

# Supplement for

**Scrutiny Committee**  
**Wednesday 17 June 2020**  
**6.00 pm**

## **COVID Recovery Programme**

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**To:** Cabinet  
**Date:** 24 June 2020  
**Report of:** Assistant Chief Executive  
**Title of Report:** City Council COVID Recovery Programme

<b>Summary and recommendations</b>	
<b>Purpose of report:</b>	To provide an update to Cabinet on the issues, challenges and opportunities arising from COVID and the work underway during a phase of transition from the emergency response, through to restart, recovery and renewal.
<b>Key decision:</b>	No
<b>Cabinet Member:</b>	Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of the Council
<b>Corporate Priority:</b>	All Council Strategy priorities
<b>Policy Framework:</b>	Council Strategy 2020-24
<b>Recommendation:</b> That Cabinet resolves to:	
1. <b>Note</b> the report and comment on the areas of work outlined and the proposed next steps outlined at paras 59&60	

<b>Appendices</b>
None

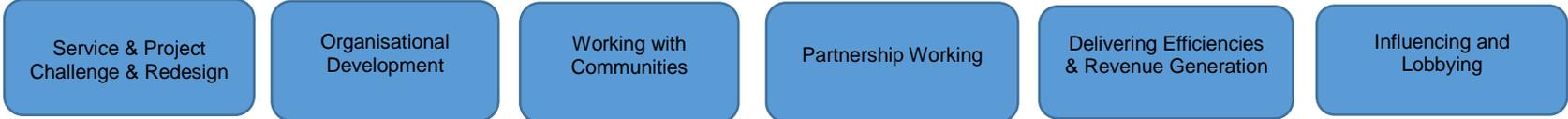
## 1) Introduction & context – impact of COVID-19

1. COVID-19 has resulted in significant disruption to businesses, residents, communities and the delivery of public services and although continued gradual lifting of the restrictions is now expected, social distancing and a significant level of disruption is set to continue for some time to come. The council responded rapidly to the lockdown requirement and made necessary adjustments to services. This has meant almost all council staff working from home, stopping or restricting many areas of work, redeployment of staff to support new areas of demand and implementation of new service models to support vulnerable people.
2. Though lock down restrictions are gradually being lifted, a return to a pre-COVID “normal” is neither practically possible, nor affordable in the current circumstances. We are currently in a transition phase in which we need to address immediate priorities. These are to continue supporting our communities through COVID; supporting economic recovery, restarting paused areas of council, ODS and OCHL work (particularly those that generate income), and supporting economic recovery. At the same time we also need to review and develop plans for the future in the context of uncertainty about the full economic and social impact, and significant financial uncertainty and challenge for the council.

3. In February, Council approved a new Corporate Strategy confirming its vision to build a fairer, greener city in which everyone can thrive, with four key aims to enable an inclusive economy, deliver more affordable housing, support thriving communities and pursue a zero carbon Oxford. COVID-19 presents new challenges to achieving these aims, particularly in terms of inequity of the health and economic impact on communities. However, COVID-19 has also forced a step change in how we deliver services in some areas and in closer working with community and voluntary groups. There is now an opportunity and a need to capture learning from this experience and capitalise benefits in terms of better outcomes for customers, residents and communities and in efficiencies in ways of working – and to “build back better”.
4. This is a challenging task given ongoing uncertainty, will require significant work over the coming months and difficult choices ahead. Work has begun on a series of reviews to inform that reset of the Council’s business plan and budget. Alongside this we will need to develop lobbying and influencing campaigns aimed at securing funding and flexibilities that enable us to mitigate impacts and access opportunities
5. We are planning for recovery over three phases:
  - **Restart** – focusing on actions that need to be taken now to respond to immediate demands, pressures and priorities
  - **Recover** – actions we can take in the medium term to support recovery and adaptation to social and economic change
  - **Renew** – planning for long term change to secure better outcomes for Oxford
6. It is proposed that the following principles are applied across all strands of work.
  - Embed and build on positive changes that have emerged to the way we work across the council, and with our communities, volunteers and other partners.
  - Seek to retain or enhance environmental benefits wherever we can.
  - Target our resources to where they are most needed to support those most in need or most vulnerable.
  - Ensure Equality, Diversity and Inclusion are embedded in all areas of our work.
  - Work closely with our citizens, voluntary and community groups to develop people focused solutions.
  - Continue to value and invest in our staff and services to deliver valued public services.
  - Capitalise on opportunities for transformation in our services to deliver improved value for money and customer focused outcomes.
  - Use a risk management approach to re-instating and re-designing services, programmes and projects.
7. We have identified 7 work strands covering key elements of the recovery programme illustrated in the diagram below and discussed in more detail in the following sections.



Economy	Public Realm, City and Local Centres	Hardship and Vulnerability	Delivering services differently	Council strategy and financial sustainability	Workforce	Health, Social Care and Wellbeing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• supporting the local economy into operation</li> <li>• mitigating impacts on local business and employment,</li> <li>• securing long term investment to support sustainable and inclusive growth.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• measures to support social distancing, safe movement and use of the city</li> <li>• learning, embedding and extending what works as social distancing eases</li> <li>• longer term transport and public realm improvements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• supporting vulnerable people (because of health, age, poverty, domestic violence, homelessness etc)</li> <li>• continue to protect from COVID19</li> <li>• redesign support systems that improve outcomes for vulnerable people in the longer term</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business Continuity Planning for further outbreaks</li> <li>• embedding adjusted ways of working across services to improve processes, reduce silo working, customer focused outcomes</li> <li>• fundamental reviews of delivery models</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• restraint and management of costs</li> <li>• ODS and OCHL business plans</li> <li>• capital programme &amp; Assets reviews</li> <li>• review major planned initiatives</li> <li>• Business Plan and Budget reset.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• support remote and flexible working</li> <li>• interim operational model for St Aldates Chambers</li> <li>• staff development programme</li> <li>• longer term operating model</li> <li>• pay negotiations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• work with public health, health and social care to:</li> <li>• prepare for future outbreaks</li> <li>• tackle health inequalities</li> <li>• embed public health improvements</li> <li>• develop community health responses</li> </ul>



## 2) The Economy

8. As a result of restrictions during the COVID-19 lockdown, the UK economy faces the most significant recession experienced in decades. Though Oxford is expected to fare better overall than other areas of the country due to the strength of its innovative, knowledge based economy, there will be a significant impact on businesses that rely on visitors. There is also likely to be a rise in unemployment to levels that the city has not experienced for decades. Up to 22,000 (19%) of jobs in Oxford could be at risk, with low paid, low skilled and young workers most at risk.<sup>1</sup> The visitor economy and hospitality account for 15% of Oxford's jobs and combined are worth over £900m a year to the economy. They are likely to be slow to recover, with few overseas tourists for the remainder of this year and potentially next. Retail has also been significantly impacted. Whilst the Universities are planning for students to return for the beginning of the academic year in September, it is likely there will be fewer students in the city and far lower numbers of overseas students for some time.
9. The council's immediate response to COVID-19 has been focused on engaging extensively with businesses to identify their concerns, needs and gaps in support schemes and lobbying government to respond to these needs. We have also focused on raising awareness of the different government business support grants and getting them paid out to all eligible businesses as quickly as possible.
9. As we move into transition phase we have developed an economic recovery plan with a focus on supporting local businesses back into operation, but also building on our economic strengths for a future economy that is inclusive and sustainable as key priorities of a new economic development strategy. Our strategy will be aligned to an Oxfordshire wide economic recovery plan, being co-ordinated by Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (OxLEP), working with the district, City and County Councils. This will be the main vehicle through which to secure strategic central Government investment in the recovery. As the national economy recovery strategy emerges, working through this group, and more broadly the Growth Board partners, will be essential in order to develop a strong business case for investment in the Oxfordshire economy. Government remains interested in the opportunities of the Oxford to Cambridge Arc, and particularly now, its part in a national economic recovery strategy.
10. Our restart phase will involve continuing close engagement with businesses and a focus on reactivating the local economy, including the following.
  - Maximising access to business support and work with OxLEP and others to develop local business support packages.
  - Working with OxLEP to monitor and manage local labour market impacts including promoting redeployment, changing training and skills offerings to meet new identified needs, and identifying opportunities to generate jobs through procurement, contracts and local supply chains.

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<sup>1</sup> RSA: Which local areas are most at risk of impacts of coronavirus on employment? 27<sup>th</sup> April 2020

- Reactivating the city and district centres through adjustments to transport and public realm to facilitate businesses to operate with social distancing and help people move safely about the city (see more below).
  - Exploring the potential for working more closely with businesses in 'local district centres' and other shopping streets, alongside our locality hubs, to understand issues and opportunities at the local level to inform the development of the recovery plan.
  - Resume ongoing capital works and OCHL development as supply chains and social distancing practices allow and further clarity over the council's financial position emerges.
  - Continue work with OxLEP on the Oxfordshire Local Industrial Strategy Investment Plan to promote Oxford and Oxfordshire's contribution through its response to COVID (via health sciences) to the national recovery.
  - Re-engage partners in the Oxford Strategic Partnership (OSP) Inclusive Economy Commission and work-streams. Inequality is likely to be exacerbated if service sectors do not bounce back quickly.
11. The recovery phase of our work will focus on finding ways to respond to the changes in the city economy, supporting job creation and business start-up and growth, including the following.
- Engage OxLEP and business stakeholders on potential areas of innovation to help re-start the economy, support entrepreneurship and community wealth building.
  - Restart and promote meanwhile or longer-term use of our assets to help re-start the economy by providing physical space to support small businesses, entrepreneurship and community wealth building.
  - Build on learning from the community hub approach to develop community-led recovery plans, encourage community business models and local skills development projects as part of community wealth building.
  - Work with Experience Oxfordshire to develop a marketing plan to support both short-term local visitors and a medium-term strategy in relation to overseas visitors.
12. Our work on the longer-term renewal phase will include the following.
- Working closely with industry to explore opportunities for a wider apprenticeship programme focusing on new careers in growth sectors post COVID-19.
  - Work with the Universities and health sector on expanding innovation and growth, building on spin outs from research and the existing high concentration of expertise in this area.
  - Completing refocused Economic Development and City Centre Visions and Action Plans.
  - Ensuring that the City Council's Asset Management Plan helps inform how we deploy assets to balance income and inclusive and sustainable economy objectives
  - Developing responses to longer term changes in demand for use of buildings in the city and work with other landlords on development and strategy of future use.
  - Embedding community wealth building and ownership in future regeneration and development projects.

- Progressing major strategic development projects: Covered Market masterplan, Oxford Station, West End Innovation Quarter, Northern Gateway and South Oxford Science Village.
- Through our Economic Development Strategy, positioning Oxford to build on its core and emerging strengths for further clean energy / green economy initiatives, industries, life sciences and creative industries. A re-focused vision for the Visitor Economy will be needed.
- Work with Growth Board partners and government to secure investment in local infrastructure priorities (including digital infrastructure), support for innovation and, devolution of funding for skills and business support, based on the refreshed Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy, the Oxfordshire 2050 Plan and the Local Industrial Strategy Investment Plan.

### **3) Public confidence, public realm & reopening our city and local centres**

13. The lockdown period has had a severe effect on local businesses, with our high streets and retailers seeing some of the biggest reductions in trading of any sector. However, it has also brought benefits in terms of absence of congestion, many more people walking and cycling, and the cleanest city centre air in generations. Since the start of lockdown, the air pollution monitoring station on St Aldates has seen a 65% reduction in nitrogen oxide levels compared with pre-lockdown measurements. As we move to recovery, our aim is to ensure that where possible, we build on opportunities to embed positive changes to the way we move about and use the city to both protect our communities from COVID19 and support sustainable and active travel options. We will also work with residents to identify measures to deliver benefits to neighbourhoods, such as school streets and limiting road speeds.

14. Government has indicated that the next phase of relaxation of lockdown restrictions from 15<sup>th</sup> June will allow many “non-essential” retail businesses to start operating again under social distancing measures. This will mean Oxford will be open for business again, but, with current advice to avoid public transport, the need to maintain social distancing and continued concern about risk of infection, these are complex challenges that businesses will need to come to terms with to operate safely, in avoiding a return of congestion and pollution, supporting more sustainable and active travel, and in giving confidence to the public in returning to the city.

15. The government supported High Streets Task Force has published guidance for safe public use of urban centres and green spaces. Oxford City Council has been directly allocated £134,000 from the nationwide £50m ‘Reopening high streets safely fund’. This sits alongside an allocation of £100k of CIL that had already been designated to support this work. Central Government has also made available £2.9m to Oxfordshire County Council as a county-wide ‘Emergency active travel fund’ to support transport and movement measures to help economic restart.

16. The City Council is working with the County Council to develop and implement a phased plan for temporary measures to help kick start the city centre economy, protect public health and build confidence among residents, commuting workers, and tourists. The plan covers both the city centre and other key shopping areas across the city. Engagement with major employers across the city has demonstrated significant support

for measures to encourage pedestrian and cycle use to get into and around the city as part of the economic restart work.

17. Many of these measures will require joint agreement with the County Council as Transport Authority where it involves their powers and to access funding. However, the City Council will utilise the funding it has made available to kick-start the work and is working with ODS to implement a plan of baseline measures by 15<sup>th</sup> June.

18. The first phase of measures include the following.

- Increased cleaning of streets and public spaces and changes to management of waste.
- Development and promotion of information and a Government checklist for businesses to provide assurance to the public that they are adhering to public health and social distancing measures.
- Signage on city centre pavements and street furniture, across the city centre and other key local centres.
- One-way pedestrian-flow in city centre hotspots and other local centres where necessary and practical, supported by "stewarding".
- Remove street clutter (including temporary suspension of A Boards, abandoned bikes) to increase cleaning effectiveness and pedestrian-flow.
- Some guidance on queueing – emphasising the responsibility on businesses to manage this safely to support social distancing and pedestrian flow on the streets.
- Increased cycle parking at Park & Rides owned by Oxford City Council.
- Covered Market management plan, which will allow for safe reopening, including using stewards at entrances and one-way pedestrian flow.
- A communication plan to disseminate information to the public about the measures, what is open and to promote safe movement.

19. Measures we are exploring with the County Council and partners for implementation include the following.

- Temporarily reallocating road space (through traffic restrictions, and changes to bus routes, suspension of loading bays) to allow people to walk and cycle safely (including wider pavements and segregated cycleways).
- Improvement in cycling infrastructure, signage and additional cycle parking.
- Pedestrianisation of spaces for a social distancing-compliant mix of activities, including seating, but also potentially outside food premises and street trading whilst maintaining a balance with additional space for walking and cycling.
- Exploring a streamlined application process for temporary tables and chairs, by creating zones outside food premises where practical, to maintain capacity, whilst adhering to social distancing.
- Improvements to local neighbourhood streets, including traffic restrictions or additional 20mph speed limits and/or better enforcement of existing limits.

20. During the restart phase, the City Council has established a working group to ensure accessibility and inclusivity considerations a factored into the design development process. The first 'Inclusive Tactical Urbanism' focus group was convened on 27<sup>th</sup> May, which helped to firm up the Council's set of general principles regarding accessible transport and movement. The group includes Councillors Tom Hayes, Marie Tidball and Louise Upton and ten external participants with experience of living,

working and travelling around Oxford with disabilities and / or who represented disability charities, including visual impairment.

21. While some of the measures implemented are likely to fall away when social distancing guidelines change substantively, the recovery phase will involve building on the learning from the restart phase, and feedback from businesses and residents, to establish and embed permanent changes informed by learning from this exercise. The opportunity here is to maintain core benefits as restrictions are lifted, in terms of improved air quality, reduced carbon emissions, increased cycling, quieter streets, and ensuring safer movement around the city for all, including those with disability or mobility issues, more space for cyclists and pedestrians, and better use of public space.

22. In the longer term, renewal phase we will restart and relaunch the Connecting Oxford and Zero Emission Zone proposals being brought forward jointly with the County Council and seek to embed longer term infrastructure investment and changes to road use to improve the way we use public space in the city and achieve our commitment to be a Zero Carbon city by 2030.

#### **4) Hardship and vulnerability**

23. At the outset of the COVID-19 crisis, the council recognised the need to put in place arrangements to support vulnerable people, who needed support either because of a requirement to self-isolate or because lockdown restrictions meant removal of normal support systems would be unable to access basic supplies or would be at risk of isolation, loneliness, health or mental health issues. This included but was not limited to those that government identified as clinically extremely vulnerable on the government's so-called "shielded list" that we were required to support. There was also a recognition of the importance of working with the thousands of volunteers and the community groups offering support.

24. The City Council set up a single point of contact (SPOC) and 5 locality hubs in our community centres across the city on 26<sup>th</sup> March, redeploying more than 70 staff from OCC and ODS to support the work, and working in partnership with the Oxford Hub to coordinate volunteers. We have worked extensively with community and faith groups to ensure we were able to reach and respond to the needs of diverse groups across the city. In the last 8 weeks, thousands of people have been supported with food parcels, helped with shopping and other basic supplies, and social support. The SPOC has received 3,000 calls from vulnerable residents and has proactively called almost 6,000 people identified as vulnerable (including 2,500 vulnerable council tenants). Cross council hub teams have dealt with housing, benefits and referred on other concerns to County social services, health and other services where needed, such as safeguarding or referrals for adult social care interventions under the Care Act. Moreover, our work has allowed some of the most vulnerable people in the city to continue to live independently and safely in their own homes – a key health and social care priority.

25. In addition to those who are vulnerable because of health or age, COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on those affected by economic hardship and other vulnerabilities such as homelessness, those at of risk domestic violence and criminal exploitation. Like other areas of the country, Oxford has experienced an increase in Housing Benefit and Universal Credit claims and once the backlog of claims is

processed we will target the hardship grant allocation from the Government support to those who most need it. We have also worked with partners to promote information and awareness of Oxfordshire's Domestic Abuse services and encourage people to seek help, and we are now in the process of translating our approach into different languages.

26. In the immediate future we need to continue providing support to vulnerable people. Indications are that some aspects of "shielding" will continue and that government will look to councils to meet the needs of this group. Other elderly and vulnerable people may well lack confidence to leave their homes and it may be sometime before usual support groups and events are available again. At the same time, we expect more people to become vulnerable to hardship, food poverty or at risk of homelessness as the economic situation starts to bite.

27. Moving forward, we have a unique opportunity to reshape our role and work in close partnership with the community and voluntary sector in not only addressing the needs of vulnerable people, but in wider community participation and engagement. The hub approach has provided us with greater knowledge of the needs of some of the most vulnerable people within our communities. It has strengthened and deepened engagement with voluntary and community groups and demonstrated the benefits of working across council teams and with partner organisations across services and specialism in localities in terms of better outcomes for customers. As we move on from the immediate impact of COVID-19, we aim to embed this approach into our way of working for the longer term, and believe that with a focus on prevention and early engagement, there is potential for this to tackle inequalities, improve outcomes for residents, provide more effective solutions for individuals and families with complex needs and yield efficiencies by reducing demand on public services.

28. The restart activity involves undertaking a review of the SPOC and hub arrangements to determine what adjustments can be made to ensure a resilient model for the hubs that can be sustained as staff move back to other council operations and is capable of responding to a further peak or period of lockdown. We have already reduced the operation from 70+ staff to circa 45 staff based on changes in demand – we aim to streamline this even further. Moving forward, the recovery work will involve developing proposals for a new way of working with our communities in localities, bringing together a business intelligence unit coupled with implementing a new case management approach inter-connected with services across the council, other agencies and the Voluntary and Community Sector on a new model of locality working with a focus on swift intelligence-led operational delivery, underpinned with measurable actions that realise outcomes related to inclusion, equality and diversity.

#### Homelessness and Rough Sleeping

29. COVID-19 has seen a dramatic change in the national response to rough sleepers. In response to Government's requirement to "get everyone in", officers worked rapidly to source single room accommodation to re-house those sleeping rough or in communal settings. There are currently 112 people accommodated in a mixture of hotels, the YHA and some university accommodation. A Triage service has been set up at Floyd's Row to manage new referrals into hotels as there has continued to be a flow of rough sleepers to the streets during the pandemic. Throughout the crisis, we have worked closely with the County Council and Oxfordshire Districts, and provider partners

on identifying and allocating hotel-style accommodation, catering for high needs clients, identifying temporary and move on accommodation.

30. As a result of the COVID-19 response, we have managed to get many entrenched rough sleepers who have been resistant in the past, to engage with services. It is clear that there is a unique and real opportunity to build on this engagement to connect people with support and develop solutions that will prevent them from returning to the streets. However, as highlighted above we are also expecting numbers of people at risk of homelessness to increase as the economic impact of COVID-19 bites and the temporary moratorium on evictions ends. Without measures and funding to address this, we will continue to see an increase in families at risk of homelessness and in the number of people rough sleeping on our streets as we emerge from COVID-19.

31. The direction of government policy on an exit strategy from the current arrangements is not yet clear, but the rough sleeping taskforce led by Dame Louise Casey has identified 22 priority areas outside London to work with, of which Oxford is one. This may mean more support will become available. The current model of provision is neither financially sustainable, nor appropriate to meet the needs of clients in the longer term in terms of access to services and stability of accommodation. Our immediate focus is on ensuring provision of accommodation for rough sleepers for the next three to six month period, this includes discussions with the Universities, colleges and housing associations.

32. Current work is also focused on:

- developing a needs-based analysis for this newly accommodated population;
- working with Housing Associations and other accommodation providers to try and secure as much accommodation suitable for ex-rough sleepers to move into;
- identifying the support required to enable each newly housed rough sleeper to sustain their tenancy and not return to the street; and
- raising additional funding from as many sources as possible to help fund the considerable additional costs this will involve.

33. Before the COVID-19 period, we were working with the County, Districts, Health and Housing Associations on a county-wide housing led strategy and feasibility study for a housing-led approach to homelessness and rough sleeping in Oxfordshire. Our experience through COVID-19 has emphasised the benefits of a joint approach and we are now working to accelerate the work on a proposal for a new long term approach. The development of the local hubs has also presented the opportunity to be able to identify and intervene at an earlier stage where an individual or family is in danger of being made homeless. This builds on the learning from the Trailblazer project last year. We are in discussion with MHCLG and the taskforce to make the case for funding to support this work and lobbying for clarity on long term funding for homelessness to inform our long term planning.

## **5) Delivering services differently**

34. Prior to COVID-19, the council's "New ways of working" programme was looking at opportunities across the organisation to do things differently to reduce silo working, improve customer and outcome focus across and deliver efficiencies. In response to

COVID-19, we have had to adapt to and implement new ways of working almost overnight including:

- pausing or stopping activities (site visits, face to face interviews, accepting payment by cash or cheque, physical public engagement and consultation activities, printing documents);
- finding alternative ways of providing services (video conferencing for customer and client appointments, accepting photo evidence in building control inspections, online training for food hygiene, online internal training, virtual HMO compliance meetings, phone surveys and on-line application forms).

35. In other areas such as leisure, events and cultural services and community centres, usual activity ceased completely as a result of premises being closed and gathering of groups of people being prohibited. In response alternative offers such as the on-line activity hub, virtual may morning and VE day commemorations were created.

36. As we emerge from the immediate impact of COVID-19, we will taking forward a programme of review, challenge and change across key services over the next three months to test where alternative ways of doing things could be maintained to provide a better experience for customers and reduce costs to the council with the aim of helping us meet our financial challenges. We will also take forward fundamental policy and delivery reviews in areas that have been permanently and significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and where new operating/delivery models are needed (for example in leisure services, cultural services and community services). Alongside this we will need to continue Business Continuity Planning, anticipating that we may face further periods of lockdown restrictions or sickness requiring switching on/off of services and redeployment of resources.

## **6) City Council strategy and financial sustainability**

37. The financial impact of COVID-19 on the council is extremely significant. The estimated financial gap of £9-10 million in 2020/21 and £14 million over 3-4 years is based on assumptions about decrease in the major sources of income for the council from car parking fees, city centre property, from the councils companies, ODS and OCHL, reductions in business rates and council tax income and new service pressures. At this point in time, there is considerable uncertainty about future impacts and confidence in the accuracy of these assumptions is low. Direct financial support to local government has been limited to date and the Secretary of State has recently made statements suggesting strongly that there will be very limited further grant funding, but that the government will take stock on the 'additional costs' to local government 'much later in the year'.

39. In immediate response to the financial challenge we have paused the implementation of all new expenditure identified in the General Fund revenue budget in February 2020, restrained recruitment and spending of uncommitted funding and have focused effort on lobbying government alongside other councils for recognition and mitigation of the costs falling on local government.

40. Despite a high degree of uncertainty during the coming weeks and months we will need to review and reset the council's budget at sustainable levels and revisit the planned business plan to deliver the council's corporate strategy against the resources available and considering opportunities to "build back better".

41. Considerable work is needed in delivering this budget and business plan reset including:

- developing and agreeing the financial strategy to set a strategic approach to the budget reset;
- reviewing the capital programme with the aim of reducing revenue support for borrowing;
- reviewing our property and commercial portfolio and use of our assets;
- reviewing ODS and OCHL business plans;
- reviewing HRA to maximise resources for key priorities;
- identifying savings from redesign and re-modelling of services, building on opportunities outlined in this paper;
- reviewing and prioritising spending commitments for major planned initiatives such as homelessness support, selective licensing and climate change work.

42. Work is underway already to refresh the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (discussed in the report to Cabinet on this subject), and this will be presented in December, and will be the subject of public consultation.

43. Alongside this we will reset and drive forward a lobbying campaign to secure additional financial support and changes to legislation or statutory instruments to assist in managing pressures (for example capitalisation of increased revenue expenditure and income losses arising from COVID-19).

## **7) Workforce**

44. Prior to COVID-19 we had very few members of staff working remotely or from home with up to half of those based at St Aldates Chambers (SAC) working from home some of the time, largely one or two days a week. As a result of the lockdown we made a radical and rapid transition to almost all SAC and Town Hall staff working from home over a matter of days. Despite the technical challenges, on the whole our IT systems worked effectively to facilitate this change and staff have adapted well to using video-conferencing technology.

45. The crisis has demonstrated that remote working can bring potential benefits to both staff and the council. A recent staff survey has demonstrated that there are benefits to staff in working from home in reduced time and costs of travelling, better well-being and work/life balance. This is reinforced by reduced sickness levels across the organisation. For the council, remote working can bring financial benefits in terms of reduced requirement for city centre office space, reduced carbon footprint from staff travel and office energy use, and our ability to recruit staff with flexible and remote working options.

46. However, some staff are experiencing challenges in working from home from merging of work and family/leisure time, lack of social interaction, difficulties with technology and lack of suitable work space/equipment. There are also a relatively small number of functions which currently cannot be carried out remotely because they require access to equipment within the building.

47. In response to the ongoing need for most staff to work from home, we have invested effort in developing well-being and training programmes delivered virtually to support staff. We have set up a task force to contact each individual staff member, assess their needs and provide them with equipment from the office, training and support to help them work from home effectively and comfortably.

48. In view of the likely further lifting of restrictions and reopening of the city centre, we are developing an interim operating model for the reopening of SAC with adaptations and restrictions to ensure safe distancing. This will reduce SAC capacity and office based working will be limited to those whose role requires them to be based in the office or who have circumstances that mean they cannot work from home. This will be kept under review as restrictions change and we develop changes to services outlined in this paper.

49. Where it has not been possible for staff to do their jobs, because services have paused, and they have not been needed for re-deployment, we have sought to furlough people and claim for financial support under the government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. As restrictions are lifted, we will be reviewing carefully where staff need to be brought back from redeployment or furloughing to respond to business need.

50. Despite significant workforce disruption, staff have responded well, both to the requirement for working from home and stepping up to the challenges that COVID-19 brought across a range of services. The experience has unveiled particular talents, skills and potential of a range of people in our workforce, energy for change within the organisation, supporting greater innovation and appetite to try new things.

51. Looking to the longer term recovery and renewal phases, key workforce projects will include the following.

- Developing proposals and a business case for a shift to a flexible and substantially remote working model in the longer term and options for alternative use of our office space with potential benefits, savings and/or income generation as a result.
- Implementing a development programme for staff to develop and expand on problem solving skills and leadership potential highlighted through the response to COVID-19
- In view of the fact that the current pay deal runs, to April 2021, we will need to restart pay negotiations with the Unions in the context of a changed and uncertain financial outlook for the council.

## **8) Health, social care and wellbeing (with partners)**

52. COVID-19 has both exacerbated and highlighted the issue of health inequalities across the country. The health impacts of COVID-19 have disproportionately affected particular groups within society, most notably older people (75% of all COVID-19 deaths were of people over the age of 75) and those with ill-health and underlying health conditions. A recent report from Public Health England (PHE) has also revealed the virus poses a greater risk to those who are older, male and overweight and to those

with Asian, Caribbean and black ethnicities<sup>2</sup>. It also found that diagnoses and death rates were higher for those living in deprived areas with mortality rates from COVID-19 in the most deprived areas more than double the least deprived areas. As the COVID-19 situation evolves and as we emerge, tackling health inequalities will be an even more important issue for the City Council and partners to address.

53. The crisis has also resulted in increased awareness of the importance of public health, of staying active and healthy and of mental health and well-being in response to lockdown and isolation. This has also led to increased recognition of the importance of having access to open and public space for exercise and increased cycling and walking.

54. The focus of all partners during the first COVID-19 phase has been on response to the health and public health emergency. All services have been under extreme pressure, and the ability to respond to increased demand and further peaks will continue to require focus and resources in the immediate future. However, the close working between the City, Districts and County Councils, and health (including public health and mental health) partners in managing the emergency response and supporting vulnerable people has strengthened engagement with these partners and demonstrated the need and value of closer multi-agency working and a focus on prevention and public health.

55. As all organisations begin to plan for the next phase of the response and for longer term recovery, there are opportunities for new joint working and initiatives to deliver better health, social care and wellbeing outcomes. Thinking is at an early stage and further discussions with partners will be required to develop deliverable projects, but areas that we could seek to explore with partners include the following.

- Involvement of health partners and the County Council in development of a new locality-based model of working, extending social prescribing and maximising our volunteer base, building on the experience of the locality hubs.
- Potential to bring more health provision into our communities, building on the model at Rosehill Community Centre (linked to the above).
- Building on our successful health inequalities project with the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) to target interventions to particular groups through upskilling in council services.
- Working with the County's Public Health team to develop a targeted approach in our most deprived areas.
- Applying a healthy place-shaping approach to our economic restart and recovery strategy to encourage healthy and active lifestyles and build on success of the Barton Healthy New Town project.
- Seek greater engagement of health, mental health and public health partners in support for rough sleepers.

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<sup>2</sup> Public Health England: Disparities in the risk and outcomes from COVID-19, June 2020

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/889195/disparities\\_review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/889195/disparities_review.pdf)

## 9) Conclusion

56. There are many challenges for the city and the council in managing the on-going impacts of, and recovery from COVID-19, particularly in the context of ongoing disruption, changing circumstances and significant financial uncertainty. Yet there are also clear opportunities arising from the changes that have resulted from COVID-19 that can deliver long term benefits for our communities. The areas of work outlined here will need to continue to evolve, and we will need to be able to respond as the situation changes whilst planning for longer term recovery.

57. There is a significant amount of work to do across the council to balance the need to maintain resilience and ability to respond to circumstances and opportunities as they emerge whilst reviewing key areas of policy and service delivery to maximise benefits to the council, and our communities of working differently in a new financial context. That will require a coordinated organisational response across our services, working closely with communities, voluntary and community sector organisations, local business and our partners over the coming weeks and months.

### Next steps

58. Over the transition period in the next three months we will need to take the following actions.

59. For Cabinet members to further develop the areas of work outlined here to firm up proposals to be brought back to future meetings of Cabinet to consider and to inform a re-set of the council's business plan and budget.

60. Continue to further develop and pursue our asks and lobbying campaigns as set out below.

- Significant investment in local low carbon initiatives to promote a green economy post COVID-19 in the July Budget statement.
- Further funding and policy support to aid recovery and address structural changes in the economy, including:
  - financial support for business, and investment in skills, training and employment that can be targeted to local needs;
  - investment in initiatives to support recovery of town centres and implement improvements to safe, healthy and green travel options (including walking, cycling and public transport);
  - investment in the Oxfordshire economy as part of the Oxford to Cambridge Arc to unlock Oxfordshire's potential as part of the national economic recovery and renewal (with Growth Board partners).
- Recognition of the economic, social and health inequalities highlighted by COVID-19 and further support for those experiencing economic hardship and areas of deprivation in Oxford through targeted interventions of support that focus on outcomes.
- Full recompense for the costs of implementing the COVID-19 emergency response to accommodate rough sleepers, support for implementing an exit strategy that

ensures rough sleepers do not return to the streets and clarity over long term homeless funding to support implementation of a county wide strategy to end rough sleeping.

- Recognition of the role that councils have played in tackling the health emergency and policy direction and funding to support locality-based preventative health approaches.
- Full mitigation of the financial impact of COVID-19 on the council and the costs incurred in our emergency response to the crisis, including additional financial support and changes to legislation or statutory instruments to assist in managing pressures (for example capitalisation of increased revenue expenditure and income losses arising from COVID-19).

## **10)Legal Issues**

61. There are no legal issues arising directly from this report. Legal implications and risks relating to the proposals emerging from the work outlined here will be fully considered as part of that work and detailed in future reports to Cabinet.

## **11)Financial Issues**

62. The financial issues arising from COVID-19 are summarised in this paper and subject to a separate item under the agenda.

63. The work outlined in this paper will be resourced from existing budgets and resulting proposals will need to be considered in further reports to Cabinet and as part of a budget reset process.

## **12)Level of Risk**

64. There is still significant financial uncertainty around the both the ongoing requirements on councils and the financial implications to the council resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. This is likely to be the case for some months. Risks will be assessed as part of the development of proposals and detailed in future reports to Cabinet.

## **13)Equalities Impact**

65. As highlighted in this report, there are significant equalities impacts resulting from COVID-19 that will need to be understood and reflected in the council's approach to recovery going forward. The practice emerging from the locality hubs and the development of proposals for a new model of locality based working includes a specific focus on inclusion, equality and diversity, coupled with a commitment to improve the use of data and insights across all council services. This approach will be reflected in a refreshed 'equality plan' and will also be cognisant of the findings of the recent Public Health England report from a disproportionate impact perspective.

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<b>Background Papers:</b>
None

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