

**TITLE OF REPORT:** Impact of Covid – 19 on businesses and the local community

**REPORT OF:** Peter Udall – Strategic Director, Economy, Innovation and Growth and Colin Huntington, Housing, Environment and Healthier Communities

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### **Purpose of the Report**

1. This report provides an overview of the some of the support provided by the Council and its partners to local businesses and the community affected by the Covid -19 pandemic.

### **Background**

2. Council previously agreed each Overview and Scrutiny Committee will receive regular reports and updates setting out the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on areas relevant to the remit of the committee.
3. The following update covers support provided to the local business community and support provided to residents who have requested help due to a direct affect of Covid-19 or as an indirect affect such as poverty or vulnerability.

### **Supporting Businesses**

4. The Council mobilised quickly and has been proactive throughout the Pandemic ensuring that the latest information, advice and guidance is readily available, businesses are support and jobs protected.
5. In the lead up to the first national lockdown we established a Business Support Hub including an online information portal for business, employers and the self-employed, and helpline for businesses impacted by COVID-19 restrictions. To date over 2,850 businesses have been supported.
6. The Council continues to provide support for businesses and self-employed including:
  - Advice on business compliance and safe trading
  - Dedicated web pages, online resource and newsletter circulated to over 3,600 small businesses.
  - 1-2-1 Advice, help and guidance in relation to grant entitlement, discounts and other financial support
  - Self-employment and business start-up advice
7. Over summer 2020, the Council paid out £40m in grants to provide a vital lifeline to support over 3,600 small businesses in Gateshead. Following the introduction of

local restrictions in September 2020 and in response to the second and third national lockdowns a further £36.3m grant funding has been paid out to businesses forced to close and those impacted by restrictions on trading and socialising. This includes £6.6m Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG), discretionary funding which has been used to support:

- Suppliers to hospitality, accommodation, leisure and events sector
  - Taxi drivers and Driving Instructors
  - Registered childcare providers
  - Home based and mobile hospitality businesses and in person services.
  - Other impacted businesses with fixed property costs, ineligible to access any other grant
8. The Council qualified for a second top-up of £1.081m in July which has been used to provide additional support to the hospitality sector which was severely impacted by government's decision to delay proceeding to Stage 4 of its Roadmap in June and July, but continued to operate at reduced capacity.
9. Government introduced ARG was awarded to the Council to support businesses important to our local economy. Guidance envisaged it would be primarily used to provide discretionary grants to businesses impacted by COVID 19 but could also be used to fund wider business support activities.
10. All grant payments have now been made to qualifying businesses. The remaining ARG funds are to be used to fund measures that support businesses through the recovery phase of the pandemic, in particular Economy Development Strategy policy objectives of:
- Visitor Economy - Re-imagining culture and tourism in a post COVID world
  - Local Economy - Creating the conditions for a strong local economy that maximises the Gateshead pound, and
  - Green Economy - Tackling climate change and environmental degradation
11. During the period business recovery has been further impacted by the end of full business rate exemptions and the introduction of employer contributions to the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (furlough) scheme on 1 July 2021. The furlough scheme ceased at the end of September 2021. It is understood that there were approximately 3,400 Gateshead jobs still furloughed at this time.
12. The fifth and final round of Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) grants also closed on 30 September and for many businesses that have accessed government COVID loan funding the 12-month repayment holiday period also ended adding additional cost pressures. Latest available figures suggest that 1,600 SEISS claims had been submitted by self-employed residents (1 in 4 eligible) with 75% reporting a reduction in turnover of over 30%.
13. The impact of the withdrawal of Government support and in particular the ending of furlough is not yet known.

## **Support to People**

14. Working Gateshead the Council's person centred, place based universal employment support approach which is open to any Gateshead resident regardless of employment status, continues to deliver both remotely and face to face with slowly

increasing presence in different venues, at events etc. It has strong links with the area co-ordinators in the community hubs and robust referral mechanisms.

15. As at 31<sup>st</sup> October 2021 Working Gateshead had received 1,212 contacts from residents for help preparing for work, returning to work, dealing with redundancy or to progress in work, all of which have been responded to. Intensive (in-depth) one to one employment support has been provided for 550 unemployed and economically inactive residents resulting in 290 residents being helped into employment since July 2020
16. The European Social Fund Make A Change project came to its natural end on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021 and the last participant has exited the programme. The project has supported 263 residents with either protected characteristics (significant barriers to employment) or who were workless housing company tenants. 100 residents have moved into employment/self-employment and 66 have moved into education/training.
17. The Wise Steps project has been extended through to the end of December 2022 and will provide continued employment support to an additional 100 residents with multiple and complex barriers and who are furthest away from the labour market.
18. The Council continues to act as a DWP Kickstart 'Gateway' to help businesses access funding to create job placements for 16-to-24-year-olds receiving Universal Credit. To date, the Gateway has:
  - Supported 25 business to access the Kickstart Scheme,
  - Created 96 job placements, and
  - Assisted 33 young people to commence work so far
19. Kickstart vacancies have been created from a variety of businesses across a range of sectors, including in the digital and creative sector, traditional manufacturing and engineering roles, sales, and administration positions.
20. Gateshead Council itself has successfully applied to operate 16 Social Care and Health positions, four within the Care Call service and 12 within Adult Provider Services. These vacancies are expected to go live soon.
21. In partnership with Gateshead Older People's Assembly, Gateshead Council has established a Gateshead 50+ employability hub to help people over 50 access employment, training and health & wellbeing opportunities. This age cohort has been proportionately more adversely affected during the pandemic. The Hub brings together the Gateshead OPA, LearningSkills and Working Gateshead support with that of key delivery partners; Jobcentre Plus, National Careers Service, and Gateshead College.
22. The Hub went live in the summer and Working Gateshead is receiving referrals for those 50+ who are looking for work. Working Gateshead is also attending and providing employment support at Bensham Court, a 50+ housing block in Gateshead, via the Hub.
23. The current Claimant Count figure for Gateshead continues to fall and is down to 7,125 (5.6%), this compares to pre-pandemic (March 20) figure of 5,860 (4.6%) so whilst continued good progress is being made it should be noted that that the number of residents is still 21.6% above 'normal/previous' pre-pandemic levels.

## Community Support

24. In response to the global coronavirus pandemic, Gateshead Council commenced its emergency food support in March 2020. Initially, this was put in place to support residents who were shielding and/or self-isolating, but over time it has developed into a poverty response. Since their inception, the Community Hubs (formerly known as the Shielding Hubs) have responded to over 12,000 requests for help from Gateshead residents throughout the pandemic to access a range of services to include:

- Emergency food
- Routine shopping
- Social welfare advice
- Counselling and emotional support
- System navigation
- Low level personal care
- Problem solving e.g. dog walking, travel to essential appointments
- System navigation

25. In addition to this work the hubs have supported a wide range of initiatives to include but not limited to:

- Writing to over 36,000 residents to check they were okay
- Telephoning almost 27,000 residents
- Spoken to 11,000 residents classed as being Clinically Extremely Vulnerable
- Connected thousands of volunteers to help out
- Made up, distributed, and delivered
  - over 18,200 food parcels
  - 1,400 cook n eat boxes
  - 1400 school meal pack lunch parcels
  - 865 Christmas hampers
- Provided over school meal vouchers to children eligible for free school meals means tested benefit over the February, Easter, Summer and October school holiday periods
- Issued over 4,300 prepay cards to households with children on free school meals
- Delivered 59 essential oxygen monitors to residents suffering from covid

## Community Vaccinations

26. Between late August and September, the Council has delivered 14 community vaccination pop ups in communities where intelligence indicates the take up of the vaccine has been low. These pop ups have taken place in local community facilities and in a mobile unit (the former Youth Bus), in addition to the community locations in Teams, Bensham, Bridges, Deckham and Felling, the vaccination pop ups have been deployed in the town centre with the support of the Trinity Square Management Committee.

27. A further 7 pop ups are planned over the early part of December in High Fell, Bridges, Lobley Hill and Bensham and in partnership with Gateshead College at their Team Valley and Baltic Campus sites.

## **Volunteering**

28. Since November 2020 there has been requests to help from an estimated 3,050 individual volunteers centrally made up of:

- 450 individual volunteers through central process
- 200 (average of 10 people per request) from groups/corporate volunteer days
- 50 (average of 12 people per group) from environmental groups

29. Within Gateshead during the initial pandemic and lock down there was a influx in informal volunteering and particularly mutual aid groups. This was reflected across other areas nationally. Mutual aid groups were established right across Gateshead but due to their nature weren't formally registered. They offered a variety of tasks from shopping to collecting prescriptions. As this is all informal the groups didn't have the usual safeguarding policies etc. of VCS groups.

30. Information has been communicated on Gateshead Council website about how to keep safe during the pandemic for both people wanting to volunteer and those who are vulnerable and needing support. These mutual aid groups have gradually ceased.

31. Since lockdown has ended and services and projects are beginning to get back to the new normal for Gateshead, the amount of people wanting to become a volunteer has increased, more people want to help out more. As a quick comparison this year there has been a total of 40 volunteers registered from 1<sup>st</sup> October – 30<sup>th</sup> November 2021. Back two years ago pre-covid (2019) the number was 15 in the same time period for individual volunteering.

32. Corporate organisations are also starting to submit requests again and there have been over 50 new roles established since lock down across Gateshead both in council service areas and within the voluntary sector.

33. During the pandemic there have also been links developed between services within the team with the voluntary sector. These already existed, however working together during the pandemic has enabled the relationship to develop in more depth and become more partnership working.

## **Gateshead Call Centre**

34. The Council has since November 2020 been contacting residents who have reported as testing positive for Covid 19, initially to check on the welfare of the individual but as the pandemic has progressed, the Council continued to take on more responsibility for track and trace locally.

35. The Council initially created its own IT system to receive and contact patient information, however, the call centre, staffed predominantly by employees from sport and leisure now operate using the national test and trace system support by a regional body called CRC.

36. Since 3rd July 2020 and the team have had 3,659 test and trace cases come through to the Council which have required detailed contact and follow up of known and close contacts. In addition, from 27th July team have been completing all support calls, totalling 1,293 to date.

## **Recommendations**

37. The Housing, Environment and Healthier Communities OSC is recommended that to:

- i) consider the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the areas relevant for this committee
- ii) identify any areas for further scrutiny

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Contact: Andrew Tate, ext 2084 and Ian Stevenson, ext 2812