

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY – 21 OCTOBER 2020

RESPONDING TO COVID-19

REPORT OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

LEAD CABINET MEMBER – COUNCILLOR BRIAN EDWARDS MBE, LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

PART A – SUMMARY REPORT

1. SUMMARY

1.1 This report sets out the Council's response to Covid-19.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2.1 The last six months has probably been the most challenging this Council has ever experienced and Covid-19 has dramatically changed the way the Council is now doing business. The pandemic has put huge pressure on our short and medium-term plans and throughout the crisis has continually seen us shift our thinking and approach to respond to the demands called upon us at both a local and national level.

2.2 Clear and regular communication and quick decision making at both officer and officer/member level has been critical in the way we have dealt with the crisis and also the necessity to scale up and scale down services based on local and national evidence.

2.3 Our mantra of 'one team, one council' has continued to shine through during the crisis, with quick officer and Member decisions made in the early days of the Covid crisis, for example in a very short space of time we were able to distribute over £18m to 1,600 businesses and quickly shift staff resources to set up an active Covid community support programme within a week of the lockdown.

2.4 The Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) has continued to challenge how the Council has responded to this crisis by completing a number of tasks including introducing a 'Taking Stock' Document (Appendix 1) that checked and challenged all our current strategies and action plans to ensure they were all still relevant to the Council and fit for purpose. A good example being the Community Hub where the exercise confirmed that it was still in the Council's interest to continue with the scheme. It will be very important that we regularly carry out similar exercises.

2.5 CLT, along with the Leader, also took part in the Local Government Associations new Peer Review Programme which tests out a Council's recovery and renewal plans. The outcome of this exercise was very positive with the peer team highlighting a number of strengths, in particular, recognising that without the infrastructure that has been put in place around transformation, the Council would not have been able to respond the way we have and at

the speed we did. The peer team also recognised how well Members had responded to the challenges, in particular how quickly virtual committee meetings were organised. (Full report will be circulated when received from the LGA).

2.6 There are a number of ongoing challenges that the Council need to be continually mindful of, including the overall resilience of the organisation, recognising that this crisis will be with us for some time and that we have a very difficult winter ahead of us. Balancing the pace of delivery against the ongoing capacity of the workforce will be very important as will strong and timely communications as things can change very quickly. For example, current Covid infection rates within South Staffordshire are rising above expected levels, so engaging with members and other key partners through strong communication will be very important.

2.7 The following points summarises some of the work we have focused on as a Council.

Business support

- Over £18m has been paid to 1,600 businesses across the district as part of the Business Grants Scheme.
- Over 700+ interactions with businesses from our Environmental Health Team who have given them advice on safely re-opening their premises.
- 100's more businesses have been supported through the Council's Enterprise Team.
- Fortnightly Virtual Business Webinars are now being held targeting smaller businesses on key topics. To date over 200 businesses have participated and viewed the webinars.
- Our Locality Enablers have been deployed to support ward members in giving advice and support to our larger villages as part of the re-opening of the high street programme.
- Through the reopening high street programme, we have developed a package of support for high street businesses including one to one support, advice on funding and grants and practical help such as the creation of a sign bank for shops and businesses to use which we have created on our website.
- We have prepared numerous promotional videos to support businesses in the context of supporting high streets and safe shopping.
- We have also delivered a number of public realm messages/posters/street furniture covers in the high streets all focused on supporting local businesses and promoting the key Public Health messages.
- We are now devising our 10 point recovery plan for business in the District.
- Arrangements are being put in place with regard to the recently announced Local Restriction Support Grant scheme, which will make grants of up to £3,000 a month available to businesses should they be required to close as a result of a local lockdown.

Community and Welfare Support

- 500+ calls have been received via our Covid-19 help line.
- The Council has worked with over 50 local community groups and parish council's to coordinate food parcels; the collection of prescriptions; and the setting up of food banks to support our vulnerable residents. South Staffordshire is a great example of communities supporting one-another through a network of support mechanisms
- We have redeployed our Connect bus service to collect and deliver shopping for vulnerable residents who are shielding.

- Our Covid support team have contacted 2,600+ residents across the district to ensure they remain safe and well.
- A total of £295,000 has been paid to 2051 residents in receipt of Council Tax Support by reducing their Council Tax Bill by up to £150.
- We are continuing to support vulnerable people to ensure they won't become homeless.
- We have worked with the County Council and local community groups to distribute food parcels to our vulnerable residents.
- Officers from the Environmental Health Team supported the County Council by taking part in their training programme and delivering training on Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to care homes across the District.
- Recognising the challenges of COVID 19 on individuals' income we held a welfare webinar at which over 30 people attended where members of the Council's Welfare team gave advice on benefits and support available alongside the South Staffs Work Clubs giving and advice on getting back into work and the chamber of Commerce on self-employed start up advice.

Front-line Council Services

- We kept Baggeridge Country Park open in a safe and controlled manner during this crisis to ensure residents still had access to the open countryside, very much supporting physical and emotional wellbeing. We are now safely managing the use of the new children's play area, which is proving to be very popular.
- Our Cemeteries remained open, when others were closed.
- Our Street-Scene Team continued to operate to full capacity to keep our district clean and tidy during the peak of the pandemic.
- Over 1,200 tons of residual, recyclables; and garden waste has been collected during lockdown. An 18% increase compared to normal collections.
- During lockdown 67% of our residents signed up to our new green waste collection service.
- The Environmental Team in addition to supporting local businesses with advice and guidance to be COVID-19 secure have also been actively engaged in the current track and trace programme managing local outbreaks in the community and businesses

Governance and our workforce

- With the rare exception of some direct front facing services the Council's workforce and Members were immediately able to work from home following the Prime Ministers announcement to lockdown.
- All internal and public meetings are being held via Microsoft Teams.
- Regular all member and staff virtual forums are being held to aid communication.
- We have in place a range of flexible working practices to help the workforce balance their work and family commitments.
- Workforce attendance and productivity has remained strong throughout the pandemic. Absence figures for July to September were significantly less than the same period last year (reduced from 1.66 to 0.55).
- Self-isolation figures have been low but the majority of staff self-isolating have continued to work (from home).
- Absences relating to mental health have not increased since last year. We will continue to carry out keep in touch surveys and provide resources/communications and training

to promote good physical and mental health well-being. This includes virtual access to well-being services including counselling.

- We are providing a range of webinars to ensure employees are equipped with the appropriate skills for working with new technology and virtual ways of working.
- We carried out a skills audit to divert staff to priority areas. This has given us increased capacity to attend to significant business continuity planning, increased call volume, support for vulnerable residents/community groups environmental health work, processing of grants, support to businesses and additional building facility management/cleaning to re-open our premises safely. This flexibility will continue over the coming months to ensure we focus on priorities and emerging areas and ensure we are responsive to changing local circumstances

Local Outbreaks

- Local Outbreak plans developed across Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent.
- Director of Public Health and Cabinet Member presented at two all Member briefings.
- Public Health Boards held 3 times a week where EHO's are actively involved. Cabinet Member also represents the Council and district in a wider countywide local outbreak group.
- Daily briefings arranged with CEO, Cabinet Member and key officers as numbers started to escalate and relevant communications distributed to Members.
- Incident Management Team meetings held across wide range of partners to collectively take proactive action to respond the increase in case numbers.

2.8 The above highlights the important role the council has played in supporting our communities. As we have progressed from the emergency planning phase, into delivery and to where we currently are now in recovery and renewal, we have continually taken stock of how we manage this crisis and Appendix 2, sets out the latest governance arrangements put in place to effectively manage this crisis.

2.9 In summary, there are a number of important tasks that the Council need to maintain:

- Continue to relay timely and relevant messages to Members, businesses and the wider community.
- Continually take stock assessing our delivery and recovery plans and also business as usual services.
- Continually check the resilience of the Council and move resources to where they are most needed.
- Continue to provide support and guidance to the business community and our residents.

Report prepared by:

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