

TITLE OF REPORT: Gateshead Council's response to COVID-19 – Financial update, wider implications and steps towards recovery

REPORT OF: Sheena Ramsey, Chief Executive and Darren Collins, Strategic Director, Resources and Digital

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is:
 - i. to update Cabinet on the financial implications of the Council's response to COVID-19; and
 - ii. to highlight our response to date and set out a potential direction of travel for how Gateshead will plan to come through this period of crisis and into a reformed and revitalised place. One that positively embraces some of the new ways of working and tackles the challenges and fragility that exists within the borough.

Background

2. The lives and livelihoods of all of us have been severely affected in the past weeks by the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic and the measures we have needed to put in place to control the infection.
3. On 23 March 2020 the country went into lockdown. Preparations had been underway in advance of that time to ensure our most vulnerable people were identified and supported appropriately. Furthermore, as an organisation we had mobilised our business continuity plans and identified mission critical staff to respond to the pandemic.
4. This is the biggest public health crisis we have faced in living memory and our priority is to help keep people safe and to support those who have faced real hardship as a result of the pandemic. Alongside that we are also focusing on the future.
5. The truth is that we will not see a return to the normal ways of living we had before the pandemic, without a vaccine, in the short to medium term at least. This pandemic has affected all of our lives in multiple ways and it will take a 'whole of society' approach and collective effort if we are to minimise its impact, and then make the best possible recovery from it.
6. Alongside that, as we recover from the pandemic, we don't want to lose the element of our different ways of working and living that have been positive. We have seen the beneficial impact on our environment and, as we move forward, we will build on that during recovery. For instance, in recent weeks have seen less car travel and more daily exercise and we want to encourage these behaviours after

the restrictions end.

7. During the last 12 weeks some extraordinary things have taken place in Gateshead that have changed the borough and the way the Council operates dramatically, and this is the focus of this report.

National context

8. Councils have a unique knowledge and understanding of place and a shared focus on the wellbeing of our communities. We can 'get the job done' – doing so with a unifying purpose to support and protect people and working beyond organisational boundaries.
9. In the space of a few weeks, in response to COVID-19, local government overall has helped to free up more than 30,000 hospital beds so that more lives could be saved, we've housed 5,400 rough sleepers and processed more than £8.6bn in grants to help support more than 700,000 businesses. These are just a few of local government's achievements. This has been in many cases in spite of central government's input rather than owing to it.
10. Going forward, we will need to support those who remain vulnerable or who've become more fragile/in need as a result of the pandemic. Whether it is an increased demand for adult social care, potential demand for children's services, people seeking mental health support, increased employment support or financial assistance and support - local government is likely to be the go-to contact point for our communities as we emerge from the emergency stage of the crisis.
11. What we know is that councils will not be able to successfully respond to these challenges, or to support our local economy and our communities in a way that drives up the quality of life, if we are hamstrung by the need to set a balanced budget and are not sufficiently recompensed for COVID-19.
12. The circa £3.2bn funding from government to date has contributed to supporting councils' coronavirus-related activities. However, the very acute financial pressures facing local authorities have not gone away and have indeed been significantly increased by the impact of the COVID-19 crisis. Promises by government to fund all COVID-related costs on local government must be fulfilled. The fragility of local government finance should not impact upon the wellbeing of our communities. This precarious position further strengthens the arguments for a truly sustainable multi-year funding settlement in any future budget and the subsequent spending review.
13. A decade ago, the coalition said, "we share a conviction that the days of big government are over; that centralisation and top-down control have proved a failure." The response to COVID-19 has reinforced this.
14. What is clear, notwithstanding the finances, is that in order to build a 'sustainable' borough, we can't go back to how things were.

Local Context

15. Through our Thrive agenda, Gateshead Council has pledged to fight for and champion the wellbeing of local people.

16. As the pandemic took hold, we as a Council embraced the national “Stay at home” stance and campaign. We actively promoted this message and encouraged the wider public to follow key government and Public Health England guidance – to stay at home, maintain social distancing and follow good hand hygiene.
17. Whilst there was an easing of lockdown introduced by the government in May 2020, the Council chose to stick with the previous “stay at home” directive on the balance of risk.
18. Our first concern throughout has been the safety of the people of Gateshead. There remains a fear that the easing of lockdown could result in another peak in the virus. At the time of easing being introduced, the R rate (‘R’ is the measure of virus transmission) was believed to be far higher in the North East. It was of concern that the guidance was not taking into account regional variances and the country was being seen as a whole in its response to the pandemic.
19. As custodians of place, councillors took the decision to retain and reinforce the stay at home message – which drew local and national attention. The Council, and its locally elected representatives consider themselves best placed to understand and guide policy and advice at a local level.
20. Gateshead Council has and will always continue to put people at the heart of all that we do. In response to this crisis we have actively:
 - worked in partnership to provide essential food and support to residents in the borough who needed help with accessing food and essential services
 - worked with the local care market to ensure adult social care in the borough can be sustained in the face of this crisis, and adequately support community discharge from hospital – supporting the NHS
 - responded to government’s call to support the processing of Small Business Grant and Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grants
 - supported local schools to open and make provision for key workers – despite many of the schools now being within trust arrangements and no longer local authority controlled; and
 - provided reassurance, advice and guidance to residents and businesses
21. These are just a few of the measures that have been put in place and a fuller list can be found at appendix 2.
22. Gateshead put these measures in place, together with the many other investments on the understanding that the government, as stated, would recompense us for the additional direct costs of responding to the coronavirus pandemic; and help us with the income that we will inevitably lose throughout the period of the crisis.

Financial update

23. Gateshead Council has worked incredibly hard through what has been a decade of austerity and we’ve had to make cuts totalling £170m, with the forecast of a further £50m to be identified over the next five years (pre-coronavirus). In response, we’ve had to generate new income streams to ensure that the borough continues to thrive and that our residents have a good quality of life.

24. The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), Robert Jenrick MP, has said that the government would give councils “the resources they need to do the job”. The Local Government Minister, Simon Clarke MP, has also stated that both he and the Secretary of State were working on a comprehensive plan to ensure councils’ financial sustainability over the financial year ahead.
25. The government has made a number of announcements on support to local government financially. However, it seems from our own assessment that the funding announced and made available so far will go nowhere near to meeting the financial pressures caused by the pandemic and government actions.
26. The government has provided a number of specific grants, some in relation to the impacts directly on the Council and others to residents and businesses which it has passed on to the council to deliver at great pace.
27. The government made available two tranches of £1.6 billion COVID-19 un-ringfenced grant nationally announced on 19 March and 18 April to help local authorities address the twin funding pressures of additional expenditure and lost income across service areas they deliver. Gateshead Council was allocated £7.593m of the first tranche and £5.554m of the second tranche, a total of £13.147m.
28. To enable the government to assess the impact of the pandemic on local authority budgets, the Council is required to submit a monthly return to MHCLG outlining the estimated impact on additional expenditure and lost income. We submitted the third of those returns on 19 June. It estimated that the full-year impact on the Council to be £25.670m additional expenditure, and £43.989m lost income, a total full-year impact of £69.659m. It is clear the government financial commitment is falling far short of what is needed.

Financial Impacts on Gateshead

29. The biggest single expenditure pressure is in supporting the adults social care market. A temporary 5% increase across all current fees will be made; including homecare with an offer to meet all additional reasonable costs of older persons residential care in addition to the 5%; as it is this sector of the market which has felt the most acute impact of the pandemic. In addition, there are additional workforce costs within adult’s services to support the hospital discharge processes, and there is a full year cost estimate of £1.824m for PPE to support adults social care services. There is an expectation that the CCG will contribute towards some of the expenditure as they will receive a share of £1.3 billion nationally to facilitate quicker hospital discharge and to free beds. The first claim from the Council has been submitted to the CCG.
30. Children’s services have been already impacted and there has been a need to open an emergency children’s home and there is an estimated increase of 5% for children looked after as well as a large increase in section 17 emergency support payments to vulnerable children and their families. This week Gateshead has seen its highest ever numbers of children looked after. The impact that the pandemic will have on Gateshead’s vulnerable children is significant as will the financial consequences.

31. In addition to social care costs the Council has block booked 36 beds to keep the homeless off the streets and safe during the pandemic.
32. Estimated lost income includes the following significant areas:
 - a. Collection Fund – this includes estimated lost income from collection of council tax and business rates. This will impact on the funding position for 2021/22 and beyond. The impact is estimated to be £19.523m.
 - b. Fees and charges – this relates to the majority of the Council’s services recovered through fees and charges, in particular leisure centres income due to the closure of facilities, parking income due to the suspension of enforcement and closure of car parks, trade waste income due to the closure of businesses, and planning and building control fees. In relation to Leisure services, the Council is making an application to the government’s furlough scheme which, if successful, will go some way to mitigating the lost income. The impact of the lost fees and charges are forecast to be as much as £11.132m
 - c. Commercial – this relates to estimated reduced income from the Council’s commercial interests, including interest from Airport loan notes, surpluses from trading activity with TGHC and other trading entities, and dividends from the Airport and Trinity Square. This loss is forecast to be £7.065m
 - d. Other – this includes estimated technical fees supporting revenue staffing budgets relating to highways traded activity and design fees for capital projects. This loss is forecast to be £4.259m
33. It is very difficult to accurately project the full-year financial impact on the Council’s 2020/21 budget and beyond due to the uncertainties about the timescales of the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions and what this might mean for Council services, the ongoing impact on businesses, the ongoing needs of residents, and the continued uncertainty surrounding government funding, not only in relation to the pandemic, but also longer-term sustainable funding for local government.

Financial Support to Residents

34. Gateshead Council has received £2.672m COVID-19 Hardship Funding, in relation to a working-age local council tax support recipients a caseload of 13,100 residents.
35. From 1st March to 31st May, 814 new applications for council tax support were received, bringing the number of UC claimants receiving council tax Support to 6,684. This averages 271 a month compared to 116 a month in the 6 months prior to this.
36. The majority of the funding will be used to provide council tax relief, alongside Gateshead’s existing local council tax support schemes. The majority of working age recipients of council tax support paying proximately £80 per year will see their bill reduced to zero.
37. The Council has also taken a very supportive approach to its residents in relation to non-payment of council tax during the lockdown.

- 13,500 (£2.2m) council tax reminders have not been sent (same period 19/20 = 11,700)
- No council tax summons issued (4,853 /£2.8m summons were sent by June 19 last year)
- Benefit overpayments - 265 broken arrangement letters have not been sent
- Housing Rent - 800 -1,000 rent reminder letters would normally be sent out each week, so from the start of lockdown up to 12,000 letters have not been sent.
- around 130 legal Notices of Seeking Possession would be issued per month for more serious arrears, so around 260 have not been issued

Financial Support to Businesses

38. The government have made a number of support packages available to businesses which have been passed onto the Council to deliver.
39. To support businesses affected by the pandemic, the government's budget included increased business rates retail discount which was also extended to the leisure and hospitality sector. Further relief included an increase to business rates discount for pubs, and the introduction of reliefs for nurseries.
40. It was also announced that there would be support for small businesses, and businesses in retail, hospitality and leisure sectors. This support is in the form of two grant schemes; the Small Business Grant Fund (SBGF), and the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grant Fund (RHLGF). The Council received an allocation of £38.440m funding to passport to local businesses eligible under the schemes. At the time of writing, the Council has made payments totalling £36.780m to 3,134 businesses. A proactive approach is being taken to identify eligible businesses who are yet to apply for grant funding.
41. In addition, on 1 May the government announced the Discretionary Grant Fund for local authorities to provide grants for small and micro businesses that were unable to access other grant funding and are not eligible under the first grant scheme. The initial allocation has been confirmed as £1.873m. The Council will provide a number of smaller grants to those businesses who were ineligible for support under the first government scheme.
42. As with council tax the Council has taken a supportive approach to the collection of business rates, with the following;
- 667 (£2.5m) business rate reminders have not been sent (same period 19/20 = 771)
 - No business rates summons issued (404 / £2.3m) summons were sent by June 19)
 - Business rate liability has changed significantly with 4,148 businesses out of 6,766 now not liable to pay rates for 2020/2021
 - Sundry debtors, Invoicing has continued but no reminder letters have been issued since the lockdown began. All legal action has been suspended.

Budget Framework and Review

43. The 2020/21 budgets were agreed by Cabinet and Council on 27 February. The net revenue budget was set at £220.761m which included £3.548m growth funding to accelerate priority areas in order to achieve savings and thrive objectives. The 2020/21 capital programme was agreed at £110.5m
44. Prior to the pandemic the proposed budget framework was for each group to consider a five-year plan, alongside potential areas of recommissioning. In light of the impacts of the pandemic and lockdown it will be necessary to revisit the plans for the 2020/21 budget and beyond, building on this existing work.
45. Due to the significant impacts of COVID-19 it will be necessary to revisit the 2020/21 budget including the priority growth to protect the long-term financial sustainability of the Council.
46. A fundamental budget review is required for revenue, HRA and capital programme. This will involve a scrutiny of current budgets in line with the business critical and non-critical assessments. The Council will need to consider savings in non-critical services such as paring back to minimum delivery or ceasing provision, some of which may need accelerated.
47. Projects within the capital programme will be reviewed corporately with a view to prioritising activity, which may result in pausing some projects and accelerating others. The reprofiling of the programme will be agreed in the September Cabinet report.

Medium Term Financial Planning

48. The current MTFs outlines a funding gap of £50m over the next 5 years, with £16m financial gap in 2021. These estimates were prepared prior to COVID-19 and therefore must be revisited particularly to assess the impact in relation to council tax and business rate funding.
49. The MTFs 2021/22 to 2025/26 will be reported to Cabinet in October in line with last year's reporting. This will be informed from the fundamental review work and the outcome of invest to save projects.
50. On 28 April 2020, the government announced that the Review of Relative Needs and Resources (Fair Funding Review) and the move to 75% business rates retention will no longer be implemented in 2021/22. The announcement also explained that the government will continue to work with councils on the best approach to the next financial year, including how to treat accumulated business rates growth and the approach to the 2021/22 local government finance settlement.
51. On 6 May 2020, the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government announced that the revaluation of business rates, due to take place in April 2021, will no longer take place. The government announced at the same time that it is continuing work on the fundamental review of business rates, though it did not indicate if the planned publication of the results of the review in Autumn 2020 would be put back.

52. All this uncertainty around the future funding of local government significantly hinders the ability to plan ahead and achieve financial sustainability for the provision of vital services.

Lessons Learnt

53. After the first exploratory phase of this consultation, some strong themes are already emerging that provide inspiration for our future. Arguably, chief amongst these is the need to work locally, with communities and partner organisations. The shielding hubs provide a more concerted efforts to create bespoke, community led and inspired approaches that stand a better chance of keeping people from needing already stretched statutory services by helping them to Thrive.
54. There is also a strong emerging desire to connect more of our roles to the needs and aspirations of citizens. The rapid remobilisation of around 140 employees to the shielding hubs has provided a renewed perspective and person-centred approach.
55. Employee flexibility in working arrangements, trust in the front line, a stronger desire for purposeful partnerships and a keen empowered management, alongside an appetite for more personal and professional development.

Going forward – a catalyst for transformation

56. As we gradually come out of lockdown, we are determined that the agility and empowerment of how we've worked with each other and partners will not be lost. The pace of change has been extraordinary, and it has been done at the right level, at the right time and in the main in the right way: we are making decisions, bending and flexing when needed and have innovated along the way. We have built some things from scratch that would ordinarily take months, we have worked collectively and with a common purpose and aim. The culture to 'do things' rather than 'talk about things' has been palpable.

So, what does this mean?

57. We are reviewing the budget (both revenue and capital) that was set only a few months ago to rethink what is important now and where our resources need to be focussed.
58. Our intent was to have a 5-year plan to make the organisation sustainable – we now need to address the following:
- A significant in year cost pressure created from additional spend and lack of income.
 - The learning from the 'Shielding Hubs' in responding to the needs of our most vulnerable communities
 - High levels of shared intelligence and information about our communities
 - Excellent co-operation across different sectors to respond as a system rather than an organisation to meet the needs of Gateshead's residents
 - Becoming digitally based
 - Working in different ways and in different places

59. Three years ago, we asked ourselves, councillors and officers, 'what matters most' and we devised the Thrive agenda and its 5 pledges. Those pledges are more important now than ever
- **Putting people and families at the heart of everything we do** - rather than thinking about individual service provision, this person-centred approach will be a fundamental principle to how we redesign the way we work with our partners going forward.
 - **Tackling inequality** - which has been so apparent and exacerbated by the virus in our most vulnerable communities. Many of our residents were vulnerable before the pandemic so we now need to accelerate a 'wrap around' approach to how we support them going forward.
 - **Supporting our communities to support themselves and each other** – the communities of Gateshead have come together in the most extraordinary way; we must retain and build on this with our public sector partners and the VCSE. This will require using the information and intelligence we already have through the use of our LION data but also the additional data we have garnered during the pandemic. This will help us identify specific needs by ward/area and will enable us to create a local infrastructure, for co-located multi-agency working in localities.
 - **Investing in our economy to provide sustainable opportunities for employment, innovation and growth** - and increase the Council's budget through council tax and business Rates but also to ensure our communities are thriving, working, living in good quality homes in an environment that tackles air quality issues and the climate emergency. There is a real prospect of high levels of unemployment as people come off the furlough scheme, which we must plan to address quickly. There is strong evidence to suggest that people who are usually in employment are far more likely to get into a new job in the first six months after losing their job, so we need to be fleet of foot in both identifying people and supporting them. The government is likely to come up with a national scheme to help with this and we are lobbying hard to ensure that this is done through local government.
 - A further level of support could potentially come from re-imagining how we use the Apprenticeship Levy – could this be done more effectively in collaboration across the public and private sector in Gateshead.
 - **Work together and fight for a better future for Gateshead** - at the outset of the pandemic councils across the country were encouraged to do the right thing and not be fettered by concerns about where the money would come from. We now have a significant hole in our budget that needs national assistance.
60. If we were to ask that question of the people of Gateshead now 'what matters most to you?' it is likely that it would include the following:
- Secured income
 - Secured tenure

- Secured health and well-being, including access to services to safely meet health/care needs
- Education – levelling up and addressing the gap caused through the crisis
- Family and friends; and
- Effective and timely test, track and trace system locally – controlling and limiting the spread of the virus in the future

Proposition moving forward

61. As the Council and the borough moves towards recovery, it will be important to consult and engage with a broad range of partners and stakeholders to ensure that our plans are comprehensive and that all stakeholders feel connected to the recovery.
62. This will include: -
- Engagement with all councillors on the Council’s response to date and future direction of travel/route map
 - Speaking and listening to residents in the borough
 - Council employees and trade unions – learning and shaping the future delivery of service based on our experience through the pandemic
 - It will be important to use the Council’s stakeholder infrastructure to seek views from a wide range of groups, including businesses, faith groups, young people, community groups, voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) and advocacy organisations for particular groups within the borough
 - In addition, the Council will also use the variety of communications and media channels it has available to consult and engage with residents and businesses, including the use of: social media, surveys with households and the Council’s residents’ panel, specific resident consultations and the use of Council News.
63. A six to twelve-month plan and route map to address the immediate needs of Gateshead and steer our recovery is proposed. This will require the following immediate actions, which themselves will be
- Proactive engagement on the evolving plan, with those stakeholders listed at paragraph 62 above
 - Review of the current in-year capital and revenue budgets
 - Analysis of workforce requirements for next six to twelve months and employee engagement
 - Supporting the review of the Gateshead Housing Company
 - maintain the established ‘shielding hubs’ infrastructure for now
 - At a macro Gateshead level - continue to work at pace as a health and care system. This is particularly important if we are to be more resilient to any future waves of COVID-19
 - Continue to encourage people to work from home and in different localities to minimise car journeys and need for office space or other accommodation – linked to our climate emergency response
 - Accelerate our digitisation capabilities and increase access points for residents to become more on-line capable

- Develop a place-based vision and regeneration plan for key areas to strengthen and sustain our economy, investment and environment to bring more and better secure jobs to the borough
- Working with all businesses that have been in receipt of grants during the pandemic to understand their needs and ambitions going forward.
- Working with key partners and DWP on emerging government programmes to tackle unemployment
- Continue to work across the region with our neighbouring local authorities to develop a resilient North East. Providing a strong platform to lobby government and to provide mutual aid and collaboration on the most appropriate footprint.

Recommendations

64. It is recommended that Cabinet:

- (i) notes the contents of this report
- (ii) agrees to receive a further report at its next meeting; and
- (iii) confirms that further engagement commences with all councillors as the first step towards agreeing the council's recovery plan; then engaging with a host of stakeholders to inform our response

For the following reasons:

- (i) to support and guide the borough's recovery from COVID-19
- (ii) to help support and build a more resilient Gateshead

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APPENDIX 1

Policy Context

1. The national and local policy context are set out within the main body of the report.

Background

2. The background to this item is covered within the covering report.

Consultation

3. The Leader and Deputy Leader of the Council have been consulted on the preparation of this report, together with the Council's Corporate Management Team.

Alternative Options

4. There is not an alternative option available to the development of a recovery plan for the borough.

Implications of Recommended Option

Resources

- a. **Financial Implications** – The Strategic Director, Resources and Digital confirms that these are as set out within the covering report. Any future resource implications arising from the recovery plan will be considered as part of the approach to budget and the medium-term realignment and investment of targeted resource towards achieving these outcomes
- b. **Human Resource Implications** – The Service Director, Human Resources and Workforce Development confirms there are no human resource implications arising directly from this report.
- c. **Property Implications** – The Corporate Property Officer confirms there are no property implications arising from this report.

5. **Risk Management Implication** - The risk management implications of the recovery measures will be assessed by Director of Public Health as part of the strategic risk management process. Business continuity and risk management plans and protocols are in place across the Council's operations and have been enacted in response to this crisis.
6. **Equality and Diversity Implications** - An integrated impact assessment will be developed alongside the emerging recovery plan – identifying any potential significant impact including against the protected characteristics, as identified in the Equality Act 2010.
7. **Crime and Disorder Implications** - There are no specific crime and disorder implications arising. The Community Safety Partnership Board will be engaged alongside our key statutory partners in supporting our recovery plans.
8. **Health Implications** – The Director Public Health for Gateshead will play a key role in shaping and influencing the Council's recovery plan. In addition to recovering from the current crisis, the plan will be driven forward on the basis of achievement of improving health and wellbeing outcomes for local people with the aim of reducing the health inequalities that exist within Gateshead

9. **Sustainability Implications** - There are no sustainability issues.
10. **Human Rights Implications** - The recovery plan will be developed to positively support the economic and social rights and conventions outlined in the Human Rights Act 1998
11. **Area and Ward Implications** – there are no direct issues from the content of the report, but we acknowledge that the pandemic and proposed recovery measures will have an impact across the whole borough.

Background Information

12. Background Information:
 - Making Gateshead a Place Where Everyone Thrives
 - Joint Strategic Needs Assessment
 - Gateshead Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2020

Gateshead Council's response to the Pandemic (highlights by exception – not an exhaustive list)

Children and Young People

- Every school in Gateshead has been open throughout the crisis (including Easter and bank holidays) for vulnerable and key worker children.
- Free school meals – we've facilitated meals for the 6593 eligible children under the government statutory scheme
- Children social care teams have continued to deliver interventions and services into all the children and families in Gateshead who require statutory social work. This has included remote working and (where safeguarding issues are prevalent) face to face visits using PPE. The service has maintained care planning and corporate parenting responsibilities, ensuring that children in foster care and our residential care continued to receive high quality care and foster carers are fully supported.
- The initial response team and out of hours support services have been maintained throughout COVID-response, ensuring that children and families of Gateshead continue to receive a 24/7 timely response.
- We have seen an increase in the number of children on Child protection plans and children in looked after arrangements since COVID and work is being undertaken with the wider safeguarding partnership and internally to plan a response to this inflation.
- Despite COVID, the national Troubled Families Programme target was also achieved in March with 100% of target outcomes achieved with families against a national average of 86%. The service has also deployed staff into areas of increased criticality, including children's homes and the virtual telephone bank making calls to vulnerable residents.

Adults and Families

- Since the 1st of April Adult Social Care has dealt with 1952 contacts relating to adults in need of support, 240 concerns around adult safeguarding and has completed 495 assessments and carried out 1023 reviews.
- We've helped to rehouse 140 tenants despite the complications of navigating COVID-19
- A number of our services and support arrangements have provided 24-hour, 7 day a week care. The resilience of the workforce, and how they have coped and adapted to things like social distancing and PPE, are commendable.
- Continued 24/7 operations in our Promoting Independent Centres and domiciliary care throughout pandemic.

Payments and financial support

- We have taken approximately 12,000 calls from council taxpayers and 9,000 calls from benefit claimants since 23 March 2020. The response has been very positive as the teams have taken the opportunity to talk to customers and enquire about overall welfare
- We have received over 45,000 overall calls providing advice on benefits, council tax and other enquiries during the pandemic
- Council tax customers have been given payment breaks and extended arrangements for payment where customers have told us they were struggling to pay, this helps by giving the lowest possible payments
- Flexible payment options for council tax arrears have been agreed and officers have ensured that any arrangements made are affordable and sustainable and the team have stressed to each customer that they should tell us if they find they are struggling
- Officers in council tax have been working with benefits colleagues, DWP and Citizens Advice Gateshead to support more complex financial cases
- We're proactively telephoning council tax customers who have missed payments to discuss options available to them.
- Contact with business rate payers has predominantly been in relation to the implementation of the grant scheme but using this as an opportunity to signpost support and help.
- The focus of the housing rent service has been on supporting residents and complementing the work of the hubs with emergency food deliveries. Over 12,000 tenants have been contacted, and many tenants have asked about paying rent as part of the conversation.
- We have provided welfare or debt advice to 220 residents and from those who receive welfare benefit advice, this resulted in an increase in weekly income of £36.18 on average.

Business and the local economy

- The Council has been responsible for administering the Small Business and Retail, Hospitality, and Leisure Grant. To date the Council has paid 3,091 of the 3,213 eligible businesses identified, at a value of £36.235m. Work is ongoing to contact the remaining businesses.
- The Council has been allocated a minimum of £1.873m for the Discretionary Grant Fund for to small and micro businesses struggling to survive due to the Coronavirus shutdown but that are unable to access other grant funding including the Small Business Grant Fund or the Retail, Leisure and Hospitality Fund.
- The Council has awarded a 12-month business rate holiday to 1,134 businesses in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors who received 100% relief in 2020/21 worth £53.128m.

- 55 childcare providers on Ofsted's Early Years Register have also received a 12-month business rate holiday worth a total of £211,307.
- Launched the Business Resilience Fund funded by the ERDF CLLD programme. The £80,000 fund will cover 50% of project costs to help businesses invest in new ways of working to increase business resilience or to switch production to support national need. 36 eligible applications are currently being assessed which if approved will commit all available funding.
- Business Support Hub: The business team has continued to provide a support service to any business seeking assistance. To date the team have dealt with 1,016 calls and enquiries from local businesses, employers and self-employed. The weekly newsletter summarising support and scheme updates is circulated to 2,925 subscribers.

Universal Services

- We have continued to collect 100,909 bins every week
- Libraries, with the support of community volunteers have produced over 7,000 visitors for 60 different care facilities
- Libraries have 403 new users and e-book issues have seen a 91% increase and e-audiobooks an increase of 107%

Shielding hubs

- We've sent 40,000 letters and made nearly 12,000 calls to people who may be vulnerable or in need of a little extra help – of which
 - 4,000 households have registered for help. Of which the requirement was: -
 - 50% emergency food
 - 22% routine shopping
 - 8% help with utility bills
 - 8% help with prescriptions
- We've delivered 500 activity packs to include craft materials and physical activity equipment such as skipping ropes and balls.
- We've delivered more than 800 free school meals to pre-school children.
- We've made 200 referrals to Citizens Advice Gateshead.