Report to Communities and Localism Select Committee

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Title: COVID-19 update

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Recommendations: For the Select Committee to note the way in which services have been impacted by, responded to and adapted their approach during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Local support hubs

1.1 On 23 March, we agreed to establish 8 local support hubs to support those individuals with serious underlying health conditions who were advised to shield for at least 12 weeks from Monday 23 March.

1.2 The hubs were envisaged as local collection/distribution/volunteer coordination points. Their core role was the collection and delivery of groceries for those required to self-isolate at home and without a support network of friends and family. However, we also anticipated that the asks of these centres were likely to expand to cover other support needs of the individuals affected, and the needs of others who may not be on the shielded list. The hubs are:

- Buckingham
- Aylesbury
- Chesham
- Princes Risborough
- Marlow
- Beaconsfield
- Wycombe
- Amersham

1.3 At the outset, a senior manager was allocated as a manager for each hub, with support from local library managers. With support from mutual aid, these managers have drawn in staff from across the council to support them. They have worked collectively as a team to make sense of the Government guidance and the local challenges, and to build processes and systems to make the model work effectively.

1.4 Critical support has also been provided by:

- **Customer Service** – in developing the role of the customer service centre and to make outbound calls to residents who are shielding to understand their need.

- **IT** – in development of a software application that captures resident data and created tasks to manage the delivery of essential food and prescriptions.

- **Business Intelligence** – in data management, process development and provision of regular reports.

- **Localities** – with the network of volunteer coordinators.

- **Food cell** - to coordinate the supply and distribution of emergency food, liaison with food suppliers, supermarkets, food banks etc.

Current Arrangements

1.5 Each day, data is received from MHCLG about individuals needing support; this is analysed and passed to hubs who contact the named individuals to assess their needs and arrange to connect them or directly provide support. This initial contact work is currently being transitioned to be dealt with by the customer services centre as we look to reduce the work of the hubs.

1.6 Key elements of the hub role currently include:

- Stakeholder management – particularly with elected members and with the local community support groups.

- Proactive support - outbound phone calls to individuals newly registering on shielded list to understand their needs and to link them with local support groups or arrange direct support.

- Submitting orders to the food cell to fulfil.

- Keep in touch calls – the nature of these calls currently varies across each hub and we are currently working to bring in a consistent approach to ensure our most vulnerable shielding residents receive a regular call to ensure they are ok and have essential supplies.

- Referral of residents to local community or voluntary groups for befriending calls – some residents have been identified as being socially isolated and who would benefit from more specialist befriending type calls.

- Reactive support – respond to support requests directed by the Customer Service Centre or Social Care, these enquiries are sometimes from people who are self-isolating not only those who are shielded

- Provision of financial support data – residents who are struggling to make ends meet are provided with a comprehensive document of information, guidance and importantly contact for organisations that can provide support.

- Sending out newsletters – most hubs create a newsletter or update for their cohort of residents to keep them up to date with the latest guidance and to provide information on local support groups and charities. We are looking to centralise this activity in the coming weeks so a single county-wide communication is developed with links to local information.

1.7 In a rapidly evolving situation, the hub managers have continually adapted to the latest position. For example, there was initially a lot of work around prescription delivery; this has eased off as the Pharmacy network has implemented its own processes and the hubs are now more involved in referring individuals to community solutions than direct delivery.

1.8 We are now working to manage the reducing level of people requiring support together with the reduced capacity within each hub as officers are required to go back to their business as usual roles. This is being managed carefully with the Localism team and local coordinators to ensure the right level of capacity is put in place for the coming months.

2.0 Working with local partners (particularly Parish Councils, police and voluntary and community sector) and use of grants

2.1 In response to Covid-19 the Volunteering and Voluntary Sector cell was quickly formed with a number of key objectives. To **establish area coordinators**, who were quickly redeployed to the cell to develop links with local C-19 voluntary groups, and task groups with fulfilling the support needs of local vulnerable people. The coordinators helped those local groups trouble shoot and escalate concerns on the ground and get a sense of where the gaps were. The 'on the ground' intelligence through the area coordinators helped swiftly populate the **community hub web pages** offering residents support for self-isolating by identifying local groups in their area, practical tools or an opportunity to volunteer. With the positive feedback on web pages their attention turned to creating toolkits for helping community groups managing volunteers, 'being a good neighbour' videos and galvanising any budding volunteers. Covid-19 Coordinators worked with local partners including town and parish councils, community groups and informal volunteer groups. The cell worked with 2 partner charities to **organise the county's volunteering response**, understanding where local volunteering groups or hubs needed people and to match up offers of support.

2.2 Key partners quickly expressed an interest in coming together for a collaborative response. Most impressive was the voluntary sector. Not only with on the ground responses enabled within days, but a strategic group of charity leaders formed to help the council prepare a coordinated response. They deployed all staff and their impressive contacts to the strategic thinking and operational work that would be needed immediately. This involved Community Impact Bucks and the Clare Foundation hosting the management of over 1800 volunteers, weekly dial in's with the Cabinet Member for shared intelligence on emerging trends, issues within the crisis and consideration of both the sector and vulnerable residents in the recovery

phases. Also participating in a weekly cross organisational funding group exploring maximising funding coming into and being distributed around the county; encouraging key partners with funding to be strategic about its use e.g. Rothschild, Heart of Bucks, LEAP and the Clare Foundation.

2.3 The relationship with the voluntary sector has very much been two way and we have been able to utilise the relationship to gather really useful feedback on some of the challenges being faced locally, so we could develop our support accordingly.

2.4 There has been regular contact with those within our strategic partners forum including the Police, Fire Authority, Health and Housing Associations and universities as well as other regular communications activity including, weekly updates to town and parish councils, as well as twice weekly telephone conferences with local councils, and regular updates to our strategic partners from our Chief Executive.

2.5 The locality working arrangements helped forge close relationships with parish councils as they were key in setting up community responses in their area and being able to share data to target vulnerable. Regular calls with clerks have been held to share intelligence and trouble shoot, focusing on shielded and self-isolating. The Cabinet Member has also chaired weekly strategic discussion with BMKALC (the Bucks and Milton Keynes Local Association for Town and Parish Councils); gathering shared intelligence on town and parish council needs locally; sharing best practice; the consideration of merits and approach should we lobby as unitary and local councils in the recovery phase.

2.6 The Councillor Crisis Fund was also established. The fund was £250k of Public Health money, earmarked for Community Boards, which aimed at supporting the excellent emergency work our local members and community groups had been doing in their areas. As a testimony to the successful collaborative work of the funding group, the Rothschild Foundation has donated a further £50k to the fund. Local members have been actively involved up and down the county in supporting their communities and residents in responding to the emergency. Using their local knowledge and contacts, local members have been able to help pull together many different schemes and initiatives all focused on providing appropriate support for their residents.

3.0   Maintaining the health and wellbeing of residents

3.1 Health and fitness facilities, library services, country and local parks, public archives, theatres, museums - as well as the wider fabric of culture, sports and leisure facilities, events and outreach activities providing vital health, leisure and wellbeing services within our local communities - have all been significantly impacted by COVID-19. The majority of facilities were required to immediately close to help prevent the spread of the disease.

3.2 **Buckinghamshire libraries** have been closed since 24 March in line with the government's instructions. Many library staff have been redeployed to the council's local support hubs providing support to vulnerable residents; others have focused on expanding and marketing online library services, with immediate and significant results:

- eMagazines – we have a collection of 143 different magazines and issues increased from 3,470 in February to 5,204 in May.
- eAudiobooks – over 1,000 new customers are using eAudiobooks and issues have risen from 3,600 in February to 5,624 in May.
- eBooks – over 1,500 new borrowers signed up for our eBooks service and the issues have more than doubled – from 6,517 issues in February to 15,353 in May (an increase of almost 240%).
- PressReader, our online newspaper app, has also seen an increase in customers using the service; issues read almost doubled from 12,894 articles in February to 24,780 in May.

3.3 Government guidance states that libraries are currently required to remain closed apart from exceptions (e.g. access to digital services) and will be considered for re-opening as part of Step 3 (July 2020), under guidance from the government taskforce on recreation and leisure. Buckinghamshire libraries have already introduced a contactless Home Library Service and are working to launch a contactless click and collect service later this month. In addition, staff are working with community library partners on a recovery plan with the aim of re-opening the majority of our libraries from July (subject to government guidance). Social distancing and improved hygiene arrangements will be in place and in the short term, libraries are likely to offer a limited service with reduced opening hours. Library staff have also continued with training programmes in advance of the re-opening of some libraries as Council Access Points.

3.4 **The council's leisure centres, swimming pools and other sports facilities** closed overnight on 20 March as part of the national shutdown. These facilities are operated through a range of contracts with different leisure providers inherited from the predecessor councils, with differing expiry dates and terms; historically these contracts generated a considerable income for the councils. For all leisure operators, the closure meant an immediate loss of income, whilst retaining significant ongoing expenditure for essential maintenance and running costs to keep the buildings safe and in a position to be reactivated in due course. During the closedown, several of the leisure centres have also acted as sites for mobile testing for COVID-19.

3.5 The Government's recovery strategy suggests that indoor leisure facilities could begin to reopen from 4 July at the earliest, although at the time of writing it is yet to publish specific guidance. In the meantime, we are working with all our leisure operators to rigorously review their plans for the range of measures that are likely to be required around social distancing, hygiene and cleanliness, etc - which draw upon emerging advice from industry bodies such as UK Active, Sport England and each Governing Body of Sport - to ensure that when facilities are reopened they provide as safe an environment for all users and staff as possible. Within this context, further work will be required to obtain a clear understanding of the impact of any operational changes to use and capacity, and the consequential changes to both the cost to each facility and the estimated impact to income levels. We continue to review additional costs and lost income as a result of Covid19.

3.6 **Local parks** have remained open throughout lockdown to enable people to exercise, albeit with some facilities such as play areas closed, in line with government guidance, and social distancing signage in place. Following the recent relaxation of restrictions around outdoor exercise, we have reopened **outdoor facilities** including the South Buckinghamshire Golf Course, as well as basketball and tennis courts and multi-use games areas in local parks, with appropriate measures in place. For example, the golf course has introduced safe play guidelines, adaptations to the course, one-way systems, contactless payment and other changes, with very positive feedback from customers about the changes made to keep them safe.

3.7 For **country parks**, the public rights of way remained open throughout to provide access for local people to exercise; the wider park areas and car parks were closed to discourage unnecessary travel. Similar to other services, during the closure a number of country parks staff worked in the Council's local support hubs for vulnerable people, as well as sharing forest school activities and engaging with customers online. The country parks reopened on 13 May following the relaxation of government restrictions on travel to exercise (noting that children's play areas, outdoor gyms and cafes across country and local parks remain closed in line with current guidance). Considerable work has gone into implementing new measures to keep visitors and staff safe, including installation of comprehensive new signage, adapting facilities (for example installing new outdoor handwashing facilities) and processing significant numbers of parking permits for regular visitors. Visitor numbers have been very high in the initial weeks; unfortunately there have been various incidents of littering, inconsiderate parking and people failing to keep to social distancing measures, which are being mitigated through ongoing communications to the public, as well as working with highways to alleviate parking issues.

3.8 Overall with regards to physical activity, the public has adapted to the current restrictions through finding new ways of staying active, including using online resources to exercise at home, and increases in cycling, as a couple of examples. These behaviour changes will be better understood across different groups in due course - including whether they 'stick' as lockdown eases further - but present potential opportunities around improving people's health and wellbeing, and reducing health inequalities, into the future. Continuing to work in partnership across areas such as active travel, maximising available government funding to support walking and cycling, and with expert partners such as Leap, the Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Active Partnership, will be key to realising the potential benefits to our local communities.

3.9 **Buckinghamshire Archives** - while public access to the physical archives remains closed, the service has undertaken regular monitoring of the strong rooms to ensure the safekeeping of the collections. As with libraries, the team has developed their online engagement work, for example, supporting the Council's wider VE Day celebrations activities and an appeal for related material to add to our collections, and communications activities to encourage people to capture and submit their experiences of lockdown. The team will of course play a key role in capturing the council's own records of the pandemic.

3.10 **Museums, theatres and the wider arts and cultural sector,** all the many local organisations and facilities that support our town centre economies and keep our local

communities thriving, have also been in shutdown since 23 March. As the national situation moves into the easing of lockdown, the cultural sector continues to work closely with the government, including through the ministerial taskforce on recreation and leisure, to map out how and when entertainment venues might reopen, the impact on theatres and other venues in terms of social distancing requirements and the potential challenges in trying to regain audience confidence to return. Locally, we are working within the Buckinghamshire Cultural Partnership on approaches to support the recovery of the cultural sector across Buckinghamshire, including meetings with the Arts Council and other key partners. Officers have also supported the Cultural Partnership in launching two online projects to contribute to wider delivery of the Buckinghamshire Cultural Strategy, whilst being specifically tailored as a response to COVID-19: Lockdown Stories, in partnership with University of Buckingham and 'Bucks in 100 Objects', both of which are getting good engagement; and supported the development of a bid with National Paralympic Heritage Trust to Esmee Fairbairn Foundation for a project to sustain engagement with collections, which if successful will benefit 10 museums and heritage centres across Bucks with development of virtual, accessible tours.

3.11 Community Safety and Engagement

Community Engagement has supported the temporary directory of coronavirus support groups, adding a number of faith groups and liaising with existing and new community groups to ensure their services are published on the website. The team has also continued to support and grow the Bucks Street Association, whose members have been actively involved in the community response, and welcomed a new Association in Aylesbury Old Town and 17 new members across the county. Some team members have also transferred to support community hubs and volunteering cells.

A Communications plan has been implemented advising on domestic violence and abuse support which has been available during lockdown. In addition, there has been regular contact with Women's Aid and the Police to monitor demand and issues. Plans are being put in place for a surge in demand from victims once lockdown lifts, although this may take some months to fully emerge. There has been some evidence of targeting of (especially young) people who are now spending more time online. Therefore, there has been a sharing of resources and communications to support people to stay safe and also support families to be more alert regarding online activity by their younger members.

There has been an increased caseload relating to anti-social behaviour, flowing from lockdown as a result of prolonged close contact between neighbours, as well as young people gathering together. There continues to be close working with Thames Valley Police, housing providers and residents.

4.0 Regulatory services

4.1 **Cemeteries and Crematoria** experienced an increased demand for burials and cremations across the sector, and there was a requirement for daily monitoring and forecasting to maintain service capacity. Some of the major impacts on the service included:

- Maintaining service levels with key staff absent as a result of COVID19 ill health

- Responding to interim regulations issued by Government and implementing changes to operating methods with limited notice

- The mobilisation and training of staff from across the Council to provide additional support and resilience to the service

- Cessation of services by neighbouring crematoria leading to increase out of area demand

- The need to sensitively manage social distancing and limitations on the number of mourners at services and burials

4.2 Major changes were made to operational delivery of **licensing services**, with almost all staff working remotely. The services reacted agilely to applicants and licensees, providing information and guidance and operating flexibly. Some of the major impacts on the service included:

- Interpreting and implementing changes to the legislative requirements

- Being unable to deliver some services due to social distancing requirements and staffing levels. This includes in-house MOT and taxi testing which resulted in MOT testing being carried out by private providers. Also, processing of new taxi applications were impacted due to the safeguarding requirement for face to face verification for new applicants.

- The majority of licenses were issued as electronic licence documents.

- A projected loss of income to the Licensing Service of circa £100k a month

- A backlog of applications to process and physical taxi plates and badges to issue upon return to BAU.

4.3 Both the **Environmental Health and Trading Standards** teams have still been engaged and working through the lockdown period. However, there have been major changes to operational delivery with almost all staff working remotely. Some distanced visits and monitoring work has continued, however food hygiene inspects have paused awaiting guidance from the Food Standards Agency. Anticipating issues will be around changes to the operation of some businesses e.g. converting to takeaways, dealing with food stocks from before lockdown.

4.4 Environmental Health & Trading Standards have been working collaboratively with the Police regarding interpretation of changes to the coronavirus regulations and enforcement of those regulations. The three area Environmental Health teams are in frequent and regular contact to monitor complaints and ensure consistent responses for Buckinghamshire.

4.5 COVID19 scams are a growing problem but are being tackled head on by Trading Standards teams who are providing general advice and messages via social media platforms, website and email newsletters. Vulnerable residents have been contacted directly by email and by phone.

4.6 Pressure is starting to grow regarding a backlog of complaints and inspections, particularly relating to issues such as noise and odour. Sensitivities have been heightened by lockdown, and these matters will be prioritized as part of recovery planning.