

**CABINET
14 JULY 2020**

COVID 19 UPDATE REPORT AND NEXT STEPS

**Responsible Cabinet Member -
Councillor Heather Scott, Leader and all Cabinet Members**

Responsible Director - Chief Officers Executive

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To report to Cabinet and inform all Councillors of the response of the Council to the COVID19 Pandemic, and to note decisions taken by officers, in consultation with Cabinet during the pandemic.

Summary

2. The report sets out the comprehensive response to the COVID19 pandemic in Darlington, highlighting key new roles that have been fulfilled, together with information about how key services have operated differently during such challenging times.

Recommendation

3. Cabinet are recommended to:
 - (a) Note the actions and decisions taken to date in respect of the Council's response to the pandemic.
 - (b) Formally thank all staff, partners and volunteers for their significant contributions during the pandemic so far.
 - (c) Acknowledge the tragic loss of life in the Borough and across the Country.
 - (d) Review further reports on the response to the pandemic and recovery plans.
 - (e) Retain free car parking in the town centre until the end of September 2020 at an anticipated cost of £342,000 and receive a further report at the September Cabinet meeting.

Reasons

4. The recommendations are supported
 - (a) To enable Cabinet to formally receive an update and to pass on thanks to key players in the response and acknowledge the loss of life in the Borough.
 - (b) To support the town centre economy by encouraging more visitors to the town.

Chief Officers Executive

Background Papers

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report

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TAB

S17 Crime and Disorder	There are no specific crime and disorder implications in this report.
Health and Well Being	Issues relating to the Covid19 pandemic are addressed in the report with the steps taken to protect the health and wellbeing.
Carbon Impact and Climate Change	Covid19 and the reduction in travel and energy usage had had an impact.
Diversity	The report does not contain any proposals that impact on diversity issues.
Wards Affected	All wards are affected
Groups Affected	No specific groups are particularly affected.
Budget and Policy Framework	This decision does not represent a change to the budget and policy framework.
Key Decision	The report does not require a key decision.
Urgent Decision	The report does not require an urgent decision.
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	This report supports One Darlington: Perfectly Placed
Efficiency	The report contains updated information
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report has no direct impact on Looked After Children or Care Leavers

MAIN REPORT

Background and Context

5. The COVID19 pandemic has been described as the single largest challenge faced by the Country since the second world war; whether correct or not, the scale of the challenge has been unprecedented in the lives of the majority of the population. Pandemics have been a feature of modern times, but nothing like this on a devastating worldwide scale.
6. For Darlington, like all other Boroughs in the Country, this has been a very challenging time and although there are many measures of the impact on

society and the economy, the single most stark measure is the loss of life. In Darlington at the time of writing this report, 84 lives have been lost to the virus and 410 have been infected (as at 25 June).

7. As a Cabinet and Council, we wish to recognise the loss of life and the hardship caused by the pandemic and will do so in an appropriate manner, now and in the future.
8. The figures above are a tragedy however, if it were not for the co-ordinated response of the Government, the public, the NHS, care workers, local Councils and volunteers, the impact would have been much greater. This report sets out the Council's contribution to minimising the impact of the pandemic.
9. In setting the context and background for this report, set out below are the key dates over the last four months.

Key Dates

18 March 2020

The Government announced that all schools were to close until further notice. Further education colleges and universities closed too and summer GCSE and A-level examinations were cancelled.

20 March 2020

Pubs and restaurants were ordered to shut, and the public urged to practice social distancing wherever possible on a voluntary basis.

23 March 2020

A UK-wide lockdown was announced, backed by police powers to enforce social distancing and closure regulations.

25 March 2020

Emergency legislation was introduced and passed in just four days, with the Coronavirus Act 2020 receiving Royal Assent on 25 March 2020. The legislation gives further powers to Government to slow the spread of the virus; reduce the resourcing and administrative burden on public bodies; and limit the impact of potential staffing shortages on the delivery of public services.

2 April 2020

The government announced a significant expansion in the coronavirus testing programme with a target of 100,000 tests per day by the end of that month.

6 April 2020

In addition, all forthcoming local elections and other polls including the police and crime commissioner elections were postponed to 2021.

16 April 2020

The Government extended the lockdown for a further three weeks and set out five tests which would need to be satisfied before the lockdown restrictions were eased.

10 May 2020

The Prime Minister made a statement on the roadmap to recovery and the gradual relaxation of restrictions as and when it deems it is safe to do so.

11 May 2020

The Government published 'Our plan to rebuild: the UK Government's COVID-19 recovery strategy'. This set out a five-point scale to indicate the level of threat posed by COVID-19 to society and a phased approach to recovery, with incremental steps to relax control and public protection measures.

13 May 2020

The Government amended its existing regulations under the Coronavirus Act to enable the phased relaxation of lockdown measures including allowing people to visit HWRCs the re-opening of garden centres and some outdoor sports facilities.

24 May 2020

The Government announced the establishment of a £50 million Reopening High Streets Safely Fund, to adapt and re-shape high street shopping areas and business districts to make them safe and welcoming spaces, in line with social distancing guidelines.

25 May 2020

The Prime Minister confirmed the government's intention that schools should plan to re-open to some pupils from 1 June 2020 and that non-essential retail should begin to plan to re-open from 15 June 2020.

26 May 2020

Government announces that all non-essential shops can re-open on 15 June 2020

23 June 2020

Government announcing the relaxation of the two-metre rule and the ability of a variety of leisure, cultural and hospitality businesses to re-open on 4 July 2020, as long as they are COVID safe. Weddings can take place with some restrictions. The announcement includes the Government's intention to return all young people to full time education in September. Some businesses such as gyms are excluded from the re-opening announcement and are subject to further review.

10. The following sections of the report set out how the Council, partners and volunteers have responded to the above.

Response to COVID19

Strategic Management

11. The Council in line with the Local Resilience Forum (LRF) for County Durham and Darlington invoked its emergency plan and worked strategically with parties on the LRF to co-ordinate a joint response. Partners on the LRF are as follows :-

- (a) Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government
- (b) Durham University
- (c) Durham County Council
- (d) Darlington Borough Council
- (e) NHS (NHSE&I, NHS County Durham and Darlington Foundation Trust and CCGs)
- (f) Durham Constabulary
- (g) Durham and Darlington Health Trust
- (h) Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Services
- (i) Directors of Public Health
- (j) Public Health England
- (k) North East Ambulance Service
- (l) British Transport Police
- (m) Coastguard
- (n) British Red Cross
- (o) React- previously Team Rubicon
- (p) Northern Powergrid
- (q) Northumbrian Water
- (r) Northern Gas Networks
- (s) DHSC
- (t) MoD/JRLO
- (u) Environment Agency

12. At a Council officer level, the Chief Officers Executive (COE) plus the Director of Public Health, Assistant Director Community Services, Head of Strategy, Performance and Communications, Assistant Director Economic Growth and the Assistant Director Law and Governance established a Strategic Steering Group to co-ordinate and manage the Council's response. The group met daily in the initial stages, reducing the meeting frequency over time, as appropriate.

13. The Steering Group met formally twice a week with Cabinet to discuss and agree actions required, and also regular consultations took place with Portfolio Holders to ensure their input and leadership. A specific delegated decision record form was produced and used for all significant COVID delegated decisions taken.

14. Given the need for fast and significant responses required, extensive use was made of the emergency powers delegated to the Managing Director to respond to these type of emergency incidents.

15. Weekly meetings were also initiated with Group Leaders to keep them informed and to answer their questions. Regular updates on significant issues were provided for all Members.

16. A group led by the Assistant Director of Community Services included a cross-section of officers from across the Council, was set up to establish and manage the Darlington Community Support Hub, to support the shielded and vulnerable members of our community.
17. Senior Officers regularly communicated at a regional and national to coordinate responses and to share best practice and liaised with Government officials.
18. In the following sections, details are discussed in relation to services provisions, this section discusses the overall approach to employee issues.

Council Employees

19. Firstly, it is essential that the hard work, dedication and flexibility of employees in responding to the challenge is acknowledged. The speed and skill with which employees and teams have responded is exemplary, often against a background of personal challenges in their own lives.
20. The initial approach taken was :-
 - (a) All staff to work from home where possible.
 - (b) All key staff who were required to attend work to provide essential services, be provided with safe working environments including, where appropriate, the provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).
 - (c) Where services were stood down, and no longer provided, employees were available for re-deployment to essential services, in particular, the Darlington Community Support Hub.
 - (d) For those services that were not directly publicly funded, e.g. leisure and cultural services, with agreement of staff and Unions, a number of staff were furloughed. The staff were paid in line with their contracts and were not financially worse off as a result.
21. As services have been brought back to previous levels, and/or re-introduced, the same basic principles have been adopted where employees have continued to work from home; where possible and/or work flexibly, For example, throughout the pandemic, Social Workers have continued to carry out their roles but used their homes as a base, therefore limiting the need to attend the office.
22. At this point, it is essential we acknowledge the work of our Shared IT Service, Xentrall Shared Services, together with the Council's own Systems Team they managed so quickly and efficiently to enable an additional 200 members of staff to work from home by providing hardware, and supporting its implementation at homes across the region, and implementing the use of Microsoft TEAMS, the video conferencing application that has enabled "meeting" across the Council and with partners to take place.
23. It is likely that home working, where possible, will continue as long as the COVID risk exists, but this will happen in an environment where providing services effectively is the essential criteria. The learning for the Council and others across the Country about flexible working has been significant, and this will no doubt

influence the shape of plans for service and the Councils estate design in the future.

Finance

24. A detailed report on the financial implications in the short to medium term is elsewhere on the agenda for Members consideration. The decisions required to meet the demands of the pandemic have had a considerable impact on the Councils financial position as discussed in the report on the agenda.

Darlington Community Support Hub

25. Much of the energy in the early stages of the response was focussed on establishing the HUB to respond to local need and to meet government guidance to support the shielded community. Information flows and the ability to gain much needed food supplies were initially very challenging, but our team responded well and hit all Government deadlines and provided much needed support to the community of Darlington. This support provided by many seconded Council staff was significantly supplemented by groups of volunteers and the voluntary sector across the Borough. A detailed report has been produced on the HUB and this is attached at **Appendix 1**. Statistical highlight included in the report are :-

- (a) Number of Calls to the HUB
- (b) Number of Food parcels
- (c) Number of Volunteers

Public Health Response

26. The Director of Public Health and her team have been at the centre of planning the Council's response to the pandemic, and our thanks also goes to the Director for postponing her planned retirement to lead the response.
27. Attached at **Appendix 2** is a detailed report from the Director of Public Health explaining the key elements of the Public Health response, including the work on PPE provision, testing provision, NHS Track and Trace system and the Local Outbreak Control Plan.

Provision of Adult Social Care

28. The pandemic whilst affecting all parts of the community has had a disproportionate impact on the elderly and those with underlying health conditions (the Shielded group). Therefore, the Council and partners have had a key role to play in supporting these groups, this section concentrates on the provision of support to the elderly.
29. During the pandemic, Council officers have worked closely with the NHS and Care providers in the Borough. Our close working relationships have ensured a whole system approach to the response enabling joint working which has seen the sharing of PPE across the sector, use of volunteers to support providers with low level support to clients, staff re-deployed to support key areas, extended working hours to facilitate hospital discharges and key financial support to providers via government grants.

30. There have been challenges nationally in this key area of work, and Darlington has also had its challenges, but the feeling is that the strong joint working in the Borough and excellent work and planning of the Council and partners, has led to the challenges and impacts in the Borough being less than elsewhere.
31. The work and response in this area has been immense and Members can see more detail attached at **Appendix 3** where there is a report of the Director of Children and Adults Services.

Support to Business

32. The Council has managed and developed grant schemes to business on behalf of the Government. Our approach has been to try and make the schemes as user-friendly as possible, within the confines of Government guidance, and to ensure public money is safeguarded against fraud. We worked hard to get funding to businesses as quick as possible, and as a result, the Council featured in the Top 10 quickest payers in the Country at one stage, during the process.
33. The Business Support Grant system saw 2,049 businesses receive grants of £10,000 and £25,000 with a total of £23.26m being awarded.
34. Business rates discounts worth £16.4m were also efficiently awarded to 667 local retail, hospitality and leisure businesses providing full exemption for business rates for 2020/21.
35. A Discretionary Grant scheme has been implemented with a total of £1.2m Government funding, and at the time of writing this report, the following key information about the scheme is available
 - (a) 291 applications for Discretionary Grant have been received.
 - (b) 151 applications have been refused as they do not meet the qualifying criteria.
 - (c) 69 applications qualify for a grant and have already been paid a total of £517,500.
 - (d) The remaining 71 applications potentially qualify for a grant, but we are currently awaiting further information from the applicant.
36. There has been a wide variety of Government support to business, not administrated by the Council, and although the Council's team have provided support as appropriate, the Tees Valley Combined Authority agreed to be the single point of contact for business support across the region and the established a call centre for this purpose.
37. As a Council we have worked to help businesses in the town centre open safely, which has not been without challenges, but our overriding guidance in such decision-making, must be public safety.
38. Our role in advising business and managing open spaces, particularly in the town centre, will continue for some time.
39. To help support businesses, car parking charges have been withdrawn at this time.

Hardship Relief and the Voluntary Sector

40. These have been challenging times for the most vulnerable in our Borough and the numbers requiring help and support have increased as a result of the pandemic. The Council operates a scheme via the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) to provide financial advice and support. The scheme has an annual budget of 245,000, in addition, the Council has provided employees to work with CAB to meet the additional demand.
41. As part of the Hardship Grant the Council received from the Government, relief of £150 per property was given to all residents in receipt of Council Tax support to reduce their bills for the year. Council Tax arrears collection during the period has been sympathetic to people's circumstances, however, overall collection rates have held up well.
42. Members will see from Appendix 1 the HUB has been a key response to the challenges.
43. The Council established a hardship relief fund to support the Voluntary Sector (VS). A significant number of the voluntary sector received business support grants of £10,000 and £25,000 however, we were aware that some voluntary sector organisations were not getting support so a fund of £100,000 was established, matched by £25,000 from the County Durham Community Foundation. To date, £46,504 (as at 25 June has been approved. The balance of the fund (£78,496) will help support the recovery phase for the voluntary sector.

Neighbourhood services

44. Members have been kept apprised, as have the public, of the cessation and re-introduction of street-based services, including the household recycling centre, refuse collection, street cleansing, grass cutting, civic enforcement, capital projects, highways and housing services. These have been some significant challenges in achieving delivery of these services in a safe way, it is through good management and the adaptability of employees that it has made it possible. Particularly pleasing is the continuation in full of the refuse and recycling service which is due to the dedication of the teams involved; during the lockdown period emptying circa 51,000 bins each week.

Housing Services

45. Housing Services have experienced particular challenges throughout the pandemic in respect of Homeless Services and Lifeline Services

Homeless Services

46. Over the period of April to June 2020 Housing Options have worked with 359 clients who have approached us for support around their homeless situation. Of these 243 were emergency presentations, resulting in 116 being placed in various types of temporary accommodation including bed and breakfast and supported housing. The remainder were given appropriate advice and support, including money advice, support to access social or private housing, access to bonds and prevention loans and referral to specialist services. At one stage we had 57 households placed in temporary accommodation, but this is now down to around

40. The additional presentations represent some of the hidden homeless and sofa surfers who we have been successfully engaging with during this challenging period.

Lifeline Services

47. The Lifeline Officers have ensured that all essential services have been delivered over this difficult period. All our sheltered, extra care and good neighbour schemes have had a staff presence throughout

48. Throughout April and May the Lifeline team have carried out,

- (a) 7550 welfare calls by telephone
- (b) 171 physical welfare checks
- (c) 1335 call outs where a person has activated the emergency call
- (d) 1849 lifts for clients who have fallen
- (e) Facilitated 26 hospital discharges by installing essential equipment

49. To ensure our tenants were not socially isolated, staff have been innovative in creating ideas to deliver virtual activities within the schemes supporting the mental health and wellbeing of our tenants. To enable tenants to see their families we have introduced safely managed family visits in the outside areas. Whilst we have had to cut back on communal activities due to the guidelines, we are now delivering some socially distanced chair-based exercises in the garden areas of the schemes. Thinking ahead we have recognised that our shielded tenants are feeling very isolated and some are frightened to go outside so we are working with Creative Darlington around a project called Unforgettable Experiences to deliver group activities, build support and relationships and in turn help them gain confidence.

50. Further details on the impact on these services and other operational services is provided at **Appendix 4**.

Children Social Care

51. Children Social Care has remained operational throughout the pandemic, working safely and in new ways, whilst continuing to ensure young people are supported and safeguarded. The service has continued to deliver services, whilst at the same time, continuing to transform services in partnership with Leeds City Council and the DfE under the Strengthening Families programme, which aims to improve support to young people and reduce the need for children to become looked after.

52. Attached at **Appendix 5** is a detailed report from the Director of Children and Adults Services on the work of children social care during the pandemic.

Education Services

53. The education of our young people is key to our Borough's future and one of the significant impacts of the pandemic, was the closure of schools to all but children of key workers. As Members will be aware, the vast majority of schools in Darlington are self-governed academies but this has not stopped the schools, and the Council, working closely through the pandemic, to respond to a variety of challenges; this partnership working has been excellent and bodes well for future working. Clearly working to enable young people to "catch up" will be a key element of recovery.

54. Attached at **Appendix 6** is a detailed report of the Director of Children and Adults Services explaining the approaches taken during the pandemic in respect of young people.

Recovery Planning

55. Whilst the pandemic is far from over, the Country and local areas are planning to recover from the impacts of the pandemic. Whilst the Council has a significant role to play in returning its services to full operation and support business, communities and partners to respond, it cannot do this alone. Government will have a significant role to play in terms of funding schemes to support and re-invigorate businesses, whilst at the same time, working to support those who are unemployed, in particular by working to get them back into employment. The regional response to the economy will be co-ordinated by TVCA working with the five Councils, and work is well advanced, to produce an action plan to present to Government to allow the region to model its own approach to restarting the economy. The Council via the TVCA has recently submitted a number of capital schemes to Government that are shovel ready, the aim of Government is to fund some projects earlier than would have been the case, to help kick start the economy.
56. Continuing and enhancing existing regeneration plans will be key in Darlington such as Bank Top station, Ingenium Park, Central Park, Railway Heritage Quarter and the town centre. Bids for the New High Street Fund and the Towns Fund, if successful, will further help our plans.
57. As a Council, we will be looking at how we can deal with the immediate effects of the impact on our residents, whilst regaining employment will be key to individuals recovery; in the meantime crucial support will be needed from the Government and locally for the Council and the Voluntary Sector, initiatives such as the Bread and Butter Thing will play prominent roles in supporting vulnerable people, in times of hardship.

Single Member Decision Making

58. On 28 April 2020, a single Member Executive decision making session took place with the Leader making a number of decisions that would previously have been considered by Cabinet.

Delegated Decisions

59. As highlighted earlier in this report, a great deal of decision making has had to be taken under delegated powers to respond to the emergency, and in doing so, officers have consulted with Cabinet Members and documented decision records, for Members information, attached at **Appendix 7** are the significant decisions taken.

Car Parking

60. As part of the response to the pandemic, it was decided that car parking charges would be removed for a number of health protection reasons, and this has remained in place since the original lockdown.

61. Whilst lockdown has been reduced, challenges still remain and Cabinet have indicated they wish to keep free parking in place to support the Town Centre economy for the immediate future, however, this will be kept under constant review and with a further report prepared for the September Cabinet meeting.
62. Although businesses are starting to reopen if charging was introduced full car park patronage at the budgeted levels is not anticipated. Therefore, for costing purposes the projected loss of car parking income from July to the end of September based on a best estimate of 50%, 60% and 70% loss of income in July, August and September respectively is £342,000. This loss has been factored into the Revenue Budget Management report included on this agenda.