

**Environment and
Sustainable Communities
Overview and Scrutiny
Committee**



3 September 2020

**The response of
Neighbourhoods and Climate
Change to the Coronavirus
Pandemic**

**Report of Alan Patrickson, Corporate Director for Neighbourhoods
and Climate Change**

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 The purpose of the report is to provide members of the committee with a summary of the actions that the teams within Neighbourhoods and Climate Change have taken, working with partners, to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Executive summary

- 2 The highly infectious nature of the COVID 19 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. 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.
- 3 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.

- 4 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.
- 5 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.
- 6 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.
- 7 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.
- 8 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.
- 9 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.
- 10 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.

- 11 This report will be accompanied by a presentation by the Corporate Director reviewing the response of the front-line services.

Recommendations

- 12 That the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee are requested to:
 - a) note the content of the report and presentation and comment accordingly.
 - b) Receive a further report on the response of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change Service Grouping on the COVID 19 Pandemic.

Background

- 13 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.
- 14 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.
- 15 County Durham communities themselves have been a major force in this and have made an immense contribution to the 'County Durham Together' response.
- 16 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.
- 17 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.
- 18 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.
- 19 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.
- 20 The council's focus has now turned to restoring council services and laying the foundations for recovering from the pandemic.
- 21 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.

Neighbourhood services

- 22 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.
- 23 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.
- 24 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.
- 25 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.

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- 28 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.

Conclusion

- 29 The coronavirus pandemic is one of the most profound challenges society has faced in more than a generation.
- 30 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.
- 31 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.
- 32 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.
- 33 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.

- 34 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

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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 grants to help cover the additional costs and lost income associated with coronavirus.

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.