has offered support for the hub, including taking on this role for Exeter, setting up arrangements to ensure the most vulnerable in our communities can be supported with access to most basic needs during this extended period of self-isolation. The County Council, as the lead authority for the response, is still awaiting confirmation from the Government on the detail, it would fair to say this has been a changing position and exact details re still unfolding however it is clear that the City Council will be called upon for some support which will include:

- contact with the individuals requiring help and support;
- the establishment of a local warehouse and distribution hub for food and other essential supplies
- identification and co-ordination of a team of liveried delivery drivers
- delivery of food and essential supplies

Support to the Street Homeless

8.11 Many local agencies have had to close their services due to staff availability. This has also impacted on the Council’s provision where we commission agencies to run our service, for example the Outreach team.

8.12 We have continued to run the Night Shelter, adapting provision in line with government guidance on Social Distancing. We have also made appropriate provision for people who are street homeless and present with symptoms of COVID-19.

8.13 We have continued to provide Emergency Housing Advice with a greatly reduced face to face provision at the Civic Centre and engaging by telephone and electronic means.

8.14 At the time of writing this report, the Council has recently received the latest guidance from the Government to bring all people rough sleeping indoors. We have developed

a Plan to do this but it is critical on support being in place alongside accommodation. Officers will be able to update at Executive but it is anticipated most, if not all, people who have been rough sleeping will be indoors by Executive.

Strategic response

8.15 As the coronavirus outbreak started to spread outside China, the council's first contingency planning meeting was held on 31st January 2020 followed by a series of regular, more frequent meetings and briefings involving the Strategic Management Board (SMB), senior managers and all staff. As the severity of the threat increased and government directives have emerged, the strategic response has been overseen and co-ordinated at daily meetings of SMB to ensure that a rapid response is in place for emerging issues. This has been critical for resolving, for example:

- Identifying critical issues for escalation to government and regional networks
- Monitoring and responding to financial impacts
- Making arrangements to close council facilities e.g. RAMM and Corn Exchange
- Cancelling major events e.g. VE Day celebrations and Exeter Festival
- Adapting our service for homeless and vulnerable people
- Closing the Customer Service Centre and ensuring online and telephone service is in place and able to react to increasing and/or changing demand
- Planning communication to all stakeholders (communities, partners, members, senior managers and staff)
- Agreeing new policies and procedures for staff e.g. working from home arrangements, redeployment and essential workers
- Ensuring business continuity of our critical functions and responding on a daily basis to issues that are having an impact on ongoing delivery
- Responding to new demands e.g. enforcement of business closures, support for Public Health England and financial support schemes for residents
- Identifying and meeting staff needs for ICT equipment to enable remote working, At 27th March 2020, 366 (86%) of staff were working remotely
- Prioritising demand for Strata who have provided an excellent support service

Business support

8.16 Officers are working hard with key partners, other local authorities, business representative organisations and other agencies to support businesses through the pandemic.

8.17 A significant number of measures and financial support packages are emerging from Government both for individuals and employers. Navigating these and managing an ever increasing level of enquiries from businesses is very challenging. Some of the packages and measures are:

- Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme
- Statutory Sick Pay relief package for SMEs
- Support for the self-employed
- 12-month business rates holiday for all retail, hospitality, leisure and nurseries
- Retail and Hospitality Grant Scheme
- Small Business Grant
- Government ordered closure
- Protection from eviction for commercial tenants
- Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme (CBILS)
- Bank of England Covid Corporate Financing Facility

- 8.18 Despite the range of schemes in place, there are numerous organisations and individuals that are excluded and therefore require additional and ongoing support.
- 8.19 The County Council and the Local Enterprise Partnership's Growth Hub will have a major role to play with advising and supporting business. The potential impact on the Devon economy and, in turn, Exeter is significant, at least on a scale with the impact in 2008 and the financial crisis. This is a national economic shock and sectors within the Devon economy are particularly vulnerable to the closures that took place in March, such as tourism and the hospitality industry.

Engagement with national and regional networks

- 8.20 Numerous council officers engage with a range of networks that deliver leadership of the response, consider issues of mutual interest, lobby government on significant concerns and support mutual aid.
- 8.21 The Devon Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Local Resilience Forum (LRF) is a multi-agency partnership of government, blue light services, health, local authorities and others that leads the emergency response to coronavirus across the peninsula. Chaired by the police, the LRF has twice-weekly meetings of its strategic and tactical groups and convenes a range of task groups that respond to the specific issues that arise. Council officers are key contributors to all of these groups and ensure that issues in the city are addressed.
- 8.22 Other groups include Devon Chief Executives, sector and single issue groupings.
- 8.23 The Liveable Exeter Place Board convened on the 26th March by telephone conference to take soundings from the key organisations in the city. This identified the scale of which organisations are continuing to function remotely on line, organisations are responding positively to the crisis, all of us are challenged, many have significant cash flow issues and some are aware that a protracted shutdown will challenge viability of some businesses. But there is a positive attitude in the city, the Exeter Community Wellbeing initiative is welcomed and supported, national bodies like Sport England and Arts Council England are mindful of the current crisis and showing flexibility to accommodate our needs. Our organisations value having a mechanism to share their issue and wish us to convene regularly through the crisis. An important point put to us was business and organisations look to local councils to pay suppliers promptly and both leaders of Devon and Exeter councils confirmed this is our approach.

Recovery

- 8.24 Councils are the lead agency responsible for the recovery phase of any emergency. The scale and long-term impact of the coronavirus outbreak will require a detailed recovery programme with appropriate governance and resources. Work is underway to ensure that this recovery programme is in place.

9 How does the decision contribute to the Council's Corporate Plan?

- 9.1 This relates to a Well-run Council.

10 What risks are there and how can they be reduced?

- 10.1 There are no specific risks to report.

11 Equality Act 2010 (The Act)

11.1 In recommending this proposal no potential impact has been identified on people with protected characteristics as determined by the Act because the report is for information.

12 Carbon Footprint (Environmental) Implications:

12.1 There are no direct carbon/environmental impacts arising from the recommendations.

13 Are there any other options?

13.1 None

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Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1972 (as amended)

Background papers used in compiling this report:-

None

Contact for enquires:

Democratic Services (Committees)

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