

**TITLE OF REPORT:** Covid-19 Recovery and Lessons Learned

**REPORT OF:** Colin Huntington, Strategic Director, Housing, Environment & Healthy Communities

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### **SUMMARY**

This report provides an update on the lessons learned from service delivery during the covid-19 pandemic and impact on our communities and place.

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#### **Background**

1. Cabinet report in June 2020 – financial implications of the Council’s response to Covid-19, wider implications and steps towards recovery.
2. Cabinet report in July 2020 – steps towards developing a recovery framework
3. Year-end performance report 2019-20 covid-19 update to OSCs in September 2020 identified the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and potential future implications.

#### **Covid-19 Update**

4. OSC will receive a presentation focusing on lessons learned and how this is currently impacting, has impacted on and changed the way the work of the Council is progressed in the longer term.

#### **Recommendation**

5. It is recommended that the Communities and Place OSC:
  - (i) consider the lessons learned from activities undertaken to deliver council services during the Covid-19 pandemic;
  - (ii) any areas they feel they require more detail or require further scrutiny;

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**Ext:**

## Timeline

- Prior to the first national lockdown announced on 23 March, the Council actively took the decision to close down some public-facing services ahead of central government decisions.
  - Closure of Go Gateshead facilities and libraries resulting in furlough of majority of leisure staff and redeployment of libraries staff into shielding hubs and PPE production
  - Closure of local housing offices within co-located council buildings
- Following the PM announcement on 23 March to stay at home we actively promoted this message and encouraged the wide public to follow key government and Public Health guidance – to stay at home, maintain social distancing and follow good hand hygiene.
- After government guidance was issued following decisions were made;
  - Closure of fixed play areas, public toilets and HWRCs
  - Suspension of non critical services – pest control, garden waste, grass cutting, tree pruning, face to face bereavement services
- Facilities Management worked through closure of the civic centre and other council buildings and undertook risk assessments and developed safety measures, including adaptations, one way systems and signage to keep buildings safe for essential use by key workers.
- Critical services which continued to deliver in lockdown such as waste & recycling collections, housing repairs and maintenance and school catering had to urgently adapt from the standard working practices to make sure they were Covid safe.
- Non-essential house moves were not permitted, and, along with other partners, advertising of vacant homes was suspended on the Tyne and Wear Homes scheme. Essential and emergency moves were facilitated via direct letting.
- 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. Some council services and facilities did plan for partial reopening or alternative service delivery
  - HWRCs
  - Garden Waste services
  - Libraries “ring and read collection, and delivery services”
- By the late spring / early summer more council services were preparing for reopening albeit in a different way, with reduced access, capacity and alternative modes of operating.
  - Libraries – book browsing
  - Leisure – reopening of gyms, use of outdoor facilities
  - Grass cutting / highways maintenance services
  - Catering – takeaway service
  - Fixed play areas and public toilet facilities
- Local NE restrictions introduced in October
  - Leisure and libraries continued to deliver services in a covid secure way
- Second national lockdown in November
  - Closure of Go Gateshead facilities and furlough of some staff
  - Libraries reverted to ring and read service
  - Pause non-essential housing works and focus on emergency, urgent and health and safety only

## Communities

## **Covid-19 Household Impact Survey**

- Our first survey ran throughout the month of July and generated more than 4,700 responses with good representation across all of Gateshead.
- Key questions asked how worried residents were about covid-19, how likely and quickly they were to return to usual activities such as gyms, libraries and public transport use. Responses shared intelligence on employment and household finance issues as well as support from local community and VCS organisations.
- Analysis will help council services planning for recovery and will also be shared with the North East Evidence Forum and Economic Recovery Group to underpin regional recovery and renewal plans.
- The findings will also be cited in a bid for external research funding to examine the long-term effects of Covid-19 on the most vulnerable in Gateshead.

## **Shielding Hubs**

- The Council quickly established 8 shielding hubs across the borough to provide emergency support and help to residents who required support through the pandemic.
- Where residents need Council support the hubs can assist with the following: -
  - emergency food parcels
  - help with routine shopping
  - collection of prescriptions
  - support if people want to talk to someone, if they are feeling lonely, in need of reassurance or a bit scared
  - benefits and financial advice
  - employment support
  - other errands and tasks
- The hubs are managed by the Neighbourhood Management and Volunteering Team with support from a variety of services across the Council but predominantly Libraries and Arts, Sport and Leisure, Social Care, the Public Service Reform Team and Parking / Environmental Enforcement. Staff in non-operational council services volunteered for redeployment into this priority service.
- To support the hubs with food parcels a distribution centre was established at Gateshead International Stadium which supplies food to each hub on a daily basis, parcels are then made up and dispatched for delivery to the doorstep with 24 hours of the request.
- Referrals for residents are made onto VCS partners where appropriate, to link up with services provided locally in the community. Mutual Aid groups are also contacted for volunteers to undertake urgent tasks.
- At the end of November there have been:
  - 6,289 requests for help from individual households (this does not include repeat requests for help and support)
  - 55% of these requests for emergency food
  - 17% for routine shopping
  - 11% for help with utility bills
- The wards with the highest demand include:
  - High Fell
  - Felling
  - Deckham
  - Lamesley
  - Bridges
- Cases by Neighbourhood Management Area:
  - South 17.5%

- Central 27%
- East 29.3%
- West 14.6%
- Inner West 11.6%
- At their peak in mid-April the hubs were dealing with over 100 cases per day, with 133 being the highest on 15 April. At present cases are averaging at a little under 100 cases per week across the network, but it does fluctuate, particularly towards the end of the month, the analysis indicates that this is a result of some residents running out of money.
- For council housing tenants a further source of advice and support that complemented the work of the hubs was provided by the TGHC Rent and Income Service. The team have had over 41,000 contacts from residents who had a change of circumstances and were worried about their incomes, as well as general rent enquiries. Over 1,000 contacts per week are still being made. The team have also been able to deliver emergency food parcels, particularly where these are required at very short notice or after the “cut-off” for the hub. Over 500 food parcels have been delivered to date by TGHC Rent and Income.
- Many residents experienced a change in income and for council tax and for housing rents arrears recovery action was suspended with resources focused on providing advice and support. TGHC identified around 4,500 residents in need of some kind of further financial advice and either supported them directly or made applications for support on their behalf. So far this has generated over £588k of financial support.

### **Support to VCS**

- Published data on the take up of Covid-19 emergency response grants available to the VCS shows that 105 grants were made to 87 recipients in Gateshead from 13 funders. The total grant allocation offered is £1,003,000. NMT directly supported 11 organisations to access £94,000.

### **Virtual Call Centre**

- The Council has written to approx. 40,000 residents to check they are okay and do not require any assistance, the distribution lists were compiled using intelligence to determine the most vulnerable alongside those shielding.
- Over 15,000 welfare calls have been made to residents again to make sure they are okay. A virtual call centre of 35 staff was quickly established with employees redeployed from other council services.
- Government paused the shielding list on 1 August and no longer provided food parcels or help with prescriptions. The virtual call centre and hub staff contacted residents on the original shielding list to ensure they were aware of this and to offer them help if required.
- Staff from hubs undertook follow up door knocking calls on the doorstep to follow up on vulnerable residents who had not been able to make contact with via the call centre.
- Over 450 Clinically Extremely Vulnerable residents have been contacted again during second lockdown to assess if they need support.

### **Holiday Activities and Food 2020**

- Brighten the Day summer programme developed from April to deliver activities and food during the summer holidays. Funding of £228,000 awarded by DfE to target FSM eligible families.
- A 7-week programme delivered in 10 schools and 20 community venues with some pop-up events taking place in local communities without access to venues. Over 2,000 FSM children attended provision with over 10,500 places offered across Gateshead.
- A virtual programme of activities was created and delivered via Brighten the Day webpage on the council website for all Gateshead families to access.

- As part of the Holiday Activities and Food Programme, over 1,400 activity packs were distributed to children and families through schools, community groups and Children's Social Care including the Early Help team.

### **Building Cleaning**

- Staff have continued to work in schools and public buildings concentrating on hand contact surfaces and regular disinfecting to keep areas safe. The service has provided deep cleans when necessary as a result of positive cases.

### **School Catering**

- Free School Meals – facilitated meals for the 6,593 eligible children under the government statutory scheme throughout all stages of pandemic. Initially these were distributed by schools until the national voucher scheme was established.
- Put in place alternative school catering arrangements for schools in first lockdown when they remained open to vulnerable children and children of key workers
- Made arrangements for delivery of FSM to children who were self-isolating and unable to attend school since September reopening.
- With the hubs delivered over 1,500 FSM packs to support families during October half term.

### **Supporting Independence Service**

- Continuing to provide essential services to residents keeping them independent in their own homes in a covid secure way.

### **Libraries and community arts**

- With the support of community volunteers, the library service produced over 7,000 PPE visors for 60 different care facilities during April and May, when PPE was in critical short supply.
- 403 new service users and e-book issues have seen a 91% increase, e-audiobooks an increase of 107%. The uptake of this service has been sustained and is proving a key service element whilst building access is restricted.
- Partial reopening of library services initially launched Ring and Read service for residents to collect and return pre-selected books from library, included a delivery service for shielding / vulnerable residents during lockdown.
- Library service reopened further in summer for book browsing and access to IT. Capacity limited in the library at any one time, hand sanitising, face covering and other risk reduction measures have been enforced.
- The library service digital team have supported the provision of laptops to priority families in Gateshead. The team provide technical support, but also remotely have encourage wide educational and creative use of the equipment.
- The service has continued to produce a wide range of digital content and activities for customers of all ages, from rhymetime, author events, local history talks, to craft activities. The uptake and viewing of this content has been exceptional.
- The community arts team has continued to deliver the Arts Diamonds project. This has taken a wide range of creative arts activities to isolated older residents. Technology has been used to bring people together to share their creative output.
- Young people have also been experiencing isolation. The youth theatre and library young people groups have continued to run remotely to allow young people to meet and collaborate during lockdown.

### **Leisure**

- Go Gateshead facilities closed to the public during first lockdown. This also includes Birtley Leisure Centre which is managed by Competition Line UK on behalf of the Council.
- Staff redeployed into priority roles supporting the hubs and virtual call centre. Some staff furloughed.
- Gyms at GIS and Birtley reopened in August to Go Gateshead members with online pre bookings with limited capacity and strict social distancing measures in place. Outdoor facilities at GIS and Blaydon reopened to organised groups and sports clubs.
- Gyms at Gateshead Leisure Centre and Blaydon followed by Dunston and Heworth then reopened to members. Indoor activities opened for educational groups only, all other activities remained closed.
- During second lockdown all Go Gateshead facilities closed and majority of staff (254 employees) furloughed for the second time except for 51 staff who have been redeployed in roles such as hubs, adult social care, food distribution and track and trace call team.
- Customer memberships have been frozen whilst buildings remain closed and will be reactivated when buildings reopen.
- The service has been posting online exercise classes to members and the wider community to help residents keep active whilst the buildings are closed.

## Place

### **Waste Services**

- Due to Covid-19, recycling tonnage was impacted by the closure of the two HWRC's, suspension of collections from Bring sites and the suspension of the green waste collection service at its peak time.
- Continued to collect 100,909 bins every week. Increased volume of household waste collected, up by 14% at its highest, compounded by stay-at-home message, home deliveries and closure of HWRCs.
- Increased volume of kerbside recycling collected in lockdown (Apr-Jun) by almost a quarter, especially cardboard and plastic recycling.
- Alternative ways of working had to be introduced to maintain crew safety, including the provision of additional vehicles so crews could travel separately during collection rounds, numbers initially limited to 2 crew per vehicle. Additional safety measures fitted to cabs in form of plastic screens, masks provided to allow 3 crew members to share a bin wagon cabs.
- **Contract issues?**
- Increase in flytipping noticed during lockdown.
- HWRCs reopened with reduced access via odd and even numberplate days, to ensure social distancing, increased hours of operation. Reduced waste collection at HWRCs initially only certain types of waste reinstated. Gradually increased materials and numbers of vehicles and types of vehicles allowed on site. Sites now operating with all materials but still reduced numbers allowed on site for social distancing reasons.
- Bulky Waste collection service reinstated via online bookings only, collection of external items only no house clearances or internal removals.

### **Environment Services**

- Parks and car parks were kept open throughout lockdown, facilities within parks were all closed. Social distancing in parks a concern in initial period when residents had to stay local with reduced options for outdoor exercise. Watergate Park car park closed to attempt to

deter visitors from travelling from out of the local area. Signage erected to visibly enforce social distancing messages.

- Tennis courts and MUGA / basketball courts opened but required monitoring to ensure used safely.
- 120 fixed play facilities in the council's parks and open spaces were closed during lockdown. Government guidance on reopening fixed play included the need for frequent cleaning and other controls. We controlled use of the sites reopening by signage and communications messages placing the responsibility on parents to supervise and ensure safety and welfare of their child.
- Ability to obtain PPE was limited and had to be overcome for reinstating services previously stood down such as grass strimming. Reinstating other services where close working between officers was needed had social distancing impacts and required risk assessing, for example tree services.

### **Bereavement Services**

- Capacity issues were heightened by closure of Birtley crematorium prior to lockdown, due to refurbishment.
- Social distancing arrangements at Saltwell crematorium reduced funeral attendees to 10 initially. This increased to 15 when guidance from government changed.
- Additional staff trained to increase capacity and for business continuity. Change in operational processes to reduce in-person contact and streamline.
- Increased number of services from 8 to 11 per day and introduced Saturday services. Bereavement services coped with the demand. Additional provision reviewed as pandemic continued and death rates continued to fall. Saturday services switched off currently and will be reinstated if required.
- Webcasting service available from mid-June.
- Prioritised PPE supplies to enable safe service delivery.
- Birtley crematorium has reopened following refurbishment, including adaptations to allow social distancing.

### **Winter Services Plan**

- Plan formulated to enable rollout of winter services using a set of priority actions to mitigate staff shortages due to impact of covid on the workforce, with the aim to maintain a full service where possible.
- Where this is not possible priority 1 routes would only be gritted.

### **Highways**

- Continued emergency call out for flooding, lighting and reactive service throughout.
- Switched on services systematically after confirmation construction was essential work.
- Street permitting and network management continued throughout largely unaffected.

### **Housing**

- Most services delivered by TGHC continued under lockdown restrictions. Key areas that were affected were obtaining access to undertake home visits for repairs and compliance activity. Larger planned repairs experienced an impact due to changes to safe working practices and took longer to complete.
- Non-essential house moves were not permitted in the initial months of the first lockdown, and advertising of vacant homes was suspended, but urgent rehousing was carried out by direct letting.
- Delivery of the backlog of non-emergency works to council housing started late June, initial focus was to complete external works first to minimise risk. A recovery strategy for repairs

service was developed. The current backlog position is 372 down from an initial peak of 4000.

- Since March the Older Persons housing team have carried out over 54,000 welfare checks on residents.
- Since the start of lockdown in March the Rent and Income team have had over 41,000 contacts with residents and provided a wide range of advice and tenancy sustainability support.
- Rent arrears recovery was suspended from the initial lockdown, with low recovery starting from August – but with a focus on support. A joint approach to council tax and rent recovery has been developed with low level recovery action recommencing together with an emphasis on sustaining tenancies and providing advice and support.
- **Since 25 March 2020, Neighbourhood Service Advisors have supported over 24,000 customers with a range of enquiries. The five main areas of advice are tenancy matters, housing options, rent, anti-social behaviour and wider council services. A new telephone service was rolled out during October and is supporting phone call management and homeworking. Since its introduction a total of 3,985 contacts have been received with only 1.4% calls unanswered.**
- ICT equipment to aid home working has been provided across the housing and repairs service including laptops, mobile phones and headsets in order to support both mobile and home working.
- The programme of Estate walkabouts went ahead as planned in September and will continue through to end of November. 122 tours have been carried out to date. Customers could not physically attend with Neighbourhood housing officers but were encouraged to participate in other ways. 136 customers engaged to share their views to develop and improve their estate.
- From 23 November, non-essential works have been paused with a focus on completing all emergency, urgent and health and safety works. We will complete any backlog works where safe working practices can be achieved. This will result in approximately 200 jobs per week being postponed and will be reviewed weekly.

### **Homelessness**

- When lockdown commenced the Housing Options service focused on the governments “everyone in policy”. To accommodate households in line with the governments “everyone in” policy the authority block booked 36 bed spaces in a local Hotel from the 23 March until 26<sup>th</sup> May 2020.
- Housing support has continued to be provided to all households living in temporary accommodation through our housing options service and in partnership with Oasis Community Housing.
- We have 78 residents currently in homeless temporary accommodation (16 single clients in B&B, 62 households in TGHC dispersed temporary accommodation).
- Since March we have accommodated over 350 households into permanent council accommodation.
- Gateshead has received £60,000 from the government’s Next Steps Accommodation Programme to support immediate accommodation needs of those at risk of rough sleeping and a further £103,000 capital and £220,770 revenue to develop 15 homes using long term voids for those at risk of rough sleeping with floating support provision.

### **Buildings Management**

- Ensured our buildings were Covid secure, with risk assessments in place and adaptations made where necessary e.g. screens in registrars. Working with services to limit the number of staff within buildings. Developed signage for all council buildings.

## Lessons Learned

- The impact of working locally, with communities and partner organisations. The shielding hubs provide a more concerted effort to create bespoke, community led approaches to support residents in need
- Connecting more of our roles to the needs of our residents. Rapid remobilisation of employees from all across the Council into front facing roles during the pandemic at hubs, virtual call centres and logistics has provided a renewed perspective and person-centred approach.
- 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.
- Use of technology to change service delivery and become digitally based and ways of working at pace to build solutions from scratch.
- Supply chain issues to access PPE and supply of materials at height of lockdown and impact of contractors furloughing staff which reduced capacity to undertake work.
- Access issues to residents' homes delayed work until PPE and ways of working in a covid secure way were established.
- Challenge of dealing with constantly fluctuations in provision – e.g. school catering kitchens closing / reopening due to self-isolating staff. Transporting meals in from a central kitchen to continue the service in a different way.
- Collective desire to achieve better outcomes for residents, working with a common purpose and aim, and ability to overcome previous perceived barriers or blockers to change
- Visible culture to “do things” rather than “talk about things”
- Workforce resilience in 24/7 delivery and adapting to social distancing and use of PPE.
- Staffing issues – challenge of constantly changing capacity across teams whilst trying to maintain service levels. Front line staff have been operational throughout the pandemic.
- Employee mental health and wellbeing as a key area of focus recognising our workforce have felt under pressure to deliver quickly, remotely, adapt to working in isolation from home initially without the right support or equipment. Front line employees have also faced different stress and anxiety from potential exposure to Covid and the variety of situations they have faced to support residents with Covid
- Communications channels with customers and employees to embed flow of information in a timely manner as key guidance changed and services were stood down, reopened and adapted during the pandemic.

## Challenges going forward

- How do we balance the benefits of agile and home working for staff against the negative impacts on service delivery for some front facing services?
- The need to replace “water cooler discussions” to increase networking opportunities for remote working teams and staff
- Staff motivation, mental health and morale, covid fatigue.
- How to be best prepared for a third wave?