

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 14th June 2021. It was agreed that the Committee would receive a further update in October 2021

Overview of response

3. The Covid-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact globally including a significant impact across the UK and North East. In Gateshead the response to the pandemic is continuing alongside measures to recover and manage the impact. As the pandemic is ongoing, the full long term impact is still emerging. Steps are being taken to identify and address issues being faced locally and how we can learn from things that worked well and inform how we work in the future. The Council quickly took measures to respond to the pandemic and continues to do this.
4. The Council has had to prioritise its resources to deliver essential services. Services are supported to undertake Business Impact Assessments of all their activities, and complete Business Continuity Plans for those activities identified as critical. To provide assurance that services continue to have the necessary resilience to ensure uninterrupted delivery of their critical activities, they are currently requested to undertake a weekly assessment of capacity in relation to critical activities, and any concerns are communicated by exception, to enable corporate consideration of plans to mitigate the risk to resilience.
5. The Business Impact Assessments are usually reviewed annually but during the pandemic have been reviewed more often to ensure the fast changing operating environment continues to be reflected in resilience plans. The next review will take place ahead of the winter period to ensure that anticipated winter pressures are reflected and provide assurance that all critical activities will continue to be delivered.

Impact

6. Key areas and impact are highlighted below, though members of the Committee will receive a more detailed presentation on the impact on residents, businesses and employees:

Impact on residents and business

- Impact and response to increased demand from local people and businesses for financial support continues to be a priority, 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 recognising the potential impact in Gateshead of the end of the Furlough scheme and the changes to Universal Credit.
- Working with Citizen's Advice Gateshead to support residents in difficult financial circumstances
- Enhancing customer experience through advancements made through the pandemic including improvements being made to the Council's website which will make it easier for people to access services online

Supporting employees

- Managing and maintaining mental wellbeing continues to be a priority as does the requirement to constantly respond to health and safety and review risk assessments. Ensuring constructive conversations and wellbeing 'check-in's' continue to take place between employees and their managers remains an important aspect of the Council's message for those who can to continue to work at home.
- Since the last OSC report, the Ways of Working Group has further developed the 'Hybrid Working Offer', along with an FAQ document and Manager's Guidance. Management Guidance sets out the issues which managers should consider when planning for a longer term hybrid working arrangement, including service delivery, customer requirements, employee preferences and physical space requirements.
- A suite of hybrid working related documents is available on the intranet <https://intranet.gateshead.gov.uk/article/18337/Hybrid-Working>
- A Hybrid Working Protocol is also being developed. This aims to clarify and set out standards and requirements for employees when working from home
- HR and Occupational Health are working closely with Adult Social Care and other relevant colleagues to manage the impact of the legal requirement for those who are deployed in care homes to be fully vaccinated against Covid.
- Employees have continued to be supported through Occupational Health, which has received an increase in enquiries. These have been related both to Covid-19 as well as other health issues. Employees are also directed, where appropriate, to other wellbeing services provided by the Council such as 'Wobble Rooms' and have fed back how helpful these have been.
- A cautious approach to the delivery of 'in person' learning and development continues; where training has to take place in person to meet legal or statutory requirements, appropriate Covid 19 safe measures are in place.

Engagement and working with others

- Engagement with ward councillors on better understanding each ward and mapping local assets, including support available from the community and voluntary sector support, is underway. This will then be collated and used to inform what is available, locally, to support our communities in times of need.
- The Council has continued to build upon the excellent partnership working that has taken place throughout the course of the pandemic. The work towards building a more resilient borough, and supporting those who need us most, continues.

Volunteering and community capacity building

- The voluntary sector has already had a significant impact in supporting residents and the community. There are many informal & formal volunteers who have shown an exceptional response and provided hours of their own time to regularly support both the hubs and the VCS. Activities have included:
 - Telephone befriending still supporting those who are still vulnerable through Covid19, including older people
 - Shopping for those who are still vulnerable
 - Cooking volunteers to help prepare and provide meals to vulnerable people
 - Volunteers helping to support Covid19 vaccine pop up sessions across Gateshead at different locations
- As restrictions began to ease, voluntary groups and projects began to become active once more. However, many suffered a loss of their usual volunteers, many volunteers are of retirement age and while no longer required to shield are being cautious due and as a result have stopped delivering their volunteering roles.
- Volunteering roles are being promoted through the Council website, throughout networks and using the Council's social media. The Council is receiving enquiries from local people requesting volunteer roles that they can get involved in. These are now being linked together and volunteers matched to suitable active roles.
- Support for both volunteers and groups will continue to develop and adapt as restrictions ease for example support to existing Countryside volunteers and Friends of Groups in local parks and offering support to new groups.

IT impact and support

- The Covid19 situation accelerated the IT adoption and change program in relation to the current IT service offer as demand for technologies that enable new ways of working has been significant.
- The demand on technologies and specific technologies such as Microsoft Teams, which has enabled the organisation to communicate and collaborate via video, is completely different to where we were one year ago.
- To meet this accelerated demand, the main key lesson learnt over this year has been to confirm the adoption and change programme, planned for new ways of working enabled by technology, is the right approach. However, further investment in technology and resources would be needed to maximise the opportunities presented by new technology and successfully implement new ways of working.

Buildings and physical assets

- 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.
- In line with guidance, most employees are still working from home in the main, though there has been an increase in employees working in Council buildings.
- Members of the public are able to access to Civic Centre for meetings by appointment or for public meetings as required.
- Assessments are also being made as to how the Council's building assets should be best used in the future. This will build on lessons from different ways of working used over the last eighteen months and inform future ways of working.
- During the pandemic there was a notable increase both nationally and locally in people accessing the environment, parks and open spaces. This was due to lock down restrictions limiting travel and the use of indoor spaces as well as more people working from home.
- It is recognised that access to the environment can improve mental health and wellbeing. The Council has a programme for improving green spaces and a full report will be presented to the Housing, Environment and Healthier Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 18th October, however this includes:
 - Capital investment in fixed play facilities, parks and countryside sites to improve access and encourage use
 - Three year Environmental Investment Scheme to help local areas to Thrive and attract inward investment and community involvement, with 23 schemes completed since the April 2021 launch
 - As restrictions ease the Council is working with event organisers to help ensure that these can recommence in our parks and open spaces in a safe manner to attract people to local areas

Impact on Resilience

- The vast majority of day to day resources within the resilience team were diverted to deal with Covid response coordination, which had resulted in delays to all but the most essential areas of business.
- All existing plans and procedures required updates to include Covid considerations and caveats for employee and public safety. These have all now been reviewed and include pandemic considerations to 'future proof' against further outbreaks, therefore reducing the risk of plan re-writes and diversions of planning resources.
- Remote working arrangements have been trialled and arrangements documented to allow the Council to respond to an incident without physically assembling a team, should that not be a safe option in future.

Other impacts

7. The pandemic has resulted in some positive outcomes to note for this Committee including:
 - The accelerated shift to online access and more digital ways of engaging and delivering services, where appropriate including internally as well as externally with partners and residents.

- Ability to meet customer expectations for greater online access which has grown during the pandemic.
- The different ways of working have increased the digital skills of employees and this has been used to collaborate effectively to support residents and build relationships across different areas
- Working from Home has provided opportunities for many employees to improve their work/life balance and for many to work in different areas helping to build relationships and improve cross Council and partnership working. There has been some very positive learning that is being used to inform how we work in the future
- Employees have played a huge role in delivering essential services, many of whom have worked diligently in directly supporting local people, or indirectly to support frontline areas.
- It has demonstrated the ability of the Council to be adaptable and respond to the needs of residents and businesses quickly and in a flexible, innovative way. From the outset the Council was able to respond, setting up support through hubs, focusing on the most vulnerable and work effectively with partners and enable vital services to be delivered to those that needed them through unprecedented circumstances.

Recommendation

8. It is recommended that Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee:
 - consider the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the areas relevant for this committee
 - identify any areas for further scrutiny

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