	WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
Name and date of Committee	**Council: Wednesday 24 June 2020**
Report Number	**Agenda Item No. 8**
Subject	**Covid 19: West Oxfordshire Response and Recovery**
Wards affected	All
Accountable member	Cllr James Mills, Leader; Email: James.Mills@westoxon.gov.uk
Accountable officer	Giles Hughes, Chief Executive; Email: Giles.Hughes@westoxon.gov.uk
Summary/Purpose	To outline the steps that the Council has taken to respond to the Covid 19 emergency working in partnership with other agencies and local groups, and to set out a framework for the Council's approach to recovery.
Annexes	None
Recommendations	(a) That the report be noted; (b) That the Chief Executive be requested to prepare a Local Recovery Plan for West Oxfordshire for consideration at Cabinet and then Council in October 2020; and. (c) That a Cabinet Advisory Group be established to advise Cabinet on the development of the Recovery Plan, on the basis outlined in paragraph 2.9 below.
Corporate priorities	Modern Council Services and Sustainable Finance - Delivering excellent modern services whilst ensuring the financial sustainability of the Council.
Key Decision	N/A
Exempt	No
Consultees/ Consultation	None

1. BACKGROUND

1.1. Covid-19 has caused profound changes to every part of life in the UK. Over 40,000 people have died, hundreds of thousands of people have been infected and the UK has been under lockdown restrictions since 23rd March 2020. Hundreds of thousands of businesses have closed temporarily or permanently, millions of workers have been furloughed or switched to working from home and everyone has had to adjust how they live their lives.

1.2. The UK is still in the response phase of the emergency, and it looks as though this will continue for some time, but steps are being taken by Government to address the country's recovery as lockdown restrictions ease.

1.3. This report identifies how the Council has responded to Covid-19 and also suggests a framework for how the Council should approach recovery in West Oxfordshire.

2. MAIN POINTS

Response

2.1. Given the Council's responsibility for delivering services to over 100,000 residents, Covid-19 has been an unprecedented challenge that changed everything overnight. From the onset of the virus, the council reacted quickly around support for local business and economy, the voluntary and community sector and support for local residents. Working with our partners Ubico and Publica, we have maintained essential services whilst redeploying staff to new areas of work to help deal with the crisis. The way in which the Council operates has also changed dramatically, with a large majority of staff now working from home and with Council meetings being held virtually.

2.2. There has been a dynamic and inspiring community sector response across West Oxfordshire to the challenges introduced through the pandemic. Local groups, towns and villages have mobilised to support their communities and the Council has developed a Community Hub team to work effectively with voluntary sector partners and volunteers.

2.3. At a County-wide level there has been a strong collaborative effort to tackle the current crisis. In particular, close coordination and good communication between the County, City and District Councils, with the NHS and OxLEP, to support vulnerable people and align programmes to support local businesses.

2.4. The following statistics from early June outline some of what the Council has achieved during the Covid-19 lockdown period working with key partners:

- 835 residents have been given support with complex needs
- 332 emergency food parcels delivered to vulnerable residents
- 544 vulnerable residents have been contacted by Councillors
- 31 homeless people provided with accommodation
- 1,981 grants totalling £25m paid to businesses in West Oxfordshire
- 20,189 calls from West Oxfordshire residents dealt with
- 2,717 shielded residents called during lockdown
- 24,373 refuse bins collected weekly
- 24,373 recycling bins collected weekly

2.5. As lockdown restrictions ease we will face new challenges and opportunities. We will need to build on the Council's strengths in working with local communities, and with Oxfordshire partners, that have been demonstrated during the last few difficult months.

2.6. Future challenges will include work with partners on test & trace in order to respond to any local Covid-19 outbreaks, continuing engagement to ensure food availability for those in need, and the need to respond to any changes that the Government makes to the support arrangements for shielded and vulnerable residents. Shielded and vulnerable residents will need support for some time to come and it is also important that this work is put on a sustainable footing. Council staff are currently engaging with local groups to better understand the challenge that this presents for the community sector.

Recovery

2.7. Recovery from Covid-19 will take time and will be complex. This reflects the multi-facet nature of the impacts created by the crisis. The Council's Covid-19 recovery work should be guided by a Local Recovery Plan to help steer the Council's efforts.

2.8. It is proposed that a Local Recovery Plan should be prepared with a view to considering this at Cabinet and Council in October 2020. This will allow the conclusions of this work to feed into the preparation of the budget for 2021/22, and set a timely framework to guide the Council's recovery activity.

2.9. To help inform the preparation of the Local Recovery Plan it is recommended that a Cabinet Advisory Group should be established to advise Cabinet on recovery. This would have an overall membership of nine members. The proposal is that five of these members would be involved in every session whilst the other four places would rotate depending on the agenda of a particular meeting. In line with West Oxfordshire practice, the overall membership would reflect the Council's political balance, which would be 5:2:2 (with the core membership of five being 3:1:1). The core and flexible membership will be in accordance with the wishes of the respective political groups (via their leaders).

2.10. To help engage with other members on recovery and on the Local Recovery Plan an all member workshop session is also being planned.

2.11. The Local Recovery Plan should provide a framework for three phases of recovery activity:

- Re-start (0-6 months)
- Re-cover (6-18 months)
- Re-new (18-36 months+)

2.12. These three phases recognise that the initial restarting of activity needs to lead into longer term actions to ensure a proper recovery. OxLEP and other Oxfordshire partners will be basing their own recovery plans on these three phases, and it is important to link into the wider work of others.

2.13. A structure for collaborative working on recovery is being established in Oxfordshire and this links to the Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum. The structure includes the principal Councils, OxLEP and the local NHS system among other partners. The work of the Council on the Local Recovery Plan will feed into, and be informed by, discussions with these key partners.

2.14. The Council's approach to recovery should also take account of the following points:

- The vision and key priorities set out in the Council's recently adopted Council Plan;
- Government instruction/ guidance and other sources of intelligence that guide our action;
- Collaboration at different scales – from local community and town support actions to County-wide and sub-regional co-ordinated and strategic initiatives;

- Governance within the Oxfordshire emergency recovery framework (linking to Thames Valley co-operation where relevant); and
- A consideration as to the most effective role we can take to promote and secure action - whether that sees us as the direct delivery body; or in a partnering or influencing capacity.

2.15. The Council Plan was adopted by Council on 22nd January 2020. This plan covers the period 2020-2024 and sets out the following key priorities:

1. Climate Action - Leading the way in protecting and enhancing the environment by taking action locally on climate change and biodiversity.
2. Healthy Towns and Villages - Facilitating healthy lifestyles and better wellbeing for everyone.
3. A Vibrant District Economy - Securing future economic success through supporting existing local businesses and attracting new businesses to deliver the economic ambitions of the Oxfordshire Local Industrial Strategy.
4. Strong Local Communities - Supporting and building prosperous and inclusive local communities.
5. Meeting the Housing Needs of our Changing Population - Securing the provision of market and affordable housing of a high quality for the wide range of householders making their home in West Oxfordshire.
6. Modern Council Services and Sustainable Finance - Delivering excellent modern services whilst ensuring the financial sustainability of the Council.

2.16. These key priorities provide useful a direction to help guide West Oxfordshire's recovery. However some of the individual actions identified in the plan may need to be amended or supplemented in light of Covid-19 and this should be considered during the preparation of the Local Recovery Plan.

2.17. Building on the priorities identified in the Council Plan the following key themes have been identified for the Council's work on recovery, and these are shown with the relevant officer leads:

- Environment – Vanessa Scott
- Economy – Will Barton
- Community – Heather McCulloch
- Publica – Frank Wilson
- Council Finances – Elizabeth Griffiths

2.18. It will take the Council some time to move back to business as usual as staff capacity is finite and there is the need to both provide support to local communities while planning and implementing recovery.

2.19. The following different Council meetings have already taken place through video conferencing:

- Council
- Cabinet
- Lowlands Area Planning Sub-Committee
- Uplands Area Planning Sub-Committee
- Climate Action Working Group

2.20. The meetings programme will be kept under regular review. In addition to the above meetings consideration will be given to holding other meetings subject to staff resources being available to support them. To help guide this consideration the following order of priority is suggested:

- Audit and General Purposes Committee
- Finance and Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- Economic and Social Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

3.1. Covid 19 is having a significant impact on the Council's finances. Current forecasts indicate additional costs of £850,000 for the 2020/21 financial year and income losses of around £1,764,000. In total the impact is estimated to be around £2,614,000. So far the Council has received additional Government funding of £1,135,083. If further funding does not come forward, the net impact to the Council is around £1.5 million. The Council has sufficient reserves to be able to finance this impact.

4. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1. None at this stage.

5. RISK ASSESSMENT

5.1. The purpose of the Local Recovery Plan is to direct effort towards priority issues and this should help to ensure that resources are focused on an effective recovery for West Oxfordshire. Any significant actions will be subject to the Council's corporate risk management approach and will, therefore, be tested in terms of risk likelihood, potential impact and identification of mitigation steps.

6. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

6.1. The Council could choose not to prepare a Local Recovery Plan.

7. BACKGROUND PAPERS

7.1. The following documents have been identified by the author of the report in accordance with section 100D.5(a) of the Local Government Act 1972 and are listed in accordance with section 100 D.1(a) for inspection by members of the public:

- Council Report Draft Council Plan 2020-2024, January 2020.

7.2. These documents will be available for inspection at the Council Offices at Woodgreen in Witney during normal office hours for a period of up to four years from the date of the meeting. Please contact the author of the report.