

TITLE OF REPORT: Impact of COVID-19

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

SUMMARY

This report provides an overview of the 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 a report 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 first reported to Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee in September 2020. The ongoing response and need to recover is being monitored and the Committee last received an update at their meeting on 1st March 2021. It was agreed that the Committee would receive a further update on 14th June 2021

Overview of response

3. The global Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact throughout the world. There have been considerable implications for everyone over the past 15 months and this will continue in the future. In Gateshead the pandemic, response and move to recovery continues to affect the lives of all who live and work here. The longer term impact is not fully understood given the pandemic is not over, although steps are being taken to identify and address issues being faced, looking both at the short term response and longer term recovery.
4. The Council implemented action from the beginning of the pandemic putting in place measures to respond to the issues that emerged early on and throughout. The Council has continued to prioritise its response through each wave, as well as looking towards recovery. The focus has been on supporting the most vulnerable to ensure they receive the help and services they need.
5. Throughout the pandemic employees have played a huge part on how the Council has been able to respond. Many have worked in different roles directly supporting local people through this difficult time. A lot of work has been undertaken to ensure employees work safely and have the equipment they need to undertake their roles in an effective way. Lessons have been learned that will help to inform new ways of working in the future.

6. The pandemic also required new ways of enabling customers to contact the Council given the need for social distancing. This required greater use of technology and a more digital approach to service delivery. Collaboration with partners and local communities has been crucial to the response and the council is working with others to help build the approach to recovery.

Impact

7. It is important to note that while the impact has been felt by everyone, Covid-19 has not gone away and we are all still responding and working differently to how we worked 15 months ago. Understanding the longer term impact will also be important and work is being undertaken by Public Health, to identify the main issues for Gateshead. This will also inform the new Performance Management and Improvement Framework through identifying and including relevant measures and qualitative information to help to address inequalities that have been exacerbated because of the pandemic and ensure there is a clear focus on what matters to local people. The framework will then be able to help to measure impact and activities to address this over time.
8. 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 the impact on Gateshead businesses, the approach to customer experience and the impact on employees. Key areas are highlighted below:

Impact on residents and business

- 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 payments made to businesses
- Proactive contact with residents and businesses to provide advice and support
- Improvements to the Council's website which will make it easier for people to access services online
- Research has been undertaken by NGI on the impact on local businesses and an update will be presented to the Committee

Supporting employees

- Continuing to support employees throughout the pandemic, with a focus on managing and maintaining mental wellbeing. Sessions have been delivered by the Occupational Health and Safety Service such as 'balance and burnout', 'working from home (including Teams fatigue)', 'coping with anxiety (self and others)', 'grief and loss' and, 'wobble/support room' sessions.
- Responding to new and evolving health and safety needs through risk assessment and ensuring constructive conversations take place between employees and their managers.
- The Employee Health and Wellbeing Survey has been analysed with headline results being used to inform an action plan. More detail of the top line outcomes and proposed actions will be presented to the Committee.
- The formulation of plans, through the Ways of Working Group, to introduce new ways of working for office based staff e.g. a suite of protocols to support

different ways of working on a permanent basis e.g. 'Virtual Meeting Etiquette'

Procurement and commissioning

- There is a good supply of PPE and the Council is obtaining the majority of PPE from Department of Health and Social Care.
- Prices are beginning to rise across many areas though particularly for building materials. Shortages are also being experienced in core building products e.g. cement, timber etc. This is not solely due to Covid as Brexit and the Suez Canal incident have also had an impact. This will be monitored.

Collaborative ways of working with partners

- The Council is developing collaborative strategic relationships with key partner organisations. This includes anchor institutions building on the invaluable work that has taken place with partners throughout the pandemic to look at how we can work together in the future for a more resilient borough.
- Building on the successful Gateshead household survey undertaken last summer, the region's local authorities have come together to undertake a further COVID-19 household survey in partnership with the National Institute for Health Research, NHS North East Integrated COVID-19 Hub, and Durham University. The results for Gateshead, when received, will be reported into the Committee at a future meeting.

Volunteering and community capacity building

- Throughout the last 18 months Covid-19 has directly impacted the voluntary sector provision with a need for volunteers to support vulnerable and isolated people in local communities.
- Around 700 people / groups offered support which was directed to the most appropriate projects. A section on the Council website enabled anyone who wanted to volunteer to register.
- The volunteering generally focussed on activities such as delivery of food and essential items, as well as telephone befrienders (through partner groups) to support the vulnerable and isolated.
- Any volunteer roles that weren't supporting the community directly with Covid-19 were not generally unable to open, though over the past few weeks regular volunteer roles have started to become active again as restrictions lift.
- Moving forward volunteer development work will concentrate on assessing the voluntary sector and identifying the volunteering needs, supporting groups to create suitable volunteer roles to address these needs and identifying the relevant guidance to adhere to social distancing

IT impact and support

- The main focus has been on supporting the IT needs of the organisation to enable working with new technology. This has been a huge part of the Council's ability to respond to the pandemic. The Council is in a strong position with work progressing well with having technology readily available following the accelerated IT programme.

- The needs for corporate meetings are being reviewed in line with new ways of working that will accommodate both face to face and virtual ways of collaborating.
- The IT Training offer remains available for all councillors and employees, through videos, virtual training and bespoke face to face sessions

Building resilience and physical assets

- Supporting services to review their Business Impact Assessments for all Council functions and, where necessary, develop or review Business Continuity Plans
- Work is also taking place to ensure Council buildings remain safe through cleaning regimes, signage etc and assessments are being made on measures as social distancing requirements change.
- The Council is also continuing with repairs and maintenance to buildings in line with health and safety guidelines
- Lessons on the use of buildings will be identified and used to inform future ways of working

Recommendation

9. 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

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