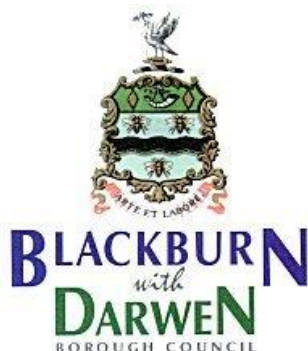


EXECUTIVE BOARD DECISION



REPORT OF:	Executive Member for Finance and Governance Leader
LEAD OFFICERS:	Chief Executive
DATE:	10 June 2021

PORTFOLIO/S AFFECTED:	Finance and Governance	Public Health and Wellbeing
WARD/S AFFECTED:	All	
KEY DECISION:	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	

SUBJECT: Covid-19 - Ongoing Response & Recovery

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In March 2020, the Council activated its Corporate Business Continuity Plan and emergency planning protocols in response to Covid-19. Regular updates on progress have been reported to Council Forum, Executive Board and Policy Council.

The Council has implemented strong governance and democratic oversight of our response to Covid-19 and a number of internal groups and cells were established. This includes a Health Protection Board, Local Outbreak Engagement Board, Incident Management Hub and critical response teams.

The Council has worked within the framework and structure of the Lancashire Local Resilience Forum (LRF) and from April 2021, the Council's Chief Executive is Chair of the LRF's Recovery Co-ordinating Group (RCG).

The new Coronavirus Act 2020 became law in March last year, and provided public sector bodies, and the Government, additional duties and powers to react quickly to the pandemic. For Local Government this included reducing administrative burdens, supporting people in crises and enhanced powers to take enforcement action in response to threats to public health and safety.

Provisions were made for the postponement of elections as well as regulation removing the requirement for local authority meetings to be held in person.

With support from Elected Members, the Council's Senior Management Team has taken swift and decisive action within the regulations of the Act and statutory responsibilities of the Civil Contingencies Act, to keep our residents safe and ensure they, and our businesses, receive the support needed.

This report outlines some of the key resource requirements to support the Council's ongoing Covid-19 response and moving into recovery, ensuring that our plans remain flexible to adapt our approach to the pandemic as and when needed over the course of 2021/22.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Executive Board:

- a) note the content of this report.
- b) acknowledge the significant council resource and capacity that has been prioritised to respond to the pandemic to date.
- c) agree that the Council will continue to resource activity related to the Covid-19 continuing response and local recovery, utilising funding allocated for this purpose
- d) agree that further updates be provided to elected members during the year.

2. BACKGROUND

Elected Members will be aware that the first transmission of Covid-19 within the UK was confirmed in February 2020 and on 3rd March 2020 the UK government published its action plan to respond to the pandemic with a phased approach – Contain, Delay, Mitigate.

At this stage, the Council activated its Corporate Business Continuity Plan and emergency planning protocols and, through the Lancashire Local Resilience Forum (LRF), the Council and partners responded to the outbreak at pace, working extremely hard to put in place all of the new measures and guidance expected of us by the Government.

During 2020/21, the Council's resources and workforce across all departments were re-prioritised to focus on our response to the pandemic, some services were required to close which enabled staff to be redeployed to support new Covid services whilst others, including environmental and highways services continued to deliver business as usual to a large extent.

Since the start of the pandemic regular updates have been provided at Council Forum and also Policy Council on activity and the on-going response. Our website also has lots information about our response, including the Covid Response Plan published in November 2020. As reported at Executive Board on 12th November 2020, Covid-19 has created a significant shock to the national and local economy, and resulted in significant, unplanned expenditure and income losses for the Council.

Council Forum received a report at its meeting on 25th March 2021 with an overview of the key highlights of the Council's response over the previous 12 months. A Covid-19 funding update was also provided to the Executive Board at the previous meeting in April 2021.

3. KEY ISSUES & RISKS

As the pandemic began to unfold the council's emergency plans were triggered. These plans provide a set of procedures to follow and a framework of considerations to take into account based

on legislation, good practice and historic events, although the scale and challenges of the pandemic were unprecedented.

The Council has implemented strong governance and democratic oversight of our response to Covid-19. We quickly introduced a number of internal groups and cells with a direct link to the Chief Executive and Elected Members, including a Health Protection Board, Local Outbreak Engagement Board, Incident Management Hub, education response cell, adult social care response cell as well as a core COVID team to co-ordinate the response. We have worked closely with colleagues in national and local government, health, police, business groups, community groups, faith settings and the private sector.

The COVID response plan on the Council website provides a high level outline of the governance and partnership frameworks we have been working within.

To ensure business continuity, the Council accelerated its planned roll-out of Microsoft Teams to enable those staff who were able to work from home to do so, and many continue to do so although we anticipate more staff returning to the offices and workplaces in a blended / hybrid working approach. Some staff whose normal duties were halted due to the pandemic were redeployed into roles that could support our immediate Covid response, including the Help Hub, contact tracing, testing and supporting businesses. The report to Council Forum on 25th March 2021, provides a summary of how our services have adapted and responded throughout the pandemic.

On 25th March 2020, the Coronavirus Act 2020 received royal assent and became law. The Act gave the Government, and other public sector bodies, powers to take the right action at the right time to respond effectively to the progress of the pandemic. The Act enabled actions in five key areas – increasing health and social care workforce by removing barriers to workforce retention; reducing administrative burdens so that resources could be reprioritised; providing public health officers with powers to control the spread of the virus; enabling a death management system to deal with increased demands; supporting people in crises. Provisions were made for the postponement of elections with regulations also put in place to remove the requirement for local authority meetings to be held in person until May 2021.

With support from Elected Members, the Council's Senior Management Team has taken swift and decisive action within the regulations of the Act and the statutory duties of the Civil Contingencies Act, to keep our residents safe and ensure they, and our businesses, receive the support needed as much as was possible. Elected Members were supported by our Digital Team to ensure they had the correct equipment and software to access Council meetings remotely and our first formal virtual Council meeting was held on 4th June (Annual Council).

The Government have also introduced a number of new duties and powers for local authorities in response to the pandemic. This has included directions to impose new prohibitions and restrictions on some industries (e.g. hospitality/leisure) and also public spaces (e.g. outdoor gatherings), or the issuing of fixed penalty notices within regulations. Responsibility for enforcing compliance with the restrictions sits with the Police. Whilst we use our best endeavours to support businesses and premises with advice and guidance, unfortunately formal action is needed when there is no other alternative. Since the start of the pandemic, the Council has issued 10 Direction orders and issued 10 Fixed Penalty Notices. Details of the Directions are on our website.

The Government published its Covid-19 Response – Spring 2021 on 22nd February setting out the roadmap out of the third national lockdown which started in January 2021. This sets out four steps

for reopening and gradual lifting of social restrictions starting from 8th March 2021. The latest information on restrictions and reopening is regularly updated on our website.

The Council has put plans in place to reopen and restart services aligned to the Government's 4 Step Roadmap and resume business as usual in many service areas. Covid-19 will stay with us for many years and we will continue to adjust and adapt as we live alongside the virus and the impact of new variants emerging.

In the first quarter of 2020/21, the costs of responding to the pandemic and the loss of almost all income from sales, fees and charges was of increasing concern and the Council's financial position was extremely challenging as reported previously to Executive Board. At Finance Council on 1st March 2021, we reported on the council's budget position, highlighting the spiralling costs in the early stages of the pandemic.

During the course of 2020, the Government began to provide additional resource to Councils to meet these costs and mitigate some of the financial losses incurred. Funding was made available through the Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF). This funding is ring-fenced for public health purposes to tackle Covid-19, working to break the chain of transmission and protecting the most vulnerable. Additional funding was also provided for Local Authorities like ours under the local restrictions tiering in 2020. As the continuing response to and recovery from Covid-19 spans financial years, funding received in the financial year 2020/21 can be carried forward into 2021/22 to support ongoing response and recovery work with a final outturn to be provided to Government in June 2022. Indeed the specific funding will be critical during 2021/22 as we deliver Covid-related activity alongside more Council services returning to business as usual.

As reported at Finance Council, we have received a Covid-19 grant for 2021/22 of £5,125,000, which will be used to meet additional costs as we respond to changing circumstances throughout the next financial year.

To support our continued emergency response into and throughout the current year, 2021/22, resource will continue to be made available for front line activity including site marshals, testing team, public protection, Help Hub, education/social care/crises response and our core public health covid incident management teams. We will also retain a focused Covid programme management team to co-ordinate activity such as governance, reporting, communications, testing, contact tracing, vaccination support. We will also ensure all of our council premises and spaces remain safe and covid-secure. This more dedicated response resource will enable other services to focus on returning to business as usual as far as is possible in the circumstances.

As with other public sector organisations, we are also dealing with a backlog and rise in demand across many of our services including social work support for vulnerable adults and children, legal, registrars, public protection, youth provision, employment and business support. To acknowledge the adjustments to services in continuing to respond to the pandemic, and operate within Covid-safe guidelines, we have allocated additional resource in this first phase to manage increased demand and provide capacity to deal with backlogs due to Covid-19.

We will continue to invest in the digital infrastructure across all premises to enable continued remote and hybrid working facilities and collaboration which will also reduce travel costs and time in future, and, recognising the significant pressure our employees have faced, we will continue to support employee wellbeing.

We will allocate £1,500,000 to support sustained recovery, including economic recovery for businesses and the town centres, supporting residents and communities to recover as the area with the highest cumulative rate of cases over the pandemic, and having been impacted by national and local restrictions for most of the last 15 months or so. As recommended by government and in line with guidance, these funds will also be used in our parks and other outdoor spaces and facilities for young people to make sure they are safe and welcoming enabling more people to access the health and wellbeing benefits of the outdoors and stay safe indoors.

Our first phase plans make provision for flexibility to adapt our approach to Covid-19 which may be needed throughout the course of 2021/22, as indeed we have experienced through 2020/21. The NHS vaccination programme is going well and we have a strong test and trace system in place. However, there is still uncertainty on aspects of the virus, including variants and future vaccination requirements, and it is important that we continue to have contingency arrangements in place to meet any unexpected demands placed on the Council.

Regular updates on activity and progress will be provided to Elected Members at future Council meetings.

4. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

We will continue to monitor government advice and guidance and tailor any policy requirements as necessary.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There have been, and will continue to be significant financial implications arising from our response to COVID-19. Reports to Finance Council, Executive Board and Council Forum provide further information. We will continue to press the Government for additional resource and financial support as needed.

Throughout 2020/21, much of the Council's resources were prioritised to assist the response to the COvid-19 pandemic, significant additional costs were incurred including emergency food and other support, PPE, communications and engagement, test and trace systems, there were substantial losses of income from sales, fees and charges across leisure and cultural services, parking and many other services. Regular reporting returns have been made to government on the extent of additional costs incurred, claims for partial recovery of lost income have been submitted and additional funding was received specifically to support, for example, the regulated care sector, support for homelessness and economic support for businesses through a variety of business rates relief and both mandatory and discretionary grant schemes.

Much of the response effort continues beyond 31 March 2021, into the current financial year, income streams will take some significant time to recover to previous levels, and we are now planning recovery work alongside business as usual. The specific Covid funding provided by government to the local authority under the Contain Management Outbreak framework can be carried forward and utilised over two financial years 2020/21 and 2021/22. This will be reported formally in the 2020/21 Revenue Monitoring outturn report to the next Executive Board meeting.

Given the uncertainties we have seen throughout the pandemic and which still continue, this report is recommending utilisation of funding for the first phase of continuing response and recovery work in 2021/22, including the specific Covid response resources, addressing some of the capacity and backlog resourcing challenges, and planning for recovery across the Council relating to residents, communities and our wider local economy.

The first phase funding of £5.2m is proposed for:

- £2.7m continuing Covid response throughout 2021/22
- £1m supporting capacity and demand challenges across service departments
- £1.5m recovery funding

We will focus on economic recovery (£750k), marketing for service recovery / income generation, town centres and events (£150k), safe & welcoming indoor and outdoor public spaces (£390k), digital upgrades, training and wellbeing (£125k), and behavioural insights, communications, research and community engagement (£125k).

The functions supporting ongoing response and recovery across the Council are shown at Appendix A.

6. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

The Council must ensure that it fully complies with the various Coronavirus legislation and Government guidance introduced from time to time, in respect of all its services, powers and duties. The Council must also continuously monitor the changes in legislation and guidance, to ensure the provision of its statutory and other responsibilities.

8. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

Please refer to section 5. Financial implications, in this report.

9. EQUALITY AND HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

Please select one of the options below. Where appropriate please include the hyperlink to the EIA.

Option 1 Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) not required – the EIA checklist has been completed.

Option 2 In determining this matter the Executive Member needs to consider the EIA associated with this item in advance of making the decision. (*insert EIA link here*)

Option 3 In determining this matter the Executive Board Members need to consider the EIA associated with this item in advance of making the decision. (*insert EIA attachment*)

10. CONSULTATIONS

Chief Officers have been consulted on the resource requirements to continue to deliver response activity, recovery and resume service delivery in their service areas.

11. STATEMENT OF COMPLIANCE

The recommendations are made further to advice from the Monitoring Officer and the Section 151 Officer has confirmed that they do not incur unlawful expenditure. They are also compliant with equality legislation and an equality analysis and impact assessment has been considered. The recommendations reflect the core principles of good governance set out in the Council's Code of Corporate Governance.

12. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

All Declarations of Interest of any Executive Member consulted and note of any dispensation granted by the Chief Executive will be recorded in the Summary of Decisions published on the day following the meeting.

VERSION: 1

CONTACT OFFICER:	Denise Park, Chief Executive
DATE:	25 th May 2021
BACKGROUND PAPERS:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Report to Executive Board 8 April 2021 – ‘Covid-19 Funding’• Report to Council Forum 25 March 2021 – ‘Council Response to Covid-19 Pandemic – One Year On’.• Report to Policy Council 3 December – ‘2020 Local and National Reflection; 2021 – Future priorities’.• Council key strategies and plans - https://www.blackburn.gov.uk/coronavirus/key-strategies-and-plans• The Government's One-year report on the status of provisions of the Coronavirus Act 2020 - https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-act-one-year-report-march-2021