

COUNCIL
16 JULY 2020

OVERVIEW OF HEALTH AND HOUSING PORTFOLIO

Purpose of the Report

1. Since the last meeting of Council, the main areas of work under my Health and Housing Portfolio were as follows:-

Public Health Response to COVID-19

2. An extensive report has been prepared by Cabinet detailing the Council's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which includes the decisions taken by officers, in consultation with Cabinet during the emergency phases of the pandemic.
3. The COVID19 pandemic has been described as the single largest challenge faced by the Country since the second world war, the scale of the challenge has been unprecedented, and I would like to acknowledge the loss of life and the hardship caused by the pandemic.
4. I would like to pay tribute to our Public Health Team and Miriam Davidson, the Director of Public Health for the support and commitment shown over the last few months, and in particular the delay of her retirement. The support for partners and the community has been exceptional and is to be commented. In addition, our Housing team and leisure teams have worked tirelessly around the clock to support our housing tenants and residents throughout this pandemic.
5. On the 11 March 2020 the WHO declared the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic indicating the new disease was spreading globally. While the outbreak initially occurred in China, it spread rapidly. By mid-March 2020 Europe became the epicentre for the disease.
6. As with other respiratory illnesses, symptoms of COVID-19 can include a new cough, fever, runny nose and other symptoms, including loss of smell or taste. Most people experience mild to moderate illness and recover without needing specialist treatment. It can be more severe for some people.
7. In England the tripartite partnership of DHSC, Public Health England (PHE) and NHS England provides strategic oversight and direction for the health and adult social care response to a pandemic with Department for Education (DfE) leading on the Children's social care response.
8. In the initial stages of the outbreak, the NHS and PHE were proactive in contacting people who had been at risk of being infected, testing them, and where people tested positive tracing who they may have come into contact with and managing/treating the cases.

9. Public Health England, supported by staff at regional centres provides specialist technical expertise and advice. Darlington Borough Council has been in regular contact with these agencies.
10. A UK-wide lockdown was announced on 23 March 2020, the instruction was “Stay at home, Protect the NHS and Save Lives”. The government advised that police would enforce the rules re social distancing and closure regulations.
11. On 16 April it was confirmed that lockdown would be extended and set out “five tests” that must be met to allow easing of restrictions.
12. **“Our Plan to Rebuild the UK (COVID-19 Recovery Strategy)”** was launched on 11 May 2020. This set out a five-point scale to indicate the level of threat to society due to COVID-19 and included a phased approach to recovery, with incremental steps to relax control and public protection measures.
13. We responded locally, working with PHE, ensuring that local stakeholders received the necessary guidance and that information and advice was shared with services within the council. The council worked very closely with PHE on detection and tracing of cases during the early phases of the outbreak providing advice to those affected. Links to the national coronavirus information and advice from government and PHE were provided via our website and we supported the national public information campaign via our social media channels.
14. We have worked with partners nationally and regionally to respond to the pandemic. When the emerging threat was recognised COVID-19 Response Planning arrangements were established, staff communications put in place and briefings reported to Members. Throughout February 2020 advice from PHE was communicated to schools, local communities, and businesses.
15. The council’s Public Health team led the initial planning and response to the outbreak, liaising with NHSE and PHE on the regional command and infection control arrangements, in line with the North East Influenza Pandemic Framework.
16. The team has been proactive in assessing government guidance on the virus, providing public health advice in relation to the guidance to council services and partner organisations.
17. Through our collaborative approach to public health, County Durham and Darlington Councils have in place a dedicated, public-health commissioned community infection prevention and control team, which has been at forefront of our efforts to contain and mitigate the pandemic, not exclusively but largely supporting care homes.
18. A key element of the national response has been the introduction of testing to monitor and enable containment of the spread of the virus and to develop intelligence which can support the development of treatments and vaccines.
19. The Director of Public Health has worked with regional colleagues from NHSE, Public Health England and local NHS foundation trusts to develop and coordinate local testing programmes for NHS workers, social care staff and key workers from LRF responding organisations including the council.

20. As part of this, through our Occupational Health service, COVID-19 testing is available for all council employees who have coronavirus symptoms, with tests and results provided quickly through local hospitals.
21. Since the end of April 2020, the council has worked with the LRF on the use of Mobile Testing Units (MTUs) under the National Testing Programme.
22. The NHS Test and Trace Service was introduced on 28 May 2020. The purpose is to trace the spread of the virus, isolate new infections and interrupt the further spread of COVID-19.

In order to do this the Test and Trace service will:

- (a) Ensure people who develop symptoms of COVID-19 can be quickly tested to find out if they are infected.
 - (b) Trace contacts of people who test positive for coronavirus and, if necessary, advise them to self-isolate.
23. Contact is expected to be the responsibility of Public Health of England, North East Health Protection Team while the Council is responsible for the management of the impact of cases or contacts in a range of settings.
 24. The DHSC requires every Upper Tier Local Authority to develop a Local Outbreak Control Plan (LOCP) and Darlington's went live on 30th June 2020.

The plan will centre on 7 themes:

- (a) Care homes and schools.
 - (b) High risk places, locations and communities.
 - (c) Local testing capacity.
 - (d) Contact tracing in complex settings.
 - (e) Data integration.
 - (f) Vulnerable people.
 - (g) Local Boards including a new member-led Board to communicate with the general public.
25. The government has allocated additional resources to councils to support Test and Trace and the implementation of plans.
 26. The council focus is on restoring services and supporting the community in recovery. With partners the council is reviewing plans to prevent or mitigate secondary outbreaks of COVID-19. Work is underway to understand the impact of COVID-19 locally and will inform council planning for the future.

Public Health Commissioned Services

27. Recognising the impact of COVID-19 on mental health the Council is working with partners to develop "Darlington Connected" to promote positive mental health and connections across the Borough.
28. Mental health support to schools is recognised as a priority. Joint work with education representatives are reviewing plans, including the Mental Health Support Worker roles, established as a result of successful Trailblazer bid.

29. Where possible work has continued on the Healthy Weight Plan, eg providing supporting information for families in receipt of free school meals to accompany the supermarket vouchers.
30. Regular contact has been maintained with all providers of Commissioned Services throughout the COVID-19 lockdown. Contract monitoring and performance meetings have been successfully managed remotely with technology.
31. Services adapted their models of delivery in the following ways:
 - (a) Face to face contacts in the 0-19 Years' Service reduced to essential visits based on clinical risk and patient safety. Majority of appointments have taken place by telephone.
 - (b) Safeguarding Single Point of Contact Service extended to provide additional support.
 - (c) In Sexual Health Services a Single Point of Contact triaged callers and essential appointments were available. Supplies were available online and pharmacy service was maintained.
 - (d) Substance misuse and stop smoking services adapted ways of working similarly. Weekly motivational support has been maintained as have required prescribed treatments. The new provider of substance misuse services "We Are With You" is preparing for commencement mid-August 2020.

Health and Well Being Board

32. The Health and Wellbeing Board has not met during the COVID-19 emergency. The decision was taken by the Chair in recognition Board partners were fully engaged in emergency response.
33. I have also met virtually with the new Chief Executive of the Tees Valley Clinical Commissioning Group and with the Chief Executive of Healthwatch Darlington.

Housing Services

Housing Income

34. We have ensured that despite the financial challenges the lockdown has brought, tenants have continued to be fully supported to pay their rent and sustain tenancies. Rent arrears in May were 3.3% of the annual debit which is an increase from the year-end figure of 2.8% but the increase is lower than other social housing providers nationally. Since April over £3.7 million has been collected towards rent and arrears with weekly collection rates over 94%. Numbers of Universal Credit claims have significantly increased as of this time last year by 66.5%, with over 1285 council tenants claiming Universal Credit and I have ensured that the team continue to provide specialist support to those people who have lost employment and claimed Universal Credit. We have made arrangements that this support and guidance continues to help ensure that residents are supported in maintaining payment plans and maintaining tenancies.

Customer Services

35. During the lockdown period, we facilitated contact with over 6570 vulnerable customers who were dealt with by our Housing and Lifeline staff where residents were offered help and assistance as appropriate. This proactive work has helped to reduce the immediate effects and allayed some of the concerns of these residents and prompted more than 300 referrals being made to Darlington Community Support Hub for emergency food, medication and advice and to Darlington Support for help with shopping, befriending and dog walking. We also ensured that Housing staff be involved within the Darlington Community Support Hub where they were able to answer emergency calls on a wide variety of topics to assist residents during these exceptional times.

Housing Options/Homelessness

36. This has been a very demanding time for our Housing Options team with a significant increase in the number of presentations for homelessness, rough sleeping or at risk of being homeless. This situation has been reflected across the country.
37. To meet this increased demand, we have ensured that additional temporary accommodation has been sourced through procuring hotel accommodation and ensuring our Tenancy Management Team increase the number of temporary Council accommodation units. The work done by this team has been guided by the information from the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government ensuring that all vulnerable homeless applicants were placed in accommodation regardless of their need and status.
38. To ensure that all applicants could self-isolate additional items were purchased such as fridges and microwaves for their rooms in the hotel as well as furniture packages and carpets for the temporary accommodation. Each presentation has been assessed by a Housing Options Officer and they have all been given a personalised housing plan which will support them with in their longer-term housing solutions.
39. Over the period of April and 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 bed and breakfast accommodation. 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. We currently have around 40 households placed in temporary accommodation. I believe that the additional presentations represent some of the hidden homeless and sofa surfers and will ensure we take this opportunity to further work, engage and support them.

Allocations Team

40. We have continued to maintain the housing waiting list over this period and at present have 1665 active housing applications. The team have continued to work from home and in April and May have ensured that 242 applications were checked and activated. Appointments have been carried out over the phone and they will continue to do this as we look at the Council's overall recovery plan and future demands on the service.

New Build

41. I have reviewed the Council Housing new build programme and agreed to recommence the two stalled construction sites at Fenby Avenue and Allington Way 3, providing 70 much needed new homes. The future programme has also been reviewed and in particular I have focused on 4 sites which officers have been progressing. I have agreed that three of these at Neasham Road, East Haven and Skinnergate should be progressed through the planning application process, providing potentially an additional 206 dwellings. One scheme at Harris Street has been withdrawn due to concerns about loss of green space. Other potential sites have been identified and will come forward in due course.

Lifeline Team

42. 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
43. I have ensured that all government guidance has been followed making key decisions around
- (a) Extra Care – closing of the dining area and delivering meals to tenant's flats
 - (b) Closing of communal areas to discourage gatherings
 - (c) Encourage and support each tenant to self-isolate within their own flats
 - (d) Correct use and guidance of PPE, ensuring the safety of staff
 - (e) Use of vehicles – one person per vehicle
 - (f) Correspondence and verbal updates have been given to our tenants throughout to ensure we have met the guidelines and that these are understood by all.
44. 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. Over all our schemes we now deliver 34 weekly activities, which include, bingo, quizzes, virtual coffee mornings.
45. In recent weeks 27 one off events have also been delivered throughout the schemes, such as VE Day where we delivered cupcakes and sweets, social distancing clap for carers, Easter events including delivering of chocolate eggs to every tenant throughout the schemes.

46. Activities are delivered safely and follow the government guidelines and as these change we are able to increase or change the way these are delivered. 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.
47. To enable tenants to see their families we have introduced safely managed family visits in the outside areas, to support mental health and wellbeing. Our Leisure Services staff provide support to the schemes as part of the Move More initiative which delivers a gentle exercise programme to support the physical wellbeing of our tenants. Whilst we have had to cut back on this project due to the guidelines we are now delivering some social distance chair-based exercises in the garden areas of the schemes.
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.

Repairs and Maintenance for Council Tenants

49. Essential gas servicing and other regular safety checks have continued during this time with appropriate measures in place to ensure staff and tenants have been kept safe throughout this process. Whilst we were required to put all our routine and general repairs on hold during the lockdown period 642 urgent and emergency repairs were completed for Council tenants. Overall, we saw a 33.5% increase in these types of repair with the biggest increase relating to blocked drains. Some routine repairs also became more urgent as time went on. From 18th May 2020 routine repairs recommenced in accordance with government guidelines, starting with clearing the backlog before accepting new repair requests from early June 2020.

Digital Tenancy Portal

50. The Digital Tenancy portal is now available once again for ordering routine repairs. The portal enables tenants to access their housing account to check their current rent balance, make online payments, report repairs, send messages and view and print their rent statements. It is accessible 24/7 using a smartphone, tablet or laptop/PC which is how many of our tenants now want to engage with us. It reduces the number of phone calls and visits to Customer Services. Work is currently progressing to enable new features of the portal, such as allowing tenants to book their own appointments and set up direct debits.

Neighbour Nuisance

51. Whilst reports of neighbour nuisance and ASB have remained similar to previous years, there has been an additional 18 Covid related breaches which have been dealt with in partnership with Darlington Police. These were mainly large gatherings inside Council tenanted properties and the surrounding areas. There has also been an increase in those who are suffering with mental health issues during the lockdown period and those individuals have received appropriate advice support and signposting.

Darlington Sports Village

52. In May 2020 the Council received a completed Due Diligence report from Grant Thornton on the proposals detailed by Darlington Mowden Park Rugby Club on the development of a Sports Village at the Darlington Arena site. The report highlighted a number of risks that the Council would be exposed to if they were to support the submitted business plan. It was therefore agreed that the Council could not support the business plan for the development of a Sports Village but would work with the rugby club in the development of an alternative approach to ensure the future of the club. Since receiving the due diligence report the rugby club have decided to explore their options and have entered into a financial arrangement with a third party. This has led to the loans secured on the Arena being repaid and the Council has now been released from the guarantee that was in place since 2017.

Dolphin Centre and Eastbourne Sports Complex

53. The Dolphin Centre and Eastbourne Sports Complex have remained closed to the public since Tuesday 17 March 2020. The Leisure teams have been redeployed to various essential roles including Darlington's Community Hub. The team have supported a number of functions within the Hub including the call centre, control room, outreach driving and deliveries and food packing, all of which have been essential to facilitate this emergency service for residents shielding. In addition, the team have also supported Lifeline services, CCTV, the Food Bank and more recently Street Scene.
54. Eastbourne pre-school, which is based at the Sports Complex reopened on 20 April 2020 for vulnerable children and children of key workers.
55. The Dolphin Centre is currently open for town centre toilet use and Eastbourne Sports Complex opened from Tuesday 9 June 2020 for limited track usage.
56. A new shop front canopy was installed at 16 Horsemarket to provide alternative pavement café options and to highlight the presence of 16 in the market square when reopened. A takeaway service has been available since 15th June and has included new features such as a range of homemade waffles and afternoon tea which have been popular. Following the government announcement that cafes, bars and restaurants can open, both the Bistro and pavement café welcomed public back on Monday 6th July celebrating a new menu. The menu includes our "Chefs promise" a commitment to healthy options.

57. Although gyms have remained closed, the team have been working hard to keep in contact with customers and members. The Dolphin Centre app has been updated ongoing with advice on exercise that can be done from home to keep people active during lockdown. There has also been a series a workout videos posted on social media delivered by gym team members called *Workout Wednesdays*. There will soon be the opportunity for customers and members to book onto home coaching or small digital classes delivered by the team via Microsoft Teams which will form part of our long-term digital offer.
58. Pools remain closed and are following strict guidance from the Pool Water treatment Advisory Group (PWTAG). Various methods of testing have been completed including die testing to check flows and water circulation and pool temperatures have been reduced throughout. Water safety messages will continue to be regular in the lead up to the summer holidays and in preparation for further easing of lockdown.
59. Connect Health who deliver the muscular skeletal contract on behalf of the NHS have agreed Heads of Terms during this period to become a tenant in the vacant registrar's area at the Dolphin Centre from November 2020.

School Meals and Community Catering Service

60. The school meals and community catering service has continued during this period with care homes receiving a varied menu, which has included themed days such as afternoon tea to animate the experience. School meals have been greatly reduced but have continued to support schools in accommodating vulnerable children attending school and children of key workers.

Northgate Initiative

61. As the impacts of the health crisis subside, what is clear is there will be a significant economic and social impact which will affect disadvantaged communities such as Northgate the hardest. An early action will be to understand the consequences of this and to revise the initiative accordingly.

Councillor Kevin Nicholson
Cabinet Member with Portfolio for Health and Housing