

HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Report

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| Committee | Culture and Communities Select Committee |
| Date: | 18 March 2021 |
| Title: | Summary of Covid Impacts and Recovery position |
| Report From: | Director of Culture, Communities and Business Services |

Contact name: Felicity Roe

Tel: 01962 847876

Email: felicity.roe@hants.gov.uk

Purpose of this report

1. To provide a summary of the impacts of Covid-19 on services over the past year during the course of the pandemic, and the current position in terms of re-opening and recovery.

Recommendations

2. Note the contents of this report which provides a summary of the exceptional events and responses by services to the Covid-19 crisis, and the ongoing challenges and opportunities.

Executive Summary

3. This report summarises the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on our services. It sets out how the services have responded throughout the pandemic over the last year, and the plan for re-opening and resuming services in line with the current national roadmap out of lockdown.
4. Over the last year, services have moved in and out of response and recovery phases, with limitations to different aspects of service provision at every stage. This crisis has been unusual due to the significant period it has extended over and this has put considerable pressure on services and staff.
5. The priority for services has been to remain open where possible whilst ensuring safety of our staff and service users through compliance with the government guidelines. The report recognises that services have reacted quickly to respond to the changing position of the pandemic, and that the resilience, adaptability and commitment from staff has been extraordinary. Even where sites have had to close, services have continued to operate throughout the lockdown periods and have provided invaluable support to the Covid response across the County Council.

6. This report sets out the key impacts of the pandemic for services in the last year, including:
 - The service provision impact, involving closures of sites and activities, and withdrawal of specific services;
 - A significant financial impact, particularly in relation to income generation;
 - The major challenges encountered, including workforce impacts and changes to the way that services are delivered to ensure they are Covid compliant, as well as rising demand in some areas;
 - The positives and developing opportunities we have seen, including the incredible efforts by staff, the acceleration of digital use, innovation to drive new offers, and an increased appreciation by the public of our services, in particular outdoor spaces.
7. Finally, the report sets out how the services are working to re-open and recover in line with the government's current roadmap out of lockdown with all services expected to fully resume by late June 2021.

Contextual information

8. Since the pandemic crisis was declared in March 2020, there have been 3 formal national lockdowns and a range of different restrictions enforced. The first national lockdown started in March 2020 and saw significant closures across our services, most of which were lifted by early July 2020. A second national lockdown then followed in November, after which local tiers were introduced.
9. The third national lockdown came into effect from 5 January 2021, and the government have produced a roadmap setting out how the restrictions are expected to ease over the coming months. From 21 June at the earliest, the government aims to remove all limits on social contact. CCBS services are putting plans in motion to re-open and resume activities that have been closed, as well as consider the medium-longer term recovery journey.

Impact on service provision of the national lockdowns

10. When the pandemic crisis was declared in March 2020 and we entered our first national lockdown, there were immediate and significant impacts across our services. A number of services had to close including libraries, country park car parks and related facilities, farm attractions (Manor Farm and Staunton), Titchfield Haven, Hillier Gardens, Hampshire Record Office, and all Hampshire Outdoor Centres. Marriage and civil partnership ceremonies were cancelled – with the exception of death bed marriages - and face-to-face birth registrations and Notice of marriage appointments were stopped. Inquests for the Coroners service were put on hold. Trading Standards inspections largely ceased and Hampshire Scientific Service

had to put on hold work programmes involving site visits to schools and care homes, and adapted working practices. The asbestos re-inspection programme (condition checking of known asbestos) was put on hold. All office based staff were asked to work from home where possible.

11. Following this immediate response period, guidance began to be made available from central government to support industries in resuming their services. Our services worked hard to understand government guidance and put in place measures to enable services to re-open in a 'Covid-safe' way as soon as possible: ensuring the safety of our staff and customers is a priority. Before re-opening services, a risk assessment was required for each site to ensure that suitable control measures were in place, including reduced capacity at sites, social distancing, additional cleaning, hygiene procedures, all supported by adequate signage and communications.
12. Aspects of services began to re-open from May 2020 including the County Park car parks and toilets, Calshot car park and slipways, and the Home Library Service. Sir Harold Hillier Gardens opened for pre-booked visits in early June. As national restrictions were further lifted in early July, additional services were able to re-open including libraries, farm attractions, Titchfield Haven, and Hampshire Record Office, and small wedding ceremonies were permitted to proceed.
13. In parallel with the efforts to re-open sites, services also reacted quickly to put in place alternative channels for customers to ensure continued access to critical services. At the point of the first lockdown the Library service immediately invested in more digital books and pivoted the physical offer to digital platforms, using social media and online forms to provide a virtual library experience. The Registration service made substantial revisions in process in order to manage death registrations by phone removing the need for face-to-face appointments. Trading Standards set up a system for virtual inspections.
14. May to October marked a period of relative recovery for the services with a significant part of the service provision resumed and services adapted to the changed circumstances. The Registration service caught up on the backlog of birth registrations whilst handling numerous requests for changes to ceremonies. Demand for asbestos services returned with routine services delivered with Covid secure procedures in place. The commercial sites focused on boosting income as visitors returned, including maximising camping uptake and offering limited activities for small groups, such as Marine Explorers at Calshot and guided walks at Lepe. The Library service developed and launched a Ready Reads collection service – where library staff select books according to a reader's preferences which customers can then collect from their local branch – which proved hugely successful.
15. Services also played a role in supporting efforts to manage the impacts of the pandemic. Trading standards developed new processes around market surveillance of PPE equipment and trading during lockdown. Hampshire Scientific Service adapted the method used for measuring alcohol in blood to test hand sanitisers and have been instrumental in

identifying fake products (some with no alcohol in whatsoever), enabling them to be removed from the market place or being distributed to frontline workers. The Senior Coroner was responsible for chairing the Excess Death Advisory Group which met regularly, and the service has supported the preparation for temporary additional mortuary provision in preparation for an anticipated increase in body storage.

16. The second national lockdown forced a number of sites to close again, and ceremonies to stop with the exception of emergency ceremonies including death bed marriage. Libraries closed for browsing but remained open for Ready Reads collection, essential PC use and limited face to face learning. Car parks, toilets and take-away catering remained open at Calshot and the Country parks, although the farm attractions and Titchfield Haven were closed.
17. As the restrictions eased in December, most sites were able to re-open, some Christmas activities and outdoor trails were able to proceed, and small ceremonies were able to resume. However, this relief was brief as Hampshire was moved into Tier 4 from 26 December and the third national lockdown came into effect from 5 January 2021. Government guidance on what could or should stay open or close has been less prescriptive and in some cases contradictory. The country parks, and the Hillier Gardens are currently open, with ANPR running and takeaway food. The outdoor activity centres remain closed but the parking at Calshot spit is open. Registration services have had to prioritise death registrations due to the numbers involved (January saw a 38% rise in death registrations compared to the same period last year) and birth registration appointments were paused, resuming from the beginning of March. Weddings remain significantly impacted and Registration has done their utmost to reassure disappointed couples and re-schedule ceremonies. The libraries service is closed to browsing but continues to offer a 'click and collect' service, a huge digital book resource and access to the 'Go-Online' terminals through a referral system with Adult Services and Job Centre Plus. Hampshire Scientific Service are open and functioning effectively. Trading Standards Weights and measures inspections continue, and Buy with Confidence audits are being carried out virtually.

Financial Impacts

18. As a result of the pandemic and service closures, **income has been significantly impacted**. In terms of income there is projected to be in the region of £2m losses for 20/21 within each of Registration, Outdoors Centres service and Countryside. Smaller, but significant income losses are also being felt in Libraries service (£900k), Hillier Gardens (£500k), Scientific Service (£300k), Asbestos (£270k), Trading Standards (£100k) and Archives (£85k). Additional costs directly due to Covid have also been reported, particularly in relation to purchasing of protective and hygiene equipment, and accommodating new working practices. To some extent these income losses and additional costs have been offset by a reduction in other costs, including savings made through furloughing staff, but there

is a significant gap across the department. It is uncertain to what extent ongoing impacts will be felt as we move into the new financial year and services begin to re-open and recover.

19. Hiller Gardens applied to the National Lottery Cultural Recovery Fund and were awarded a grant of up to £920k that should cover most of its loss of income due to Covid, and support the recovery to drive back visitors.
20. Hampshire County Council's strategy in dealing with the financial impact of Covid-19 was set out in the Medium Term Financial Strategy update report to Cabinet and the County Council in July 2020. The strategy sees Covid-19 as a one-off event (albeit a significant one) and has identified funding sources at a corporate level (including Government grant provided for this purpose) to deal with the identified net impact for the County Council as a whole. At a departmental level the budget position has been analysed to separate out the impact of Covid-19 from business as usual activities. The financial impact of Covid-19 will be met from the corporate provision so there will be no impact on the financial position of individual departments.

Key Challenges

21. It has been critical that services were compliant to government guidance issued, and this has changed multiple times over the course of the year. The pandemic has required services to **adapt quickly and adopt new ways of working** over the last year. The planning for the recovery of services has involved extensive work on site specific risk assessments within the overarching County Council approach to Covid and other risk more generally. This has involved introducing new protocols at frontline sites to ensure Covid measures are in place and adhered to, as well as changes to the way that staff were managed allowing for small work bubbles to form. New staff rotas had to be developed and significant staff communications were required. As an example of adaptive change, soon after the first lockdown commenced, the scientists at HSS adapted their working patterns over 7 days – combining early starts and late finishes to ensure the work could continue to be delivered while remaining Covid compliant within their office and laboratory space.
22. Services usually rely on many thousand hours from volunteers. Whilst volunteers have continued to play a critical role in areas, for example in the delivery of the Home Library Service, overall **volunteer hours have been significantly reduced**, largely due to Covid measures, reduced opening hours and less appetite from volunteers. This has had impact across many services, but in particular in Countryside where the invaluable volunteer hours that contribute to the winter work programme have been sorely missed. As services look to move into recovery, the return of volunteers is very important.
23. **Higher demand on some services** has also caused issues. Since the beginning of the Covid 19 pandemic in March 2020 there has been an increase in the use of our County Parks and Rights of Way. Visits to the

Country Parks have risen by between 120% – 160% over the past 6 months when compared to last year despite reduced catering facilities and no events or activities for much of that period. Whilst this increase in visitors to enjoy our sites is positive, this has led to considerable pressure on sites, as well as some misuse of our countryside, which has put additional pressure on staff (for example dealing with increased litter and clearing of late night parties). Over the recent colder months, the numbers of visitors have been manageable and mostly behaving sensibly. Spot check visits by the Health and Safety Executive early in the new year have confirmed this.

24. The Coroners service has continued to function throughout the pandemic with ever increasing workloads and demands associated with rising death rates. The service fielded a huge number of calls at the beginning of the pandemic from medical professionals who were unclear on the referral requirements for deaths related to Covid. Registration service were also impacted by high death rates with staff dealing exclusively with back to back telephone death registrations. January 2021 saw death registrations levels up 38% compared to the same period in the previous year. Early on in the pandemic the service trained a significant number of additional staff from the libraries and trading standards services to support the worst-case peak in the projections. As another example of services working flexibly to support each other Archives and Records took on the function of preparing and issuing death certificates on behalf of Registration. Over a three-month period, working from Hampshire Record Office, a team of four staff issued nearly 13,000 death certificates.
25. There has also been considerable pressure on the ceremonies coordination team due to the multiple changes in restrictions, with thousands of calls over the pandemic period. Many customers have cancelled and re-booked ceremonies (for some rebooking 4 or 5 times) and the team have worked hard to manage this and support customers.
26. The pressure of the extraordinary year has undoubtedly led to concerns over **staff wellbeing**. Anxiety due to the national crisis, absences related to Covid, new ways of working, increased pressure, and uncertainty throughout the year have all contributed to a challenging time for staff. Staff have shown incredible resilience and many resources to support wellbeing have been developed corporately, but it remains a key priority for us to ensure staff are supported. The department has also commissioned interventions within the Coroners Service to support staff dealing directly with the death management process and its associated personal impacts. This has been much appreciated by the team, securing business continuity during a period of high stress and anxiety.

Key Successes and Opportunities

27. **The extraordinary efforts from all staff** have been humbling throughout this long crisis. Staff have worked incredibly hard to keep services running and to accommodate the changes in a flexible and innovative

way, putting the needs of our service users as a priority. We have seen teams pull together to overcome the multitude of challenges, demonstrating commitment and compassion. Just one examples of this is the efforts our ceremonies team have put in to support their customers through a very challenging time. Following the announcement of the second lockdown in November late on a Saturday night, on the Sunday the team called around all those with ceremonies booked in the days immediately after the Thursday start to lockdown, offering to reschedule them to earlier in the week, prompting compliments from customers for the service provided. A ceremony was even attended with one hour's notice so that a couple could get married before lockdown 3 came into effect. During this period, the Library service have also been running and implementing Hampshire's largest ever public consultation on Library Service Transformation Strategy to 2021. Staff consultation commenced in September with those leaving through voluntary redundancy exiting by 31st December.

28. The **increasing use of digital** has been very important throughout the pandemic, as a critical route to keep connected with the public. This has created new opportunities for the future. Across all services, we have seen significant increase in web visits and social media interactions, and we have been able to keep our newsletter subscribers updated. Our digital channels have been vital to keep customers informed about what they might expect at our sites and to keep people up to date with the latest information. Services have also been able to use digital channels to carry out tasks previously conducted face-to-face, including virtual inspections and Buy With Confidence audits by Trading Standards, virtual inquests for Coroners services where possible, and virtual citizenship ceremonies within Registration.
29. Within libraries, the digital offer for the service has expanded significantly throughout the pandemic. The service has invested in more digital books and pivoted the physical offer to digital to provide a virtual library experience. This continues to include a weekly schedule of activities such as baby RhymeTime and Storytime sessions, children's activities, digital reading groups and wellbeing videos. Social media audiences have grown exponentially in the last year and a new audience is enjoying online accessibility to library services. Library videos have been viewed over half a million times. eBooks and eAudiobooks have been heavily promoted, providing alternative formats for even the most traditional readers and usage has nearly doubled compared to the same period in the previous year. The service moved delivery of the national annual children's Summer Reading Challenge to a digital platform and this proved successful with 7,320 children taking part (the highest in the South East Region). The service also ran a Hampshire Winter Reading Challenge for the first time, following a similar online platform, attracting 2,258 challengers during January and February 2021. Staff skills and new teams have been rapidly developed to accommodate the digital demand.
30. We have seen excellent innovation and a number of **new services have been designed and launched to support and protect the public**

throughout the lockdowns. The new library Ready Reads service has proved hugely successful - 13,000 customers have requested Ready Reads and many have discovered new genres and authors along the way. Over 6,000 Ready Reads customers remain active, collecting book bundles every 3-4 weeks. The Home Library Service team have also developed a Reading Friends service, launched through the Reading Agency and supported by government funding. This involves a telephone-based service that links volunteers to people who may be vulnerable, isolated or at risk of loneliness. The service aims to create social connections and get people talking. Face to face 'Discovery time' sessions for new parents have also been launched at some libraries, targeted at new parents and focussing on early years literacy and development, and parental attachment. The library service have also been supporting the development of a domestic abuse project with Hampshire police. The commissioned domestic abuse charity has recently begun pilot projects at Chandlers Ford Library and Gosport Discovery Centre. The initial stages of the project will enable staff to gain a basic level of training and support anyone comes into branch and discloses to signpost effectively. There has been an investment in new stock both in branch and through digital offer. Digital books all went out on loan quickly so more have been purchased.

31. Within Trading Standards, the Animal Health teams made welfare 'check ins' with all dairy farmers in the first lockdown. These farmers had seen the market for their produce disappear overnight due to closures of pubs; hotels and restaurants in periods of lockdown. We continue to maintain our networks with Farmers to monitor Animal Welfare, and support their Mental Wellness.
32. With school residential visits unable to happen, Calshot launched a new offer targeted at family bubbles to make use of the accommodation space available and providing the opportunity for families to enjoy these activities. The Calshot family adventure holidays will continue to be promoted and open up a new commercial offer which could be expanded beyond the pandemic.
33. Our communication and **commitment to put customers first** has led to commercial benefit in some areas. We have built relationships with new schools who have been keen to use our outdoor centres, where they have been let down by the private sector.
34. Enabling **access to our outdoor spaces has been vital for public wellbeing**, particularly during lockdowns, and the appetite to use these spaces has been huge. Research commissioned through the countryside service in May 2020 showed that 99% of people recognised that outdoor spaces have a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing, and 72% believed that our country parks had a large impact in improving their families quality of life. This increased appreciation for the countryside and outdoor spaces, along with evidence that new users have been using our sites and spaces, presents opportunities for the future. We

can also anticipate a rise in 'staycations' with more people seeking to spend their holidays and free time within Hampshire.

The Roadmap out of lockdown

35. All areas are gearing up to re-open again in line with the government roadmap. From 29 March ceremonies are able to proceed with the legal limit of 6. From Step 2 of the timeline (12 April) a number of services can re-open including Libraries, farm attractions, Titchfield Haven, Hampshire Records Office, Calshot Hangar and the Outdoor Centre campsites. Outdoor catering can resume and retail areas can re-open. Ceremonies will be allowed with up to 15 people. At step 3 (17 May) indoor attractions (e.g. the Chapel), indoor catering, events, and indoor play areas will be able to resume, and ceremonies will be expanded to 30 people. At step 4 (21 June) it is hoped that all services will have resumed and restrictions lifted.
36. As this timeline progresses we hope to get clarity on the extent of covid-safe measures will need to remain in place, and we will continue to align to government guidance.
37. The recreational services are preparing to maximise income generation over the spring/summer and beyond, capitalising on the increased staycations and appetite to enjoy the outdoors. The outdoor activity centres are looking forward to bringing school groups back, both for day visits initially and for residential at the appropriate stage. The Library service are seeking to have phased reintroduction of groups and activities, with face to face learning and room hire resuming. Unsurprisingly as this roadmap was published, many people are seeking to rearrange their wedding ceremonies, with significant demand beyond June 21 when it is hoped all restrictions on weddings will be lifted.
38. Coroners service caseload remains exceptionally high and they will be seeking to address the backlog in relation to inquests, but this may take up to a year to return to normal levels.
39. There remains uncertainty around how the pandemic may evolve, the timelines linked to the roadmap out of lockdown, and how our customer behaviours may have change beyond the pandemic. Services will continue to adapt as the situation evolves. The impacts of the pandemic will be lasting and whilst resuming services remains a priority, capitalising on the opportunities that have arisen and moving to a 'new normal' is also vital.

CORPORATE OR LEGAL INFORMATION:

Links to the Strategic Plan

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| Hampshire maintains strong and sustainable economic growth and prosperity: | yes |
| People in Hampshire live safe, healthy, and independent lives: | yes |
| People in Hampshire enjoy a rich and diverse environment: | yes |
| People in Hampshire enjoy being part of strong, inclusive communities: | yes |

Other Significant Links

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| Links to previous Member decisions: | |
| <u>Title</u> | <u>Date</u> |
| Direct links to specific legislation or Government Directives | |
| <u>Title</u> | <u>Date</u> |

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| Section 100 D - Local Government Act 1972 - background documents | |
| <p>The following documents discuss facts or matters on which this report, or an important part of it, is based and have been relied upon to a material extent in the preparation of this report. (NB: the list excludes published works and any documents which disclose exempt or confidential information as defined in the Act.)</p> | |
| <u>Document</u> | <u>Location</u> |
| None | |

EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT:

1. Equality Duty

The County Council has a duty under Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 ('the Act') to have due regard in the exercise of its functions to the need to:

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by or under the Act with regard to the protected characteristics as set out in section 4 of the Act (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation).
- Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic within section 149(7) of the Act (age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation) and those who do not share it.
- Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic within section 149(7) of the Act (see above) and persons who do not share it.

Due regard in this context involves having due regard to:

- The need to remove or minimize disadvantages suffered by persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic.
- Take steps to meet the needs of persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of persons who do not share it.
- Encourage persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low

2. Equalities Impact Assessment:

The proposed Summary of Covid Impacts and Recovery position should not raise any equality or diversity issues.