

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

**19 March 2021**

**An update on the response  
of Neighbourhoods and  
Climate Change to the  
Coronavirus Pandemic**



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**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 an update in the actions that the teams within Neighbourhoods and Climate Change have taken, working with partners, to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic prior to a presentation from the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change attached as appendix 2.

**Executive summary**

- 2 Services across the Neighbourhoods and Climate Change service group continue to be significantly affected by the pandemic both in the operational procedures that remain in place to keep staff safe, and also the public facing service offer.
- 3 Social distancing continues to provide the most significant challenges, with many operations having to adapt to safe working practices. While many of these practices are now well embedded in many services, the operational and service impacts are still being felt.
- 4 In the area of regulation and compliance, we continue to see generally very good levels of compliance with the COVID regulations from the public and businesses across the county, with only a limited amount of formal enforcement being necessary.

- 5 The governments roadmap out of lockdown was published on 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2021 and services are currently working through the detailed implications in readiness.

### **Recommendations**

- 6 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) include in the 2021/22 work programme a further update.

## **Background**

- 7 The council and its partners have continued to provide front facing environment services to the people of County Durham throughout the pandemic and for much longer that was anticipated when emergency procedures were introduced almost 12 months ago.
- 8 Council employees have continually 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.
- 9 County Durham residents have observed and co-operated with national guidance and while the lockdown restrictions continue to be in place at the current time, there is now a Government Roadmap for release, which will bring its own issues for operational services.
- 10 Locally, the council continues to work with partner agencies via the County Durham and Darlington Local Resilience Forum (LRF) to manage the multi-agency response to COVID-19.

## **Neighbourhood services**

- 11 Social distancing remains the main impact of the pandemic on many of our operational services. Safe operating procedures remain in place for all services including refuse and recycling collections, highways and construction maintenance, grounds maintenance and cleansing.
- 12 Refuse and recycling services have continued throughout the pandemic without interruption albeit with more resource required. The garden waste collection service was delivered during 2020 on the basis of Saturday and Monday collections and with a short interruption early in the first lockdown. The service will re-commence in April 2021 on a Tuesday to Friday basis, which is the more usual configuration.
- 13 Household waste recycling centres continue to be very busy and this has increased further as the winter weather has receded recently. This additional demand, in conjunction with the social distancing measure that still need to be in place at the sites, have continued to create queues, which at some sites has meant that traffic management must remain in place. Solutions to ease this issue are in development including a booking system and an online queue monitoring system.
- 14 Highways maintenance returned to a normal programme during 2020 as safe operating procedures became embedded. More recently efforts have focussed on winter maintenance during some extended periods of exceptionally challenging winter weather. Significant efforts were also made to ensure that priority footpaths were kept clear and a special focus was given to all COVID testing and vaccination centres across the

county. This led to some very appreciative feedback from colleagues in the health service and others involved in the COVID response.

- 15 Major projects have continued, using COVID safe procedures. The New Elvet Bridge project continues to make good progress and the new Witton Park Bridge was opened in December 2020.
- 16 Community Protection teams have been involved principally in providing advice and guidance to those businesses across the county that were able to continue trading under the new regulations. Compliance has generally been very good however enforcement has been necessary in exceptional circumstances, with one gym being taken to court to gain a closure order after refusing to abide by the current regulations.
- 17 Community protection teams have also been working on outbreak management with public health colleagues.

### **Government Roadmap**

- 18 On 22nd February 2021 the government published the roadmap out of lockdown, setting out a four-step process based on data, not dates, but with an indicative timetable across the next five months.
- 19 While further guidance, and regulation, will be forthcoming to crystallise the requirement of each stage there is currently considerable work being progressed to understand what are the key milestones and decision points across this roadmap both for our operations and our public facing service offer.

### **Conclusion**

- 20 The teams working within the Neighbourhoods & Climate Change service grouping have continued to show resilience, dedication and flexibility to maintain essential services during this prolonged pandemic. The roadmap out of lockdown provides a template for work going forward but many details remain to be confirmed.

### **Background papers**

- None

Author

Alan Patrickson

Tel: 03000 268165

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## **Appendix 1: Implications**

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### **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.