

**TITLE OF REPORT:** Impact of COVID -19

**REPORT OF:** Darren Collins, Strategic Director, Resources and Digital

---

## **SUMMARY**

This report sets out an overview of an update to be provided to Committee on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on areas relevant to its remit.

---

### **Background**

1. Each Overview and Scrutiny Committee is receiving reports setting out the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on areas relevant to its remit.
2. The early impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was reported to Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee in September 2020. This provided an overview and also outlined the impact of the pandemic on performance against the five Thrive pledges.
3. The ongoing response and need to recover is being monitored and the Committee received an update at their last meeting on 30 November 2020. It was agreed that the Committee would receive a further update on 1<sup>st</sup> March. 2021

### **Overview of response**

4. The global Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact throughout the world. There have been considerable implications for everyone in the UK including Gateshead, where it continues to affect the lives of all who live and work here. It is clear the impact, particularly the long term issues, will be far reaching for many years to come.
5. The Council implemented action from the beginning of the pandemic putting in place measures and steps to respond to the issues that emerged early on and throughout. The Council has continued to prioritise responding to the pandemic and its impact. It has focused on supporting people in Gateshead, particularly the most vulnerable, some of whom has required support for the first time. It has also provided help to businesses who have and continue to be adversely affected. This has included the administration of various grants and financial support as well as providing advice and signposting.
6. The issues and impact have required a collaborative approach working in partnership with a range of organisations and communities and volunteers who

have come together in response from strategic resilience planning to delivering food and prescriptions to those unable to leave their home.

### **Impact and informing future**

7. While the Council has been responding to the short term impacts, the full picture in regard to the longer impacts is not yet fully understood. Services will continue to identify impacts and learn lessons to inform activities and the future ways of working.
8. The Council has made many changes to adapt to working and delivering services differently to ensure local people get the support they need. Lessons learnt from the early response have helped the Council to continue to respond during the increase in Covid-19 infections. Services are also looking at how to retain what has worked well as well as seeking to understand what may be needed as part of recovery and beyond.
9. The Committee will receive a presentation which will provide a more detailed overview of the impact of the pandemic on areas relevant to this committee including:
  - Update on the impact and continued response
  - Lessons learnt
  - How this is changing how we work in the future
10. Key areas are highlighted below, though further detail will be covered in the presentation:
  - Impact and response to increased demand from local people and businesses for financial support including Council Tax Support, Council Tax Hardship Fund, Winter grants and over 11,000 payments made to businesses
  - Customer experience developments to ensure local people can effectively and efficiently contact Council services - with 156,000 general calls since March
  - The Covid - 19 pandemic accelerated the IT adoption and change program as demand for technologies that enable new ways of working has increased significantly. Software such as Microsoft Teams, which has enabled the organisation to communicate and collaborate via video, is completely different to the position a year ago. To meet this demand, the key lesson has been to confirm the plan for new ways of working enabled by technology is the right approach. However, to maximise the opportunities presented by new technology there is a need for further investment
  - Supporting employees throughout the pandemic from frontline workers to those working at home, responding to different needs and ensuring safe working environments through risk assessments and activities
  - Employees have been able to access counselling, 'wobble room' and guidance on looking after mental health and wellbeing while the Individual Employee Personal Discussion tool has been rolled out to understand the different needs of employees and how they can be supported
  - A Health and Wellbeing Survey is currently underway with employees and the findings will be used to inform future developments

- A focus on agile working for the future, when employees can return to the workplace, and having solid foundations in place for different ways of working on a permanent basis
- Support through the hubs which have received over 7,500 requests for assistance including food, utilities and routine shopping
- Working with volunteers and community groups to support vulnerable and isolated people. Over 500 individuals offered to volunteer while a range of initiatives have been undertaken, most recently through the Christmas and winter period providing Christmas Hampers, gifts and a joint Gateshead and Newcastle Spirit of Christmas Campaign
- Supporting the Public Health response to the pandemic with implementation of resilience and business continuity planning
- Learning lessons from resilience work with partners across the Northumbria area and nationwide as well as implementation of more virtual communications and ensuring that continued incident responses adhere to health and safety guidance pertaining to Covid -19
- Financial impact on the Council through increased expenditure as well as lost / reduced income
- Supporting schools through the Services for Schools commercial services with continued engagement with schools and responding to emerging issues

## **Recommendation**

11. It is recommended that Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee receive the presentation and:
  - consider the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the areas relevant for this committee
  - identify any areas, they feel they require more detail about or feel require further scrutiny

**Contact: Lindsay Murray**

**Ext: 2794**