

Cabinet

5 June 2020

COVID-19 planning and response

Ordinary Decision



Report of Corporate Management Team

All Cabinet Members

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To provide Cabinet with a summary of the actions the council has taken working with partners to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and our framework for recovery planning.
- 2 While the report is correct at the time of writing (26 May 2020), the situation with COVID-19 is changing rapidly and government announcements, policy and guidance change on a daily basis meaning some of the information in the report may have been superseded.

Executive summary

- 3 A novel coronavirus - severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) – was identified in Wuhan, China at the end of last year. The virus is highly infectious and causes a respiratory illness called COVID-19.
- 4 The virus has spread rapidly across the world, and was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation on 11 March 2020.
- 5 As at 27 May 2020, 213 countries/territories had been affected; there were 5,488,825 confirmed cases globally; and 349,095 confirmed deaths. In the UK, there were 267,240 confirmed cases and 37,460 confirmed deaths. Here in County Durham, as at 27 May 2020, there were 1,976 confirmed cases and 532 confirmed deaths.
- 6 The highly infectious nature of the virus and the serious illness it can cause has significantly affected how we live, work and play. It has

resulted in global adjustments to normal ways of life, travel and commerce, to try to contain the spread of the virus, minimise deaths and ensure that COVID-19 cases do not overwhelm health and social care systems.

- 7 As such, the coronavirus pandemic is one of the most profound challenges society has faced in more than a generation and with effective vaccines yet to be produced, we have to anticipate that society will be affected by COVID-19 for some time to come.
- 8 The council and its partners had emergency and business continuity management planning frameworks in place, which enabled us to respond promptly to the threat as it emerged. However, we have had to respond dynamically and innovatively revising our approach as the national coronavirus action plan and recovery strategy evolved.
- 9 The council has worked nationally, regionally and locally to protect our communities and to support those affected by the pandemic, economically, socially and in relation to their own physical and mental health.
- 10 County Durham communities themselves have been a major force in this and have made an immense contribution to the 'County Durham Together' response.
- 11 County Durham residents have observed and cooperated with national guidance and while the lockdown restrictions are beginning to be relaxed for many, the council will continue to support the many thousands of residents who are still shielding and self-isolating.
- 12 Council employees also have risen to the challenge and demonstrated their willingness to work flexibly, adopt new ways of working and support each other, focussing on what needs to be done to maintain services and support local communities.
- 13 Locally, the council has worked with partner agencies via the County Durham and Darlington Local Resilience Forum (LRF) to manage the multi-agency response to COVID-19.
- 14 The council's Director of Public Health is a member of the regional Health Strategic Group which has worked with the three LRFs and other strategic planning groups across the region.
- 15 The council has played a key leadership role regionally, supporting the LRF and regional health partnerships. Locally the council has focused upon the following key aspects of its own response plan:

- (a) public health and overall planning and response to the pandemic;
- (b) population health management;
- (c) community support, action and welfare support;
- (d) social care and commissioning;
- (e) support to businesses;
- (f) education and children's services;
- (g) business continuity;
- (h) neighbourhood services;
- (i) on-line services;
- (j) workforce and human resource management;
- (k) testing;
- (l) recovery planning.

16 In responding to the pandemic, the council:

- (a) developed overall planning arrangements, translating WHO and government guidance into local action and support, underpinned by dedicated intelligence and data analysis, public health practitioner advice, communications and human resources (HR) management;
- (b) established a community support hub with the community and voluntary sector, to support vulnerable people affected by coronavirus including those advised to 'shield' themselves for an extended period;
- (c) offered assistance to 75,000 vulnerable people in the county, as well as to 13,271 people who said they needed help to shield from infection because they are at extreme risk of illness;
- (d) established a volunteer bureau to enable local people and groups who want to help;
- (e) invested an additional £1.5 million via Area Action Partnerships (AAPs) to support local and cross-county community responses and have enabled local Members to allocate Member budgets more flexibly, potentially providing a further £1.764 million of revenue support;

- (f) increased our Welfare Assistance Scheme by a further £1 million to provide emergency financial assistance for those in crisis, utilising funding from the Hardship Fund;
- (g) extended the benefits of the Local Council Tax Support Scheme, utilising the Hardship Fund to provide up to an additional £300 council tax relief and arranged individually with council tax payers in financial hardship for their payments to be deferred with instalments to recommence later in the year;
- (h) supported commissioned social care providers through over 13,600 telephone calls and the provision of advice and support;
- (i) agreed 10 percent funding increases for social care providers in addition to their annual inflationary uplift to help meet additional costs of dealing with the pandemic and made £13 million of payments upfront, as opposed to in arrears in order to help with funding and cashflow issues;
- (j) supplied over 815,000 items of PPE through to 27 May, including over 480,000 items to the social care sector and managed the provision of emergency PPE on behalf of the LRF;
- (k) established an infection inspection team and comprehensive multi-agency support package to support care homes to prevent and tackle infection outbreaks;
- (l) supported over 8,000 businesses with total grant payments of over £94 million;
- (m) recalculated the business rates bills of just under 2,300 businesses, applying business rate reductions and discounts totalling over £49 million;
- (n) introduced immediate supplier payments, supplier relief for important vulnerable suppliers and rent deferrals for our commercial tenants;
- (o) provided advice and assistance to schools across the county and assisted over 240 schools to remain open to provide childcare for key workers;
- (p) maintained all of our child protection, safeguarding and social care services, maintaining contact with children and their families;
- (q) prioritised and maintained service delivery wherever possible, which has involved facilitating home working for approximately

60 percent of our workforce and the redeployment, training and development of 500 staff;

- (r) maintained essential services such as refuse collection, social care and community support;
- (s) rapidly expanded on-line service delivery, communications and online and telephone customer support, including the development of digital and video alternatives to face-to-face service delivery;
- (t) developed access to rapid local testing for council and social care staff, and is continuing to support and challenge the roll-out of testing via the National Testing Programme and development of regional and local contact tracing arrangements;
- (u) developed and communicated physical and mental health support packages for staff and maintained proactive employee communications and engagement and positive industrial relations with the trade unions.

17 The council's focus has now turned to restoring council services and laying the foundations for recovering from the pandemic.

18 While there is a possibility that we may experience further outbreaks and pandemic peaks, recovering from COVID-19 will set the context for future community and council planning and decision-making in the county as we develop and implement the new county vision and council plan.

Recommendation(s)

19 Cabinet is recommended to:

- (a) note the contents of this report;
- (b) acknowledge the immense contribution local communities made to the response;
- (c) acknowledge the cooperation of County Durham residents and that the council is continuing to support many people who are still shielding or self-isolating;
- (d) reflect on the contribution the council's employees and strategic partners made to the response.

Background

Virus and disease

- 20 Coronaviruses (CoV) are a large family of viruses that cause respiratory illness.
- 21 Coronaviruses were identified in the mid-1960s and are known to infect humans and a variety of animals (including birds and mammals). Since 2002, two coronaviruses infecting animals have evolved and caused outbreaks in humans: SARS-CoV in 2002, and MERS-CoV in 2012¹.
- 22 On 31 December 2019, a cluster of pneumonia cases of unknown cause was reported in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. The novel coronavirus has been named by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as 'severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2' (SARS-CoV-2), while the coronavirus disease associated with it is referred to as COVID-19².
- 23 As with other respiratory illnesses, symptoms of COVID-19 can include a runny nose, loss of smell, sore throat, cough, and fever. It can be more severe for some people and can lead to pneumonia or breathing difficulties. More rarely, the disease can be fatal. Older people, and people with pre-existing medical conditions (such as diabetes and heart disease) appear to be more vulnerable to becoming severely ill with the virus³.

Spread

- 24 On 31 January 2020, the WHO declared the outbreak as a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC). At that stage, there were 9,847 confirmed cases globally, with 9,826 in China.
- 25 On 11 March 2020, the WHO declared the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic, signifying that the new disease was now spreading globally. At that time, there were 124,101 confirmed cases globally and 4,583 confirmed deaths.
- 26 The outbreak initially occurred in China and spread rapidly throughout the country and then into neighbouring Western Pacific states. It spread to Iran and Italy, with Europe taking over from the Western Pacific as the epicentre for the disease by mid-March. The outbreak has spread rapidly globally since, with the Americas, and principally the

¹ <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/2019-ncov-background-disease>

² [https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-\(covid-2019\)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-2019)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it)

³ <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses>

United States, recognised as the next potential epicentre since late March.

- 27 As at 27 May 2020, 213 countries/territories have been affected; there were 5,488,825 confirmed cases globally; and 349,095 confirmed deaths⁴. In the UK, as at 27 May 2020, there were 267,240 confirmed cases and 37,460 confirmed deaths⁵.
- 28 Here in County Durham, there were 1,976 confirmed cases and 532 confirmed deaths as at 27 May 2020⁶.
- 29 The latest international, national and local statistics are available from the following data dashboards:
- <https://covid19.who.int/>
 - <https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk/>
 - <https://lginform.local.gov.uk/reports/view/lga-research/covid-19-case-tracker>
 - <https://infogram.com/1pd2r5l2dpend6tmwp5xy9qqj6tkgk0yv61?live>

Response

National

- 30 In the UK, the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), Chief Medical Officers, NHS England and Public Health England, supported by staff at regional centres have led the national response. The council has been in regular contact with these agencies and local health and care organisations in the county.
- 31 In the initial stages of the outbreak, the NHS and Public Health England were proactive in contacting people who had been at risk of being infected, testing them, and where people tested positive, tracing who they may have come into contact with and managing and treating risk cases.
- 32 DHSC launched a UK-wide public information campaign to advise the public on how to slow the spread of the virus and reduce the impact on NHS services. Information promoting important hygiene messages appeared in print, broadcast and social media.

⁴ <https://covid19.who.int/>

⁵ <https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk/>

⁶ <https://infogram.com/1ppmejmyd1r6dvfrg55gyjnlv0szlmx65dq?live>

- 33 DHSC worked across government to produce sector-specific guidance, to reflect the different challenges across a number of different settings for example, transport, education, social care and hospitality. As the outbreak spread, more guidance was published and existing guidance revised as the national strategy to tackle the pandemic evolved.
- 34 Appendix 2 contains a detailed chronology of government announcements. The most significant policy announcement milestones are as follows.
- 35 On 3 March 2020, the government published its coronavirus action plan which was based on four strategic phases – contain; delay, research; and mitigate.
- 36 On 12 March 2020, the government published its ‘Stay at home’ guidance which set out what individuals should do if they experienced coronavirus symptoms, however mild. At this point the government recognised that the virus was spreading generally throughout the country and could no longer be contained through international travel restrictions and by contact tracing around suspected or confirmed cases. In terms of its action plan, this signified the shift from ‘contain’ to ‘delay’.
- 37 Following announcements in relation to the closure of schools, pubs and restaurants, a UK-wide lockdown was announced on 23 March 2020, backed by police powers to enforce social distancing and closure regulations.
- 38 Emergency legislation was introduced and passed in just four days, with the Coronavirus Act 2020 receiving Royal Assent on 25 March 2020. The legislation gives further powers to government to slow the spread of the virus; reduce the resourcing and administrative burden on public bodies; and limit the impact of potential staffing shortages on the delivery of public services.
- 39 On 6 April 2020 the government confirmed that local authorities would be allowed to hold remote council meetings and that the 2020/21 annual general meetings of councils would be postponed. In addition, all forthcoming local elections and other polls including the police and crime commissioner elections were postponed to 2021.
- 40 In terms of financial support, the Chancellor announced a £330 billion support package on 17 March 2020 including business rates relief support for small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). And on 27 April 2020 the Chancellor announced a loan scheme underwritten by the government which would offer SMEs loan finance of up to £50,000 with the government meeting the interest payments in the first year.

- 41 On 20 March 2020 the introduction of a Job Retention Scheme was announced, whereby the government would pay the equivalent of 80 percent of the wages of staff put on 'furlough' (a period of temporary leave of absence on reduced pay) during the lock-down.
- 42 On 12 May 2020, the Chancellor made a further announcement that the furlough scheme would be extended by a further four months with workers continuing to receive 80 percent of their current salary through to the end of July. In addition, from the start of August, furloughed workers will be able to return to work part-time with employers being asked to pay a percentage towards the salaries of their furloughed staff. The employer payments will substitute the contribution the government is currently making, ensuring that staff continue to receive 80 percent of their salary, up to £2,500 a month. The government also announced that it is shortly to publish proposals for how furloughed workers can be supported to undertake additional training and learn new skills while on furlough.
- 43 The government has made a number of announcements in relation to supporting local government financially, either by making available additional funding or by bringing forward previously announced funding programmes⁷. In terms of additional funding, the government has made available two amounts of £1.6 billion COVID-19 grant, announced on 19 March and 18 April 2020. Hardship funding to support local council tax support schemes was announced on 11 March 2020 totalling £500 million, and more recently on 15 May 2020, a £600 million fund was also announced for care homes support.
- 43 On 11 May 2020, the government published 'Our plan to rebuild: the UK Government's COVID-19 recovery strategy'. This set out a five point scale to indicate the level of threat posed by COVID-19 to society and a phased approach to recovery, with incremental steps to relax control and public protection measures.
- 44 On 13 May 2020, the government amended its existing regulations under the Coronavirus Act to enable the phased relaxation of lockdown measures including allowing people to visit HWRCs, the re-opening of garden centres and some outdoor sports facilities.
- 45 The council has established work programmes to digest the strategy, assess its implications and work towards its implementation as part of the recovery programme for council services and the county.

⁷ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/insights/coronavirus-support-for-local-government/>

Regional

- 46 In the North East, the initial emergency preparedness, resilience and response to COVID-19 was structured around the established North East Pandemic Influenza Framework, which had developed by NHS England (NHSE) and Public Health England (PHE) and adopted by all three local resilience forums (LRFs) in the region.
- 47 Initially, the command and control arrangements in the framework operated on a precautionary shadow basis, before the regional Health Strategic Coordination Group was stood-up formally in early March when the outbreak began to escalate in the region.
- 48 Public Health England took the lead in issuing public information and guidance and advice to partners in the local health system, universities, local boarding schools, prisons, LRFs, airports and ports. Detection and contact tracing also took place in the early phase of the pandemic until early March when the national plan shifted from 'contain' to 'delay'.
- 49 In line with the regional framework, the council led the process locally working closely with PHE, ensuring that local stakeholders received the necessary guidance and that information and advice was shared with services within the council. The council worked very closely with PHE on detection and tracing of cases during the early phases of the outbreak and on the provision of advice and care to those affected. Links to the national coronavirus information and advice from government and PHE were provided via our website and we supported the national public information campaign via our social media channels.
- 50 In line with the framework, local response arrangements were led by the LRFs. On 25 March 2020, County Durham and Darlington LRF declared a major incident in response to the pandemic, and formally stood-up its response arrangements, with a strategic coordination group led by the Deputy Chief Constable of Durham Constabulary.
- 51 The council is a major LRF partner and has played a significant role at all levels of response – participating in the strategic coordinating groups (SCG) and tactical coordinating groups (TCG) and chairing and resourcing all of the multi-agency support cells established to manage the county's response:
- **Community Support** – developing and coordinating support mechanisms for vulnerable people and those shielding from COVID-19, including facilitating and supporting volunteering and local community action;
 - **Excess Deaths** – working with GPs, hospitals, mortuaries, registrars, crematoria, funeral directors, town and parish councils

and faith groups, to manage the increased number of deaths while supporting the bereaved;

- **Intelligence and Data** – collecting, processing, analysing and interpreting local, regional and national data to inform LRF (and council) planning and decision-making;
- **Media** – developing and coordinating the communication of consistent messages and public information across LRF agencies as well as monitoring broadcast, print and social media and responding to media enquiries;
- **Multi-agency Information** – providing a one-stop-shop for agency information, producing daily situation reports, threat assessments and feedback reports for and on behalf of the SCG;
- **PPE** – establishing a distribution hub for emergency supplies of PPE, receiving government PPE drops, securing our own more reliable supply lines of PPE and processing and responding to requests for PPE from the social care sector and organisations in difficulty;
- **Recovery** – planning for recovery and restoration, undertaking impact assessments and coordinating multi-agency programmes to support individual, communities and businesses.

52 In doing so, we have worked very closely with our LRF local authority partner, Darlington Borough Council.

Local

53 The council had been tracking the spread of the virus since the first media reports at the beginning of January 2020.

54 The emerging threat was reported to Members via the Health and Wellbeing Board on 29 January 2020 and the Adult and Health Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 6 February 2020.

55 In February, a COVID-19 working group was established, staff communications commenced and a planning exercise commissioned on the pandemic and the council's response in line with its existing corporate emergency plan and business continuity management arrangements.

56 On 4 March 2020, Exercise Cove took place with Extended Management Team and relevant strategic managers, it included a briefing on the outbreak and national planning assumptions and an exercise of the council's corporate business continuity arrangements.

The exercise was repeated with all strategic managers on 11 March 2020.

- 57 Following the exercise, a COVID-19 planning group was established and a number of task and finish groups set up to take forward priority actions identified through the exercise. The planning and task and finish groups were supported by a COVID-19 core working group, coordinating intelligence and data analysis, public health practitioner advice, communications and HR policy advice.
- 58 On 12 March 2020, Corporate Management Team invoked the council's corporate business continuity plan, putting in place strategic management groups to plan for major staffing interruptions and loss of premises.
- 59 On 13 March 2020 communications were issued to the workforce to advise them of the position the council was taking in relation to safeguarding employees and requested that staff prepare and where possible work from home. Where front line service employees needed to attend for work, precautionary measures were put in place, in agreement with trades unions.
- 60 During the course of the pandemic, the council has revised its incident response arrangements, to dovetail with those established by the LRF, respond to national policy changes and to shift its focus from response to planning for recovery.
- 61 The council has been proactive in working nationally and regionally to shape the response to the pandemic. We have engaged with the Local Government Association, the County Councils Network, professional bodies, government Ministers and departments, MPs and other local authorities in the region, to understand and shape policy and coordinate efforts.
- 62 Corporate Management Team met on a daily basis and rapidly put in place governance arrangements with regular daily monitoring of the spread and impacts of the pandemic, regular reporting from service areas and reviews of emerging national guidance.
- 63 While council meetings have been suspended, decision-making has been maintained through delegated authority with Corporate Management Team scrutinising and overseeing the decisions being made.
- 64 Cabinet Members and the leaders of the council's political groups have continued to meet to be briefed on developments. In addition, regular email briefings have been provided to all elected Members.

- 65 Local partners and stakeholders have been briefed and there has been regular liaison with local MPs and the other local authorities in the region.
- 66 The following specific aspects of the council's response are outlined in more detail below.

Public health advice

- 67 The council's Public Health team led the initial planning and response to the outbreak, liaising with NHSE and PHE on the regional command and infection control arrangements, in line with the North East Influenza Pandemic Framework.
- 68 The team has been proactive in assessing World Health Organisation and government guidance on the virus, providing public health advice in relation to the guidance to council services and partner organisations and advising the task and finish groups, service managers and partners accordingly.
- 69 Through our collaborative approach to public health, County Durham and Darlington are unique in having in place a dedicated, public health-commissioned community infection prevention and control team, which has been at forefront of our efforts to contain and mitigate the pandemic.

Population health management

- 70 The council has worked with the North East Commissioning Support Service to develop a population health management model, which has informed the council's response.
- 71 Working with the NHS, foundation trusts, primary care and community services and Durham University, the council has developed a comprehensive dataset which has been used to identify individuals who may be particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 as a disease and the wider impacts of the pandemic.
- 72 The model and dataset informed the development of the community support hub the council established, the prioritisation of services and provision of support. The dataset has been used to provide a local cross-check of the information provided by NHSE, which has focused solely on those deemed to be extremely vulnerable to the disease and at high clinical risk due to pre-existing conditions. As a more comprehensive and up-to-date dataset, the population health management model has enabled Durham to go beyond this and augment the level of support offered to vulnerable people in the county.

Community support

- 73 The council established a community support hub to provide support to the increasing numbers of people who were advised to self-isolate at home and those who were advised to 'shield' themselves for an extended period, minimising social contact as well as practising social distancing.
- 74 On 24 March 2020 the government wrote to local authorities to confirm that it had commissioned the distribution of food parcels and medication for those shielding via national distribution contracts. However, it asked local authorities to step-in in the initial weeks of set-up, to resolve any local issues, if there were any problems with the national arrangements including delayed or missing deliveries and meeting specific dietary requirements as initially, the food parcels consisted of a standard basket of basic food items.
- 75 Local authorities were asked to establish and coordinate local emergency food supplies for the shielded population – the government provided councils with a one-off small supply of food items to support this (the council received four pallets of food on 3 April 2020).
- 76 We were asked to coordinate ongoing social contact and support to the shielded population, as they were being encouraged to stay at home and to minimise contact with others for a period of at least 12 weeks.
- 77 In addition, we were asked to coordinate local community and voluntary responses to supporting vulnerable people during the pandemic.
- 78 On 27 March 2020, with the community and voluntary sector, the council established County Durham Together, a contact hub, support centre and volunteer bureau providing ongoing support to the shielding population but also other people vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19.
- 79 An emergency food and medication distribution service was established, whereby council employees and volunteers would obtain and deliver food and prescriptions to people in need. This included the provision of food boxes for people shielding in instances where their national food parcels were yet to arrive, or where the food parcels did not meet their dietary requirements, and where individuals self-isolating had run out of food before they were able to organise their own food deliveries.
- 80 While the commercial provision of food deliveries has improved significantly over the last six to eight weeks, Members may recall that in those first few weeks many people experienced difficulties in obtaining home delivery slots and there were shortages in local shops and supermarkets due to initial panic-buying. The hub therefore played a

vital role in providing emergency access to food and medication for some of our most vulnerable residents.

- 81 A telephone chat service called 'Chat Together' was established to combat loneliness, and working with the libraries service, a book delivery and e-books service was introduced.
- 82 The council has also enhanced support for residents affected by domestic abuse, drug and alcohol problems and homelessness, all of which have been exacerbated by the pandemic.
- 83 This has included offering additional short-term support with housing costs through the council's Discretionary Housing Payment scheme, which can help tenants avoid losing their homes while they addresses their longer term financial issues. Work has also taken place with local housing providers and charities to ensure that rough sleepers and other vulnerable people have been supported through the pandemic. To date, 19 rough sleepers have been housed and all have been supported to remain in their temporary accommodation
- 84 To make people aware of the hub and the wide range of support available, a series of prioritised mailshots were undertaken with leaflets delivered to all those shielding – 25,909 people as at 19 May 2020, over 75,000 other vulnerable people and then all 265,000 households in the county.
- 85 In addition, initial and ongoing contact has been made with all those shielding who registered with the government as requiring assistance (13,271 people as at 19 May 2020), with those who said that they have no access to essential help, prioritised for assistance through proactive calls from the hub.
- 86 As at 24 May 2020, a total of 4,819 calls into the hub call centre had been received, 3,125 of which required resolution and assistance, with the hub helping people with food deliveries, food poverty, be-friending, repairs, prescriptions, bills advice, welfare assistance, posting items, looking after pets and a whole host of other requests which people were unable to do themselves while shielding, self-isolating or otherwise deprived of access to their usual sources of support and assistance.
- 87 Establishing the hub has been a massive undertaking in a very short period of time and involved the development of a full staffing structure operating seven days a week, policies, procedures and protocols, staff and volunteer training, supervision and welfare support and the redeployment of over 200 council employees from other service areas, in addition to 85 contracted Wellbeing for Life staff.

Local community action

- 88 The hub has been built upon the key relationship between the council, its NHS partners and local community and voluntary organisations, working together to support individuals and local communities. Durham Community Action has been instrumental in working with the council and the Area Action Partnerships to engage and support local community organisations in the response.
- 89 When local government in County Durham was reorganised in 2009, 14 local Area Action Partnerships (AAPs) were established across the county to support and promote local community action, and the AAPs' local knowledge, networks and ability to respond quickly have been key to enabling and supporting the local community response to COVID-19.
- 90 This was particularly important in the initial two to three weeks between the publication of the 'Stay at home' guidance on 12 March 2020 and the guidance on national and local support for those people shielding, which was published on 24 March 2020. During that period and while the community support hub was being established, local Members, community groups and volunteers were active in organising and providing support to vulnerable people in their communities.
- 91 Information on the many new groups and initiatives which were established as part of this community response was added to the council's locate website which became a self-service portal providing access to local community and voluntary initiatives which could offer assistance.
- 92 Appendix 3 provides a small selection of the many examples of local community initiatives supported by Members and the AAPs.
- 93 The council established a volunteering bureau to engage and find meaningful and valued roles for volunteers across the full range of tasks and help required. This has included joining-up different calls for volunteers including through the 'goodsam app', the national call for NHS volunteers and spontaneous offers of help. As well as matching offers and requests for assistance, this has involved providing the necessary risk assessments, training and advice to ensure the health and safety of everyone involved.
- 94 In addition to all the community support and action outlined above, the council has to acknowledge the fantastic way in which local communities responded to the pandemic, with local people helping each other, their neighbours and people who live nearby. The value of this

has been immense and it very much supports our collective response - 'County Durham Together'.

- 95 Similarly, the council and its partners' task has been made all the more easier because the vast majority of County Durham residents observed the lockdown and cooperated with national guidance. While the restrictions are beginning to be relaxed for many, the council will continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with the many thousands of residents who are still shielding and self-isolating and we will continue to provide support.

Financial support for communities

- 96 The council worked quickly to provide financial support to local communities.
- 97 Building on the work of the community hubs, a total of £1.5 million was provided to the Area Action Partnerships across the county. This provided an additional £100,000 per AAP to support local groups in delivering early help on the ground as well as supporting the council's own volunteers. This funding also helped to ensure local groups could continue to operate during COVID-19.
- 98 Again, at a local level, Members' neighbourhood budgets were adjusted to provide additional revenue funding of £1.7 million to support COVID-19 response. These two measures together ensured that a total of £3.2 million was provided to support local communities from a very early stage of the outbreak.

Welfare support

- 99 The council has retained a broad range of welfare support which provides support to those who need help. Prior to the pandemic, the Welfare Assistance Scheme was reviewed to take account of the experience of those accessing the scheme and to address significant pressures that were seen in 2019/20, before the pandemic.
- 100 A number of changes were made to the scheme to ensure more people could be provided with assistance as well as providing increased levels of support. This included increasing the limits for Daily Living Expenses awards by 20 percent, relaxing the criteria with regards to allowing one Daily Living Expenses award in a six month period and allowing two run-on weeks for an individual award. Changes were also made to establish a supermarket voucher based scheme, which provides increased flexibility for vulnerable households.
- 101 Welfare Assistance staff work with individuals and also point them to support available through local charities and organisations, which

augments the support available through the Welfare Assistant Scheme's Settlement Grants. Support is also provided to access low cost loans for replacement goods through the Credit Union with the council acting as a guarantor for referrals under the Welfare Assistance Scheme.

- 102 Since the pandemic, there has been a significant increase in demand for the Daily Living Expenses element of the welfare scheme, with claims more than doubling across March, April and the early part of May 2020. Demand for Settlement Grants has remained broadly in line with last year. The majority of Settlement Grant applications are from individuals being rehoused because they are homeless. The council works closely with individuals and their new landlord as part of its welfare support service to assist people through what are often extremely difficult circumstances.
- 103 The fact that the council has retained a Welfare Assistance Scheme when most councils have been unable to, has enabled this additional support to be provided to those that are most vulnerable in the county and has provided a valuable source of assistance.
- 104 In addition to welfare support, the council moved quickly to implement measures to support residents with council tax payments. The government announced funding of £500 million nationally to provide enhanced council tax support and set out a proposed reduction in council tax for working age council tax support claimants of £150. In County Durham, the council already had a very beneficial council tax support scheme (78 percent of people claiming council tax support receive 100 percent reduction and have no bill to pay), which has allowed initial reductions of up to £300 to be made for those council tax support claimants who continued to have a liability. This level of additional support is double the amount set out in the government's guidance. In total this additional support was provided to more than 8,000 claimants.
- 105 Arrangements were also put in place to suspend council tax recovery for all residents for a three-month period and to ensure options were available for residents to defer their council tax payments and direct debits where they were facing financial difficulty.

Social care and commissioning

- 106 In addition to maintaining our statutory social care and safeguarding responsibilities, the council has followed national guidance and requirements in supporting the NHS with hospital discharges.

- 107 To cope with the anticipated increase in COVID-19 related hospital admissions, the NHS sought to increase the speed of hospital discharges to free-up hospital beds, in advance of the rapid increase in admissions and during the peak as in-patients were treated and well enough to return home. A 'discharge to assess' policy was introduced nationally whereby as soon as patients were assessed medically as being well enough to be discharged, they were moved off the wards and then discharged home within a matter of hours.
- 108 Under this approach, care plans, which ordinarily are agreed and put in place prior to discharge, had to be rapidly developed after discharge by community and primary care services working in tandem with social care.
- 109 The County Durham Integrated Care Partnership put in place a coordination hub to manage the process, which was also used to ensure that the community health and social care needs of the shielded population were met.
- 110 Between 19 March and 1 May 2020, the hub received 568 hospital discharge referrals.
- 111 With regards to commissioning, the council introduced daily monitoring and liaison with all commissioned service providers including residential and nursing care homes and domiciliary care to ensure that they were supported through the pandemic and that operational pressures were identified and responded to as quickly as possible.
- 112 To date, over 13,600 calls have been made to providers to check their situation and to offer advice and help, including responding to additional Care Quality Commission (CQC) and Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) monitoring requirements.
- 113 Arrangements were also made for additional psychological support for care home staff should they need it.
- 114 The council agreed 10 percent temporary funding increases for providers in addition to the annual inflationary uplift and made £13 million of payments upfront, as opposed to in arrears in order to help with funding and cashflow issues.
- 115 In advance of the national and regional social care recruitment campaign, we launched our own local recruitment and development programme, through the County Durham Care Academy to encourage more people to pursue careers in the sector, helping providers with staff and skills shortages. To date we have had over 70 applications from people interested in training for roles in the care sector. Upon registering an interest, applicants are immediately contacted, with DBS

checks fast tracked, followed by completing the remote training. This has enabled the council to develop a “bank” of individuals with clearances and training undertaken to draw on either within the council or in commissioned care services as required.

- 116 To support care homes to tackle and prevent the spread of infection in their establishments, we have established a multi-agency infection inspection team to review and support the implementation of effective infection control practice and procedures in the homes. Public Health England has also provided advice, guidance and initial swabbing of cases in care homes.
- 117 The supply of personal protective equipment (PPE) has been a major issue during the pandemic. Whilst commissioned service providers are responsible for meeting their own PPE needs, it has been necessary for the council to step-in and help providers by providing over 480,000 items of PPE to the social care sector from its own stock and that which we manage on behalf of the LRF. In total up to 27 May 2020, the council has delivered over 815,000 items of PPE.
- 118 The government has worked to provide LRFs with emergency PPE drops to address local shortages, and while these have been welcomed, the overall issues with PPE supply and distribution have affected the reliability of these drops, such that the council has had to work with other local authorities in the region to secure its own more reliable supply and in some instances, prioritise its own PPE use in order to direct supplies to support frontline social care services.
- 119 In addition our commissioned public health services – stop smoking services, sexual health services, mental health, 0-25 health and drug and alcohol services have all taken a key role in continued service delivery.

Support to businesses

- 120 In order to support business, the council through Business Durham and Visit County Durham has been proactive in contacting businesses and offering advice and support and continuing to work in partnership with bodies such as the National Federation of Small Businesses, the North East Chamber of Commerce, Durham University and local and regional transport providers.
- 121 The assistance offered has included regular surveys and direct contact and advice on financial support and re-orientating business models to mitigate the impacts and support the national response to the pandemic, through for example developing and manufacturing medical equipment, devices and PPE. Appendix 4 includes a number of

examples of where the council has assisted local business to rise to the challenge.

- 122 The tourism and hospitality sector has been particularly affected by the lock-down and is some months away from being allowed to re-open under the national recovery strategy.
- 123 Visit County Durham has provided advice and support to the tourism sector and the council has promoted online alternatives to some of our flagship events such as Bishop Auckland and Seaham food festivals in order to continue to provide commercial opportunities to local producers.
- 124 To support pubs, cafes and restaurants which have had to re-orientate their business, the council's Community Protection service has provided advice and guidance on shifting to food delivery and take-away models, so that the businesses concerned are able to comply with the food standards and safety regulations involved.
- 125 In addition, Community Protection has provided advice to businesses on understanding the coronavirus lockdown regulations and legislation and where necessary has raised the prospect of enforcement action to ensure compliance. Our proactive and advisory approach has proved effective and of 18 May, enforcement action has had to be taken against just three businesses which have operated in contravention of the regulations.
- 126 Where permissible and safe to do so, the council has supported the continuation of major construction and regeneration projects in the county, including the Milburngate and new council headquarters developments in Durham City, Integra 61 to the south of Bowburn and the related improvements to Junction 61 of the A1(M). Work has also continued on Horden rail station and a new mixed-use development at North Terrace Seaham has recently commenced.

Financial support to businesses

- 127 As with the support provided by the council to local communities, steps were put in place quickly to provide support to local businesses.
- 128 Reductions in business rates liabilities totalling approximately £49 million were made across 2,248 business rates accounts in line with the government's extended business rates relief schemes.
- 129 As with council tax, recovery action was suspended on business rates accounts for a three-month period from 1 April 2020 and the council has deferred payments and realigned instalment plans where requested.

- 130 Local authorities were asked to establish a scheme for paying business grants to eligible businesses in their area, following the establishment of a £1.6 billion business grant fund by the government. In County Durham, the council received a total allocation of £107 million from the national allocation and expects to pay out approximately £99 million to eligible businesses. Processes were established quickly to pay local businesses the grants under this scheme and the council was praised by the government for its approach in making payments to businesses quickly – being recognised as one of the top three councils nationally. This has been a significant achievement given the size of the county and the number of businesses that needed to be contacted and paid.
- 131 At the time of writing this report, 95 percent of the expected value of grants due to be paid, has been paid to local businesses, with work underway to target businesses that had not applied for the support available to them. More recently, government has provided £5 million of funding for a new business grant scheme to provide further support. This support will be provided in line with the guidance that has been received as well as applying local flexibility where this is appropriate and affordable.
- 132 Supplier relief schemes were introduced for key suppliers in line with government guidance. Suppliers and immediate payments to suppliers were put in place to help with their cashflow.

Education and Children's Services

- 133 The Education service has been proactive in providing advice and guidance to schools and parents in the county through all stages of the pandemic. This included providing business continuity planning advice and information on the national planning assumptions and ensuring that schools received the relevant public health advice, during the initial weeks of the pandemic before the national decision to close schools for the majority of pupils.
- 134 As schools prepared to close, curriculum development advice was provided to help schools provide remote/home learning packages and materials during lockdown and support and advice has been provided on how schools could continue to fulfil their Free School Meals commitments, prior to the government announcing the introduction of the national Free School Meals Voucher scheme.
- 135 A key area of work in the initial weeks was in relation to the government decision that while schools should close for the majority of pupils, they were to remain open to provide childcare for the children of key workers. The council has worked with schools to coordinate this provision, and where necessary to direct key workers to where provision

is available, if it has not proved possible for their local school to remain open.

- 136 The council has worked with special schools to ensure that SEND provision continues to be available, which has meant ensuring that home to school transport provision still operates, but in line with social distancing measures to protect the health of pupils and the drivers involved.
- 137 During the course of the lockdown, over 240 schools in the county remained open to support the children of key workers and this provision extended through the Easter school holiday and recent public holidays.
- 138 At an early stage, the Education service began planning for the re-opening of schools, working through what would need to be done to re-commission school buildings where they had been closed for several weeks, how school spaces and classrooms could be reconfigured to support social distancing and what additional support may be required to help children get back into the rhythm and discipline of school life after so many weeks away from the classroom.
- 139 When the government indicated when and how it envisaged schools should re-open, our precautionary planning was reviewed and advice and guidance provided to schools to help them assess the feasibility of re-opening to some pupils and the implications for those that are not expected to return to school until September.
- 140 In the light of key issues beyond the council's control - national scientific advice, delay in the track and trace system and high regional infection rates - we provided updated advice to schools on the safe reopening of schools.
- 141 Due to these challenges, we took a proactive decision to advise schools to delay their phased reopening beyond the date set by national government. Our priority continues to be the safety of children and staff in school settings and our position will be reviewed as the situation changes.
- 142 With regards to safeguarding and children's social care, the council has ensured that its statutory duties in relation to child protection, safeguarding and social care have continued to be met and that regular contact has been maintained with children known to social services, while the schools have been closed.
- 143 This has included using a wider variety of social media and digital platforms to augment regular face-to-face contact. This mixed approach has proved successful in maintaining high levels of contact with children.

- 144 The council has continued to discharge its responsibilities as a corporate parent to looked after children and care leavers; the chair and vice chair of the Corporate Parenting Panel have met with young people during this period and the service has continued to review the sufficiency strategy and support to foster carers.
- 145 In addition, in a number of instances, council establishments providing different aspects of social care to children and young people and their families have remained open, but with reduced staffing levels and strict compliance with social distancing and infection control measures.

Business continuity

- 146 The council has an established business continuity management framework and following Exercise Cove, a specific task and finish group was established to quickly review all existing business continuity plans to ensure the framework was fit-for-purpose for responding to the pandemic.
- 147 Services identified how they could maintain services by switching to home-working if council workplaces and service outlets/venues had to close; how they could prioritise and respond if they experienced much higher levels of staff absence due to sickness and self-isolation; and what operational changes they would need to make to continue to deliver services while complying with social distancing health and safety measures.
- 148 Where council premises and venues have had to close and it has not been possible for staff to perform their job roles from home, wherever possible they have been redeployed to support other services in different job roles. As at 18 May, 500 staff across the council have been redeployed, mainly into different council services but also into the voluntary sector as well.
- 149 In the run-up to 'Stay at home' and lockdown, many staff shifted to working from home and the council provided additional ICT equipment, licences and support to enable this.
- 150 The roll out of Office 365 had been completed in early 2020, with One-drive for business and Microsoft Teams being made available through a phased adoption programme. This was rapidly accelerated in response to the pandemic, and having the underlying infrastructure already in place, enabled the transition to remote working and working from home to happen at scale and at pace.
- 151 As at 27 May 2020, approximately 60 percent of council staff are working effectively from home, wherever possible maintaining our expected standards of service delivery.

Neighbourhood services

- 152 During late March, partly in response to the enactment of the Coronavirus Regulations, a rapid assessment of front line services was made. Libraries and leisure centres closed on 18 March, followed a few days later by decisions to close customer access points, park and ride, play areas, recycling centres, festivals and events.
- 153 Highways and construction maintenance were reduced to emergency response only with only winter maintenance continuing uninterrupted. In a number of instances, service delivery was re-designed and prioritised to enable continuity. For example, our clean and green teams no longer work in groups, so that we comply with social distancing and can continue to carry out priority work such as emptying dog waste and litter bins, spraying weeds and cutting grass with fewer staff.
- 154 Clean and green crews, along with other staff, drivers and council vehicles, have been re-deployed to ensure that we were able to maintain the weekly household refuse and recycling collection service, while complying with restrictions to the number of staff who could work in close proximity to each other or travel in the same vehicle cab.
- 155 Protecting the waste collection service during the anticipated peak of the pandemic, involved temporarily suspending the start of the garden waste collection service. However, as the council became more certain about its staffing levels we were able to re-design the collection arrangements and reinstate the service, with the collections for 2020 commencing at the beginning of May. Although refunds were offered if subscribers were not happy with the revised arrangements, we have had very few cancellations and in fact, a further 3,000 households have signed up to the service this year.
- 156 Following government advice issued on 24 April, and on a prioritised basis, we have now recommenced a number of building and highways maintenance projects. Initially, this was focussed on white-lining and carriageway resurfacing projects that would benefit from lighter than usual traffic volumes. Subsequently, other construction work followed along with footway maintenance and structural work. Full risk assessments were carried out and safe operating practices developed to ensure the safety of our employees and contractors. The trade unions were consulted and fully engaged in the process.
- 157 We also worked with the contracted provider of our household waste recycling centres (HWRCs) to reconfigure how the sites operate and the waste is handled. The amendments to the Coronavirus regulations made journeys to the recycling centres allowable from 13 May and the council's 12 HWRC sites re-opened to the public on 18 May.

- 158 The implementation of the Coronavirus regulations also introduced new responsibilities and challenges to the council's regulatory teams, for example trading standards teams and environmental health officers are engaged in the monitoring of compliance against business closure requirements and several letters of advice and closure notices have been issued in this respect.

On-line services

- 159 A major aspect of maintaining service delivery has been the rapid expansion of on-line services and communications.
- 160 As customer access points have had to close, the council has shifted to online and telephone customer support, introducing 'live chat' on our website to support customers with instant messaging with our customer service advisors as people look at pages on our website.
- 161 With libraries closed, we have expanded our e-books service and introduced online story-telling for children.
- 162 Durham Music Service has introduced music lessons and support via live video-messaging and where performances have had to be cancelled in our theatres and venues, where possible video content has been broadcast instead via the council's social media platforms.
- 163 Whilst we were not able to proceed with the wide range of commemorative events planned to mark the 75th anniversary of VE Day, we used our considerable digital archives to develop an online commemorative programme to enable people to learn about and understand the sacrifices made.
- 164 With leisure centres closed, service users have been able continue to receive personal fitness advice and training through our new technogym app, which supports fitness and cardio sessions in people's own homes.
- 165 On 4 April 2020 the government published regulations which allowed local authorities to hold remote committee meetings. To enable this in Durham, Office 365 including Microsoft Teams has been rolled out to Members and guidance and training provided to Members on how to conduct and participate in online council meetings. Today's meeting of Cabinet (5 June 2020) is the first remote meeting to be held online, with further remote meetings for other committees arranged to follow shortly.
- 166 The council's website and social media channels have been at the forefront of the rapid expansion of digital access. Our COVID-19 pages on information on business grants and COVID-19 help received over 11,000 and 7,700 page views respectively in the period from March 23 to 26 May; and the number of followers we have on social media

increased by between 2.5 and 12 percent including an increase of over 6.5 percent on Facebook to nearly 50,000 followers, May compared with March 2020 across the range of channels we use.

Workforce and human resources management

- 167 To respond to the pandemic and support the new working arrangements, the council introduced a comprehensive emergency human resources policy. This included new absence management arrangements, flexibility in terms of carrying over outstanding annual leave, enhanced family and compassionate leave policies to support staff affected by COVID-19 and comprehensive guidance for employees, managers and councillors on dealing with the coronavirus outbreak.
- 168 The policy was developed with the support of trades unions and provided the council with the ability to redeploy staff into other posts to respond to pressures across some services.
- 169 A COVID-19 staff questionnaire seeking volunteers was issued to 9,500 employees. Over 3,500 employees completed the survey indicating their desire to volunteer for redeployment should the council need assistance.
- 170 For those service areas where demand was critical and more staff resources were needed, volunteers were matched to posts to be filled, and training and development and induction was provided to enable staff to step into other roles.
- 171 In order to safeguard the workforce, training and development was cancelled in the interim and apprentices were supported in terms of continuing their apprenticeships via on-line learning through local colleges and universities.
- 172 Recruitment was reduced to essential only and where necessary was moved to video-call interviews and induction. Consideration was also given to creative ways of filling critical vacancies such as recruitment of social work students into family worker posts.
- 173 Recruitment for critical employees was fast tracked with DBS checks turned around within 24 hours.
- 174 Regular 'Frequently Asked Questions' (FAQs) and communications have been issued to staff as any changes were introduced throughout the pandemic.
- 175 Throughout our response, ensuring the health and safety of staff and service users has been our top priority and the council has worked very

effectively with the trade unions, who have been very constructive in protecting their members' interest while working with us to ensure that we continue to deliver vital and valued services to Durham's communities.

- 176 Council managers and employees have been surveyed on their experiences working through the pandemic and feedback has been very positive. There have been regular communications and engagement led by the council's senior management to thank staff and support their physical and mental wellbeing.
- 177 The council has continued to track and monitor staff absences and illness. As at 27 May 2020, absence related to COVID-19 was 2.5 percent with overall absence fairly consistent at 6.5 percent of the workforce. This has enabled council services to continue to operate at around 93.5 percent capacity.

Testing

- 178 A key element of the national response has been the introduction of testing to monitor and enable containment of the spread of the virus and to develop intelligence which can support the development of treatments and vaccines.
- 179 The Director of Public Health has worked with regional colleagues from NHSE, Public Health England and local NHS foundation trusts to develop and coordinate local testing programmes for NHS workers, social care staff and key workers from LRF responding organisations including the council (this is 'pillar one' of the national strategy for testing). As at 28 May 2020, over 11,300 tests had been carried out via 'pillar one' testing through County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust, with testing data shared to inform our understanding of local infection.
- 180 As part of this, through our Occupational Health service, COVID-19 testing is available for all council employees and elected Members who have coronavirus symptoms, with tests and results provided quickly through local hospitals in the county. As at 26 May 2020, 164 individuals had been screened, with 89 referred for a test.
- 181 Since the end of April, the council has worked with the LRF on the roll-out of mobile testing units under the National Testing Programme ('pillar two' of the national strategy for testing). The effectiveness of the mobile testing units has been affected by the performance of the national testing booking website, with the local sites we helped to establish not listed and people being directed to other testing sites in Cumbria, Yorkshire and Scotland, and in some instances turned away when they had attended local sites because the national booking system failed.

The council wrote to the government on 6 May 2020 to raise the concerns about the booking arrangements. We are still waiting for a response.

- 182 On 10 May 2020, the government signalled its intention that local authorities and their Directors of Public Health should take the lead in local coordination of testing in the social care sector.
- 183 On 11 May 2020 we wrote to PHE about data sharing between the National Testing Programme and local agencies, and local targeting and coordination of testing programmes on the ground. For example while by 26 May 2020, the mobile testing teams had managed to perform 6,681 tests at mobile testing sites in the Durham and Darlington LRF area, data and intelligence from this testing had not been shared, which we could be used to inform the development and targeting of local infection control programmes, particularly in the social care sector.
- 184 The council is now working with PHE and the Association of Directors of Public Health on 'track and trace' testing programmes and the establishment of a local outbreak control teams as the next steps in containing coronavirus outbreaks.

Recovery planning

- 185 From the very outset of planning its response, the council established a recovery task and finish group to begin the process of planning how the county and community life would adapt to a post COVID-19 world.
- 186 When the LRF incident response arrangements were stood-up, the recovery task and finish group was incorporated into the LRF recovery cell to coordinate recovery planning across the entire LRF area.
- 187 Working with colleagues from Darlington Borough Council, the LRF Recovery Cell established a number of sub-groups led by county council senior staff to work on the development of recovery plans for the following:
- (a) Business and economy;
 - (b) Buildings, infrastructure and environment;
 - (c) Health, welfare and communities;
 - (d) Local authority services.
- 188 Each group is developing plans under a simple structure:
- (a) understanding the data and intelligence associated with the sub group to understand the impact of COVID-19;

- (b) identifying what needs to be recovered from, through an impact assessment;
- (c) designing interventions in a recovery plan linked to the government's phased release of lockdown.

189 The council has used this work to revise its own COVID-19 governance arrangements to shift its focus from response to recovery. We have now established complementary recovery (longer-term, externally focussed) and restoration (shorter-term, internally-focused) groups to plan and manage how we restore council services and return to normality in line with the government's national recovery strategy and our own local strategies, priorities and frameworks.

190 Key elements of the work include:

- (a) reviewing how the council has responded, so that we can learn and improve our response if we experience further pandemic peaks;
- (b) identifying any better ways of working, which were developed in adversity as part of our response, so that they can be retained to improve future working;
- (c) restoring services to the public as quickly as possible where it is safe to do so while minimising the risks of further infection outbreaks;
- (d) supporting our workforce through the changes and transition ahead;
- (e) supporting local testing and contact tracing programmes so that we are able to contain further outbreaks;
- (f) continuing to support key settings including residential and domiciliary care and the NHS;
- (g) providing ongoing support to communities, individuals and frontline workers affected by the pandemic including mental health support;
- (h) supporting business, industry, town centres and rural industries to recover and navigate through the anticipated downturn and recession; and
- (i) developing a data and intelligence framework to monitor and review progress.

- 191 The Office for National Statistics has reported⁸ the differential impacts the pandemic is having on different population groups, urban and rural areas and places which experience higher levels of deprivation.
- 192 County Durham has a number of areas of deprivation and already has a poverty action plan in place. Understanding the impact of COVID-19 locally, and in particular the impact of COVID-19 on our rural, urban and more deprived areas will be a core part of the council's recovery work and will inform the council's (and wider partnership's) poverty action strategy and other council-wide policies.

Transition to transformation

- 193 As the council moves into recovery it will be necessary to consider the significant changes to working practices and working patterns during the COVID-19 response. Work is underway to consider how the new ways of working, new technology and different ways of working can form part of the council's culture in the future, which will deliver many of the plans the council has in place as part of its transformation programme.
- 194 At the end of last year, the County Durham Partnership developed a new vision for the county. The council is in the process of developing a new council plan to better enable us to work with partners to achieve the vision and to continue to develop as an organisation. Progressing this work will be key to moving beyond COVID-19 response and recovery. We also need to ensure that the learning and new service models which resulted from the close community and business engagement that is very much a part of the COVID-19 response and recovery work, are a core part of future planning.

Financial pressures and government funding

- 195 The latest assessment of the council's COVID-19 financial pressures was submitted to government on 15 May 2020. In total, estimated expenditure pressures and income reductions that the council has forecast totalled approximately £50 million. It is important to note that this is an estimate based on a number of assumptions in relation to income and expenditure.
- 196 Two tranches of COVID-19 funding have so far been received from government. An initial national allocation of £1.6 billion was allocated to local authorities based on the adult social care formula. The council received £18.6 million from this allocation.

8

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deaths-involving-covid-19-by-local-areas-and-deprivation/deaths-occurring-between-1-march-and-17-april>

- 197 A second national allocation of funding (again totalling £1.6 billion) was allocated to local authorities based on population. This allocation provided a larger allocation to district councils in two-tier areas. The use of a population-based formula for distribution resulted in the council receiving £14.6 million, a reduction of £4 million (22%) from the first allocation. In total, the council has been allocated £33.2 million COVID-19 funding.
- 198 The latest estimate of COVID-19 additional costs and foregone income totals £50 million, which suggests a £16.8 million shortfall if no further funding is received.
- 199 However, the overall financial impact of COVID-19 on the council is unlikely to be known for some months and is dependent on the length of time lockdown measures remain in place, the timescale and extent of recovery for communities and local businesses, the extent to which demand returns for income based services and the extent of future government support.
- 200 It is also evident that the council will require significant funds to invest in the recovery from COVID-19. Whilst these costs cannot be quantified at this stage, they are likely to run into many millions to recognise the cost of revitalising local communities and regenerating the county.
- 201 The impact of COVID-19 on the medium to longer term financial outlook for the council is very uncertain. The fair funding review and proposed implementation of 75 percent business rates retention will not now be implemented in 2021/22. There remains significant uncertainty over how local government will be funded going forward.
- 202 Funding for infection control in the care sector has been announced totalling £600 million nationally. This funding is allocated based on the number of care beds across the country, with County Durham receiving £6.7 million. National guidance has recently been received in relation to how this funding is to be allocated to the sector. This funding supplements the financial support the council has already (and continues to) provide to the care sector through COVID-19, including:
- payment of a five percent inflationary uplift to the private care home sector;
 - cash flow support to the care sector totalling more than £13 million;
 - payment of an additional 10 percent uplift (around an additional £1 million per month) to the private care home sector and other social care providers (payable from 19 March 2020) to recognise pressures arising from COVID-19;

- provision of PPE to the care sector valued at circa £170,000.
- 203 On 24 May 2020, funding of £50 million was announced to support 'Reopening High Streets Safely', of which the council will receive £469,000. The funding is intended help reintroduce safe and welcoming spaces for local businesses in line with social distancing guidelines.
- 204 Representations have and continue to be made to government in relation to the financial issues the council and local government more generally are facing.

Conclusion

- 205 The coronavirus pandemic is one of the most profound challenges society has faced in more than a generation.
- 206 Previous pandemics have lasted a number of years and with effective coronavirus vaccines yet to be produced, we have to anticipate that society will be affected by COVID-19 for some time to come.
- 207 The council and its partners had emergency and business continuity management planning frameworks in place, which enabled us to prepare and respond promptly to the threat as it emerged. However, we have had to respond dynamically and innovatively as the pandemic developed, revising our approach as the national coronavirus action plan and recovery strategy evolved.
- 208 In line with the national response, the council has worked regionally and locally to protect our communities from the virus and to support those affected by the pandemic, economically, socially and in relation to their own physical and mental health. County Durham communities themselves have been a major force in this and have made an immense contribution to the 'County Durham Together' response.
- 209 Council employees also have risen to the challenge. In line with our council values, they have demonstrated their willingness to work flexibly, adopt new ways of working and support each other, focussing on what needs to be done to maintain services and support local communities.
- 210 Our focus has now turned to restoring council services and laying the foundations for recovering from the pandemic. While there is a possibility that we may experience secondary outbreaks and pandemic peaks, recovering from COVID-19 will set the context for future community and council planning and decision-making in the county as we develop and implement the new county vision and council plan,

within the context of the significant financial pressures we can expect to face.

Background papers

- None

Other useful documents

- North East Pandemic Influenza Framework

Author(s)

Jane Robinson

Tel: 03000 267355

John Hewitt

Tel: 03000 261943

Amanda Healy

Tel: 03000 264323

Kevin Edworthy

Tel: 03000 268045

Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

Under section 2B NHS Act 2006 (inserted by Section 12 of the Health and Social Care Act 2012), local authorities have a statutory duty to take such steps as they consider appropriate for improving the health of the people in their area.

The Local Authorities (Public Health Functions and Entry to Premises by Local Healthwatch Representatives) Regulations 2013 (SI 2013/351) make provision for the steps to be taken by local authorities in exercising their public health functions. This includes providing information and advice for the purpose of protecting individuals in the area of the authority from events or occurrences which threaten, or are liable to threaten, their health, and may in particular include arrangements to deal with infectious diseases.

Section 73A (1) of the 2006 Act, (inserted by section 30 of the 2012 Act), gives the Director of Public Health responsibility for exercising their local authority's functions in planning for, and responding to, emergencies that present a risk to the public's health.

Under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, local authorities also have a duty to collaborate with others to protect the public, which includes promoting business continuity and resilience. The council is designated as a category one responder under the Act, and as such collaborates with other agencies through the County Durham and Darlington Local Resilience Forum.

The Coronavirus Act 2020 gives further powers to government to slow the spread of the virus; reduce the resourcing and administrative burden on public bodies; and limit the impact of potential staffing shortages on the delivery of public services. Under regulation, this includes postponing local elections including that of the County Durham and Darlington Police and Crime Commissioner due in May 2020, postponing the annual meeting of the council and allowing existing postholders to continue in office until an annual meeting is able to be held; and introducing 'virtual' council and committee meetings in the light of the lockdown and ongoing social distancing measures.

Finance

The council has been allocated government grant of £33.2 million to help cover the additional costs and lost income associated with coronavirus. At this point, it is estimated that the additional costs and income foregone will amount to £50 million. The longer term financial implications for the council are at this stage difficult to quantify, and are dependent on the duration of lockdown and the speed of economic recovery. Future MTFP reports to

Cabinet will need to consider the financial risks relating to the longer term impact of COVID-19 as well as the future policy direction of local government finance.

Consultation

Not applicable.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

Not applicable.

Climate Change

The lockdown and reduction in traffic and building use has generally been seen as having a number of environmental benefits including reduction in noise, light and air pollution, emissions and carbon reduction. Aspects of this may continue with walking and cycling being promoted as safer, socially-distanced modes of travel.

Human Rights

Not applicable.

Crime and Disorder

Not applicable.

Staffing

500 employees were redeployed during the COVID-19 response and all of the council's main HR policies and procedures were revised as part of a comprehensive emergency HR policy.

Accommodation

It has been necessary to close a number of council premises as part of the national lock-down and in some instances, where the council is an accommodation provider to business/commercial tenants, rent and/or rates relief has been offered to support tenants during the lockdown. A Facilities Management Task and Finish Group has been established under the council's recovery and restoration plan, to ensure that closed premises are re-commissioned and safe before they are opened again.

Risk

A risk assessment of the impact of the pandemic has been undertaken by a risk management task and finish group as part of the council's governance arrangements. Risk assessments have been undertaken as part of the

council's business continuity and response arrangements to ensure the health and safety of staff, volunteers and service users.

Procurement

In order to respond to the pressures the council faced, emergency procurement procedures were adopted in line with government coronavirus legislation and procurement regulations.

Appendix 2: Chronology of Government announcements

10 February 2020

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care introduced regulations to reduce the risk of human-to-human transmission in the UK by keeping individuals in isolation where public health professionals believed there was a reasonable risk an individual may have the virus. The regulations were used to enforce the policy of asking individuals who had recently returned from countries badly affected by the virus to go into quarantine or to self-isolate for a period of time. Over time the number of prescribed countries and regions increased.

25 February 2020

The government published guidance for employers and businesses, which at that time focused on what action to take in the workplace if an individual was confirmed or suspected as having COVID-19, or had recently returned from one of the prescribed countries badly affected by the virus. As the pandemic spread and the national strategy changed, the guidance was revised a number of times.

3 March 2020

The government published its coronavirus action plan which was based on four strategic phases – contain; delay, research; and mitigate.

6 March 2020

The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) published a set of planning assumption for a reasonable worst case scenario for the pandemic. These included a general infection rate of 80 percent of the population, between 17 and 21 percent of the workforce being absent from work in the peak weeks of the outbreak and an estimate that approximately 50 percent of the workforce would need to take time off work, either due to sickness or caring responsibilities over the full course of the pandemic.

12 March 2020

The government published its 'Stay at home' guidance which set out what individuals should do if they experienced coronavirus symptoms, however mild. At this point the government recognised that the virus was spreading generally throughout the country and could no longer be contained through international travel restrictions and by contact tracing around suspected or

confirmed cases. In terms of its action plan, this signified the shift from 'contain' to 'delay'.

16 March 2020

Imperial College London published a study which indicated that significant action was needed to avoid the NHS becoming overwhelmed and the number of deaths escalating much higher than in the worst case scenario initially envisaged. The report advocated widespread social distancing, in conjunction with other measures including school closures, case isolation, household isolation and the shielding of vulnerable groups, to control the spread of the pandemic to more manageable levels. The study prompted the government to advise the public to avoid all unnecessary contact and travel and to stay away from pubs and theatres.

18 March 2020

The government announced that all schools were to close until further notice. Further education colleges and universities closed too and summer GCSE and A-level examinations were cancelled.

20 March 2020

Pubs and restaurants were ordered to shut and the public urged to practice social distancing wherever possible on a voluntary basis.

23 March 2020

A UK-wide lockdown was announced, backed by police powers to enforce social distancing and closure regulations.

25 March 2020

Emergency legislation was introduced and passed in just four days, with the Coronavirus Act 2020 receiving Royal Assent on 25 March 2020. The legislation gives further powers to government to slow the spread of the virus; reduce the resourcing and administrative burden on public bodies; and limit the impact of potential staffing shortages on the delivery of public services.

2 April 2020

The government announced a significant expansion in the coronavirus testing programme with a target of 100,000 tests per day by the end of that month.

6 April 2020

The government wrote to local authorities to confirm that they would be allowed to hold virtual council meetings and that the 2020/21 annual meetings of councils would be postponed. In addition, all forthcoming local elections and other polls including the police and crime commissioner elections were postponed to 2021.

16 April 2020

The government extended the lockdown for a further three weeks and set out five tests which would need to be satisfied before the lockdown restrictions were eased.

23 April 2020

The first human trials in the UK of a test vaccine commenced.

4 May 2020

The first human trials in the UK of plasma treatments commenced.

10 May 2020

The Prime Minister made a statement on the roadmap to recovery and the gradual relaxation of restrictions as and when it deems it is safe to do so.

11 May 2020

The government published 'Our plan to rebuild: the UK Government's COVID-19 recovery strategy'. This set out a five point scale to indicate the level of threat posed by COVID-19 to society and a phased approach to recovery, with incremental steps to relax control and public protection measures.

13 May 2020

The government amended its existing regulations under the Coronavirus Act to enable the phased relaxation of lockdown measures including allowing people to visit HWRCs the re-opening of garden centres and some outdoor sports facilities.

24 May 2020

The government announced the establishment of a £50 million Reopening High Streets Safely Fund, to adapt and re-shape high street shopping areas and business districts to make them safe and welcoming spaces, in line with social distancing guidelines. The council will receive £469,000 from the fund.

25 May 2020

The Prime Minister confirmed the government's intention that schools should plan to re-open to some pupils from 1 June 2020 and that non-essential retail should begin to plan to re-open from 15 June 2020.

Appendix 3: Examples of local community support initiatives

Bishop Auckland and Shildon

Health Express and The Auckland Project set up a joint initiative aiming to provide food and meals to those in most need in the Bishop Auckland and Shildon areas.

With funding support via the Neighbourhood budgets of local Members, the project delivers free frozen meals and hampers of food products and ingredients to people in hardship in the area who have been advised to self-isolate and as a result have difficulty accessing food.

Bishop Middleham, Chilton, Ferryhill and West Cornforth

The 4 Together Area Action Partnership (AAP) which covers Ferryhill, Bishop Middleham, West Cornforth and Chilton turned their office into a local food distribution hub, distributing food that has been donated to the AAP.

More than 40 cases of milk, plus yoghurts, fruit, vegetables and fruit juices, alongside a number of other items, have been donated to 4 Together and are being shared amongst local residents in need.

The AAP team has also assisted local groups to create activity packs for children and young people in their area, including print-outs for rainbows, stress balls and packs of pens and notebooks to keep children busy during their time indoors. Future packs will also provide fruit and vegetable vouchers to those in need, which can be exchanged at the local fruit and vegetable shop in Ferryhill.

Brandon and Esh Winning

Mid Durham AAP is supporting Brandon Primary School and Esh Winning Primary School to keep children fed during the pandemic.

The AAP has granted £1,000 of funding to each school, to fund food projects for families in need.

Esh Winning Primary School benefitted from the AAP's coronavirus response fund, whilst Brandon Primary School benefitted from both the coronavirus response fund and the Neighbourhood budget available to local Members.

Brandon Primary School is using the funding to boost initiatives such as providing packed lunches and food parcels to families who normally receive free school meals, and who are struggling to afford food with their children at home during lockdown. Using additional funding from the Greggs Foundation, the school is also providing the high proportion of children who normally attend its breakfast club each morning with free breakfast packs.

The AAP's donation and the school's funds will be combined with funding from Believe Housing and Brandon and Byshottles Parish Council, to purchase and deliver food parcels to all families who contact the school in need.

Esh Winning Primary School is supporting parents and carers whose finances have been hit hard by the coronavirus outbreak, by delivering emergency food bags containing three days' worth of food, to help protect and support vulnerable and at-risk families.

The money supplied by Mid Durham AAP will help fund the school's scheme which, as well as supporting its own pupils, is also now supporting families from the village's other school, Our Lady Queen of Martyrs.

A parent support advisor is also helping families to access additional services and the school has become the temporary location of the Esh Winning Food Bank too.

Crook, Willington and Tow Law

Over what would have been Easter school holidays period, Jack Drum Arts developed online courses and arts and crafts activity packs for children and young people in Crook, Willington and Tow Law and surrounding villages.

The group has since received £13,000 from the 3 Towns Partnership (the AAP for the area) to cover their monthly overheads for the next three months so that they can run creative online classes and deliver arts and crafts activity packs to families in need. The grant will also enable Jack Drum Arts to commission a further 10 weeks of online courses aimed at children, adults, families, older and vulnerable people, with artists hosting virtual sessions including singing, dancing and music technology.

Durham City

Durham City AAP has been working with King's Church Durham in responding to referrals from the community support hub, to help a number of self-isolating people.

Building on its current Friends and Neighbours service, which operates in the Sherburn Road and Gilesgate areas of Durham City, King's Church Durham has received £2,000 from Durham AAP to extend its support into Newton Hall, Framwellgate Moor and other parts of the city.

The services offered include telephone befriending and free food parcels to residents in Sherburn Road and Gilesgate, as well as providing shopping support to residents in Sherburn Road, Gilesgate, Newton Hall, Framwellgate Moor and other areas of Durham City.

East Durham

Food parcels and essential items are being delivered to vulnerable residents in East Durham by local groups awarded funding by East Durham Area Action Partnership (AAP)

Around £4,000 has been awarded to East Durham Trust, which has seen a 400 per cent increase in requests for food parcels since the lockdown began.

The trust has recruited around 20 new volunteers in response to the demand and, building on its existing People's Takeaway service, has been working with community groups in the area to deliver meals to isolated people.

Another £4,800 has been awarded to Dawdon Youth and Community Centre to help support its foodbank, allowing it to expand the service to include hot meal deliveries. Since the service expanded, the centre has delivered more than 450 food parcels and meals to the community as part of its coronavirus support service.

Murton Parish Council has also been awarded £3,000 to deliver emergency food parcels to residents who are in isolation. The funding will allow the parish council to deliver more than 600 parcels to those in the community.

Lanchester

A funding grant from Mid Durham AAP has supported Willow Burn Hospice in Lanchester with its running costs during the coronavirus outbreak.

The nurse-led hospice offers specialist supportive, palliative and end of life care, including in-patient care, respite, day services and bereavement and family support, and is one of few rurally based hospices in the country.

It costs £1.2 million to operate Willow Burn each year and the hospice team is responsible for raising 70 per cent of this through grants, fundraising, retail income and donations.

However, due to the lockdown restrictions, the charity's shops and café have closed and local fundraising has fallen significantly. The AAP, through its own coronavirus support funding and Neighbourhood Budget from local Members has provided £10,000 to support the hospice over this period.

Newton Hall

Emergency funding from the AAPs has been used to support community venues suffering from lost income during the lockdown period.

One example is Newton Hall Community Centre which has received a grant of £1,700 to cover essential bills and to enable it to remain financially viable.

With essential costs covered, the community centre has remained open and the building is now being used by Durham Foodbank, which needed extra space as it supports more families who are struggling as a result of the coronavirus outbreak. Staff at the foodbank are using the centre as somewhere to pack and prepare family food parcels for the Durham area.

Spennymoor

Spennymoor Area Action Partnership (AAP) has supported local groups that have stepped up to the COVID-19 emergency through its Targeted Small Grants Fund.

One such group that is benefitting from the extra money is a dedicated team organised by Spennymoor Town Council which is pulling together care packages for vulnerable people in the area. Funding from Spennymoor AAP and housing provider Livin, contributed to over 50 packages being shopped for and delivered.

Asda in Spennymoor allowed a special shop at 7am and provided 150 free bags for life. Council staff and Members made up the packages at Spennymoor Town Hall and helped with delivery alongside volunteers from the Helping Spennymoor group and The Learning Library.

Spennymoor Police, The Learning Library and Solan Connor Fawcett Family Cancer Trust supplied details of clients who needed an extra helping hand.

Stanley

PACT House in Stanley has dealt with over 1,250 issues since opening its Coronavirus Crisis Hotline, these have ranged from things as seemingly trivial as posting letters, to supplying families with food who have lost employment or due to health issues have been forced into isolation.

They have created a six day a week fresh food bank, cooking food on the premises to be frozen into easily distributed cartons. Satellite foodbanks have also been set up by the organisation in outlying villages. Crisis packs are available to those in dire need, consisting of a range of fresh and tinned goods, bread, eggs, toiletry and sanitary products. They also have a team of volunteers who can shop for people with specific needs such as diabetes, and also collect and deliver prescriptions and medications.

Upper Teesdale and Weardale

Upper Teesdale Agricultural Support Service (UTASS) has been supported by the AAPs for Teesdale and Weardale to introduce a new 'Cook Your Own Tea @ Home' offer, which is a variation of its usual holiday activities where children and young people would gather together at a local centre to cook a balanced meal to enjoy.

UTASS has adapted the service and is offering a free fortnightly service where a recipe bag including locally sourced ingredients is delivered to a safe, pre-arranged location so members can create their meal at home with their families.

The project has received £1,380 from the AAPs as well as financial support from NHS County Durham Clinical Commissioning Group, BBC Children in Need and local which support UTASS.

Appendix 4: Examples of business support initiatives

Business Durham has assisted a number of businesses to diversify and expand in response to the pandemic:

- Bishop Auckland-based carton manufacturer JSB Enterprises, has diversified into PPE production by adapting a number of its cardboard cutting machines to create protective visors. The company initially supplied the visors locally to care homes, bus services and other frontline organisations. However, it has expanded production following national requests for protective visors which has enabled the business to safeguard six jobs including those of two staff members recruited through the council's Employability Durham scheme.
- Peterlee-based Alexander Technologies Ltd is recruiting 100 jobs. The company manufactures storage battery packs, some of which are used in medical equipment.
- A Seaham-based company that is a subcontractor to Serco has won a contract under the national track and trace programme, creating 170 new jobs over a 12 week period. Recruitment has commenced, but the company has asked that their name is not released.
- Sedgfield-based Kromek has moved into additional space in Discovery 1 at NETPark to develop and manufacture ventilators.
- Magnitude Biosciences Ltd, a Durham University spin-out, has moved into lab space in Plexus 2 at NETPark and have acquired Invermis Ltd, a specialist transgenics services provider. Their existing training workshops and services will now be conducted from NETPark, allowing the company to service larger projects.
- IBEX Innovations, based at NETPark, has raised more than £500,000 to commercialise a product which aims to improve detection of breast cancer. The funding has been secured from the North East Venture Fund, along with IP Group and a number of private investors.
- Technimark in Middleton-in-Teesdale is making filters for ventilators as part of the COVID-19 response. The council's planning team has provided advice to enable the company to maximise its space and consider options to increase manufacturing capacity on-site.