

NEWCASTLE-UNDER-LYME BOROUGH COUNCIL

**EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT TEAM'S
REPORT TO**

Health Wellbeing and Partnerships Scrutiny Committee
01 June 2020

**Appendix 2 – Discussion Paper: CV-19 implications for the Health,
Wellbeing and Partnerships Scrutiny Committee**

Vulnerable Residents

1. The Government wrote out to the 2.2 million most vulnerable residents across the country giving them advice on how to stay well. In Staffordshire, it is understood that there are 36,887 people in the Extremely Clinically Vulnerable category, of which 4,416 reside in the borough. Staffordshire County Council are offering assistance to approximately 130,000 other vulnerable residents, who are over 70 and/or have a serious health condition but who have no alternative family or friends to offer support with urgent personal care or obtaining food or medicine.
2. The Borough Council and our partners at the Realise Foundation and Support Staffordshire acknowledge that there are a number of other vulnerable groups within our community, who may not have care and support needs but may be self-isolating or struggling for a variety of reasons as a result of the Covid-19 virus and need to ask for help from others. Assistance such as help getting shopping, walking the dog or even being put in touch with local community groups or someone to talk to is available. It is recognised that already a number of community groups have already been established to try to respond to others in need in their neighbourhoods and that support is being made available for these from Support Staffordshire.
3. The Realise Foundation has created a website portal for the Borough to co-ordinate activity locally and offer assistance to those in need, working with volunteers and voluntary sector organisations to ensure that the people of Newcastle-under-Lyme are supported, protected and kept well-informed. This network will co-ordinate the response locally to ensure that everyone who needs help can receive it.
4. To assist the website function the Council created a complimentary COVID 19 call centre staffed by volunteers from our leisure services team. A range of vulnerability themed scripts have been created to assist staff in giving relevant and appropriate information and signposting to callers, including money advice and financial hardship, domestic abuse, social isolation, safeguarding, housing and homelessness, and food deliveries.
5. The Borough Council are continuing to assist more complex cases and other vulnerable households with partners through the work of the Daily Vulnerability Hub, Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) and the Newcastle Housing Advice Service. There has been an increase in cases being referred into the Daily Vulnerability Hub.
6. The Council is contributing to a number of pan Staffordshire task groups, which have been established to co-ordinate activity that is supporting and managing assistance to vulnerable households. These groups include the Civil Contingency led Staffordshire Resilience Forum Vulnerability and Voluntary Support Group and the Police led C-19 Safeguarding, Vulnerability and Partnerships sub group and Domestic Abuse task group.
7. Staff unable to work in their usual setting have been temporarily reassigned to support the vulnerability hub which has provided a vital resources to vulnerable residents, giving advice and guidance as well as arranging care packages and delivering prescriptions and other essential items.

Domestic Abuse

8. Police advise that there has been no noticeable increase in demand in relation to reporting of domestic abuse, but they are preparing for a potential increase which is likely to come through over the next few weeks as people are able to leave their home and contact support services more easily. Presently the majority of the incidents received are low level, however there are concerns that these could escalate into something more serious as the lockdown continues, which reflects the national picture.
9. The weekly Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC), at the time of writing had six cases heard at the meeting this week and the numbers have remained pretty consistent.
10. New Era, the County domestic abuse service commissioned by Staffordshire Commissioner's Office, report that there has been an increase in referrals for service. The service is operating with a full complement of staff, working from home, and are making preparations for potential increase in provision. They report that there have been some front line barriers experienced with complications in accessing legal aid as self-isolation reduces the options to provide proof of identity.
11. GLOW, the provider of the Newcastle Children and Young Persons (CYP) service, who also own and manage the Elizabeth House Refuge, report that referrals are increased to all elements of their services. The Refuge staffing is stable and as at the time of writing it is full. They are offering predominantly telephone based support but visits will be undertaken if necessary and safe to do so. Schools are continuing to refer children and young people to the Glow CYP service, which is commissioned by the Borough Council on behalf of the Newcastle Partnership.
12. Officers are working closely with colleagues at Newcastle Housing Advice to monitor the situation closely. They are also working with partners to cost a dedicated accommodation model with specialist support for homeless households fleeing domestic abuse, as it is expected that demand may start to rise and exceed the temporary accommodation currently available.
13. Officers have prepared and shared information around available domestic abuse services for dissemination to staff and the wider public, which has been shared by our Communications Team. Staffordshire Commissioner's Office have also launched a County wide domestic abuse communications programme, which Officers have been sharing alongside the more local campaigning.

Housing, Homelessness & Rough Sleeping

Private Renting

14. The government took early action to support renters by suspending any eviction activities and calling on landlords to be compassionate so that renters are protected in their home.
15. A key concern is the lack routine maintenance, essential repairs and safety checks during this time. Government Guidance states that work can still be carried out in people's homes where necessary, e.g. for safety reasons. However this is still dependant on the views of the household and contractor with each case assessed individually.
16. Routine, non-urgent housing visits are suspended however we are responding to requests for advice and support. We will undertake visits if the situation deems it necessary, the household are in agreement, social distancing can be observed and that we have any necessary PPE.
17. The Health and Safety Executive and Gas Cert Register have both put out advice to landlords on gas safety certificates and we are following this in giving advice.
18. Government advice for landlords, tenants and Councils has been added to our website pages. It has been emailed to our landlords who are part of the Landlord Accreditation Scheme, to our HMO licence holders and landlords for whom we have e mail details.

Disabled facility grants

19. This service is provided by Millbrook Healthcare on behalf of the Council. Most customers are in vulnerable groups so only emergency works are being carried out where they can be done quickly and with minimal site presence i.e. stair lifts. Applications are being worked up to approval where this can be done without site visits.
20. A key issue is planning our recovery as there will be a build-up of work but no new contractors, there may be supply chain issues, costs may increase, and contractors will have to change current procedures starting and finishing in one house before cleaning equipment etc. and moving to the next. Millbrook Healthcare are being asked to carry out measures now to maintain the supply chain.
21. Millbrook are funded by fees on completed grants. As no grants are being completed Millbrook have no income and may need to furlough staff. This will significantly affect recovery. The County Council has sought to address this by agreeing to pay part fees on grants which have been worked up to the approval stage, and to fund purchases of materials which can be stored in readiness for when works can start again ensuring that supplies are available. This Council will support this by processing these claims against the individual grants.

Empty homes

22. We had a few empty homes where works were on site. Most have now been suspended. Communication is being maintained with owners to ensure this isn't an excuse for longer than necessary delays for returning them to use.

Caravan sites

23. We have one large site with permanent residents and owned holiday units. We have been in touch with the site owner, they are coming together as a community helping each other and reporting no concerns at the moment.

Homelessness & Rough Sleeping

24. This service has continued to operate with a full complement of staff working from home. The homelessness and housing options service is delivered for the Council by Midland Heart assisted by the Council's Housing and Partnerships Team and the Safe Recovery service, the latter supporting, in particular, cases presenting with the most complex needs. There has been an increase in demand for service as households have not been able to move into new accommodation as landlords have not been letting homes.
25. The Rough Sleepers Team are operating as normal, at full capacity, carefully observing social distancing good practice. There has been an increase in demand for the service across North Staffordshire, again due to the lack of move on accommodation, but it is currently unclear how much this has increased specifically in Newcastle because of the transient nature of the cohort.
26. Particular pressures arose at the end of March when the Minister for Local Government and Homelessness wrote to all local authorities asking them to urgently accommodate all rough sleepers to try and mitigate the spread of the pandemic and the disproportionate effect of the pandemic on that Cohort. Local authorities were advised to use third party accommodation providers to comply with this request, where necessary, including local hotels and bed and breakfasts.
27. Rough sleepers and those living in temporary accommodation are disproportionately affected by the pandemic because of complex needs such as mental health issues and substance dependency, compounded with the additional challenge this cohort faces with being able to self-isolate effectively. As a result, our primary concern was to secure accommodation for everybody who is rough sleeping (regardless of local connection, immigration status, eligibility or priority need), to provide somewhere where they can self-isolate, if necessary, whilst obtaining appropriate support for individuals' particular needs.

28. Despite the powers and additional funding made available from the Ministry, this has been an extremely difficult task. Most hotels and bed and breakfasts have either closed for business or were only prepared to accommodate key workers or people not suffering from substance misuse or mental health issues.
29. After extensive research and negotiation, temporary accommodation placements for rough sleepers were made at a local Bed and Breakfast which has assisted the Council with this cohort for a number of years, and at its sister establishment in Stone, when the local site was fully booked. In particular, four rooms were made available as COVID-19 self-isolation rooms, to be used in the event of any rough sleepers reporting or presenting with symptoms.
30. Recognising that bed and breakfast is not sustainable for rough sleepers and other complex needs cases, the Council worked with local charity Open Door to create a 7 bedroom temporary accommodation unit, which is staffed by support workers 24/7. The unit is situated in Stoke-on-Trent, as a suitable property in Newcastle couldn't be identified at short notice. It was mobilised on Monday 13th April.
31. Other temporary accommodation is also being used at a local motel, for other homeless presentations. There are a further two shared supported houses used to transition individuals into independent accommodation. Families who present as homeless are able to access two 2 bedroom temporary accommodation properties owned by Midland Heart.
32. At the time of writing, there are 5 households in B & B accommodation and 15 in the various temporary accommodation properties, whilst the Housing Service continues to assist the households and investigate their circumstances.
33. Officers are aware that demand for temporary accommodation is likely to continue in the coming weeks and are working closely with partners to develop more housing options and support plans to move people on to more suitable accommodation where possible. There have been some issues with housing providers ceasing to turn over void properties and make lettings but these seem to be being addressed and worked through on a one to one basis.
34. The Furniture Mine, a local charity helping homeless households with furniture and white goods, have advised that they have closed for business, which may have a knock on effect when trying to move people from temporary accommodation into a permanent tenancies. Officers have been liaising with the Furniture Mine to ensure that the remaining furniture stock can be accessed if required.
35. Officers have developed a similar scheme, using homelessness prevention funding, to pay for a furniture pack to set a homeless household up in a tenancy and move them from temporary accommodation. Although there is an initial financial outlay for this it will save the cost of continued B & B in the longer term for some and therefore present a longer term saving.
36. A review of the support packages and supported accommodation provided to homeless households will be completed over the forthcoming weeks to ensure that the provision meets the statutory legislation and Covid guidance as this is amended going forward

Customer Services

37. Within 24 hours of Government issuing the lock down instructions, the Council established a dedicated helpline to assist vulnerable members of the public. Operated by staff who were transferred from the Jubilee 2 team, the helpline worked in partnership with both the NHS and Staffordshire County Council services, referring vulnerable people to the best source of assistance. Significantly, the helpline also operated in partnership with the Realise Foundation – who co-ordinated service to assist residents who were not on the NHS Shielded Patient list and, who were not eligible for assistance from Staffordshire County Council. The helpline was available from 9am to 5pm, 7 days a week and a voicemail service operated outside of these times. One notable intervention occurred over a Bank

Holiday weekend, where a re-trained member of J2's staff received and responded to a call where a caller was worried about their supply of insulin. The member of staff concerned collected the prescription and delivered it to the caller in a matter of hours.

38. The service only received around 10 calls each day – except on Mondays which was typically busier, despite being open at the weekend. The weekend service was discontinued two weeks ago, as less than 2 people per day were making use of the facility. Call volumes to the helpline are now tapering off and it is unlikely the service will be required for much longer. Since its introduction, the helpline service has assisted 722 customers.

Bereavement Services

39. The Bereavement Services' response to the Covid-19 situation has been one of continued response to changing government guidance and legislation, whilst keeping both funeral directors, families, and other service users up dated with the relevant changes and still providing a dignified funeral service.
40. Some of the changes include increased cleaning between services, which has been facilitated with the support of staff from J2. A reduction in the number of funeral attendees was implemented to ensure that social distancing can be maintained both within the Crematorium chapel and at graveside services. To ensure that the service can continue to meet the demand of the increased number of funerals, times have been adjusted to allow up to 14 services per day at the crematorium, with the cremator operators working shifts to allow for the additional times, and support from the landscape and community team with the chapel attending duties.
41. Due to the restrictions on numbers of those able to attend funerals, the Bereavement Services' team, with the support of ICT, have installed the facilities to enable webcasting from the crematorium chapel. The Obitus system enables those who are unable to physically attend a funeral the ability to view the service remotely.

Cultural and Leisure Provision

Jubilee 2

42. Like many services, the Council's sport and leisure function has been significantly disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic. Not only did all the facilities at Jubilee2 close on 20th March, but all community centres and sports clubs across the Borough also closed.
43. This has created multiple challenges for our workforce, volunteers, and members of the public. With social distancing, self-isolation and sanctions on daily life, the task of keeping the Borough active and healthy is arguably more important now than ever before. Without access to our facilities we are having to be more creative and versatile in our work, for example by providing instruction for exercise at home and developing on-line content and classes.
44. In addition, throughout this time a proportion of staff have been redeployed to other Council frontline services, including staffing the vulnerability helpline, supporting the crematorium and providing additional capacity in waste services.
45. The opportunity has also been taken to carry out the outstanding roof repairs at Jubilee2 and re-visit plans for the stripped out health suite.
46. With the Government's ambition to re-open leisure facilities no earlier than 4 July, the complete process of recovery and the service's approach will be influenced by the guidance at national level from central government and informed by learning from others including advice from the leisure sector (Sport England, UK Active and the Chartered Institute for Sport and Physical Activity) as well as local partners.

47. In terms of safely lifting lockdown in our leisure facilities, it is anticipated that our communities will be living with the virus in the population, so social distancing has to be maintained, most likely until a vaccination is available. This assumption forms the basis for the developing Jubilee2 recovery plan, which can be adopted for opening other leisure facilities safely.

The Brampton Museum

48. The museum closed on 19th March 2020. Visitor numbers in that week had been very low. Much of the focus has been on continuing to catalogue and digitise the collection so that it is available on line, maintaining Facebook posts whilst closed to engage the public and continuing to work on the extension project for a new gallery and education space. All grant funding has now been approved and a total of £400,000 reached. Staff, as well as undertaking on-line CPD training, have researched the History of the House & Museum for a new display and timeline for a new gallery including objects and directed volunteers in researching notable people for Newcastle 850.
49. An online home education resource was created for Florence Nightingale's 200th birthday on 12th May, looking at her legacy with healthcare and other epidemics/pandemics that have affected locally. The design and research for the new museum education workshop programme is being undertaken as well creating outreach workshops that can be delivered between the end of lockdown and the re-opening of the new spaces in the museum.
50. Plans for new gallery and the new craft space are being developed, as well as the option to provide and offsite service at Lancaster Buildings (subject to situation conditions). Contact is being maintained with artists to supply work for the shop, and online events - Lockdown Art exhibition and local artist/maker profiles/interviews are in preparation.
51. Free printable educational crafts are also offered via Facebook and also using the #heritage at home tag. An artists A-Z section is being developed where any artists who have been involved with the museum and art gallery can share their website on a listings page if they wish. The COVID lockdown is also being recorded photographically for the museum archive/collections.

Parks and Open Spaces

52. Government guidance has remained consistent throughout the lockdown period, in that parks and open spaces are important to enable people to exercise and enjoy the outdoors, which contributes to physical and mental health and wellbeing. Therefore, the Council's parks and open spaces have remained open and available for our communities to use throughout the period of restrictions for activities such as walking, running, cycling and dog walking, which can be undertaken whilst observing social distancing requirements.
53. Some facilities within parks have had to be closed, such as children's play areas, tennis courts, bowling greens, football and rugby pitches, changing rooms and toilets as these activities could not safely continue to be used while observing social distancing and cleansing requirements. Also, in consultation with Staffordshire Police, car parks at Bathpool Park and Birchenwood were closed due to concerns relating to the potential for people to drive some distance to use these parks, which would have been contrary to guidance. Essential safety inspections of play areas, trees and other facilities continued on their normal frequency, along with periodic patrols, and it appeared that most people were using parks and open spaces responsibly and observing social distancing.
54. For the initial part of the lockdown period, grounds maintenance operations in parks and open spaces were suspended as they were considered to be non-essential services, and significant numbers of Streetscene staff were redeployed into supporting the Recycling and Waste Collection service, as well as focusing on street cleansing activity. However, as messaging about the importance of parks and open spaces grew stronger from Government, it became clear that to enable our communities to access and enjoy our parks, a reasonable level of grounds maintenance was required, particularly at larger, strategic sites. Therefore, operations resumed in these areas in late April.

55. More recently, government guidance has allowed for the reopening of certain sporting facilities where social distancing guidelines can be followed, including tennis and bowls, and the Council has responded by reopening these areas where appropriate. Children's' play areas remain closed for the time being, as do changing rooms and toilets.

Community Centres

56. Following the announcement from Central Government that public facilities, including community centres, should close, Officers have offered assistance to management committees to ensure that they are able to:

- a. Communicate with their users advising them that the centres will remain closed.
- b. Undertake building inspections and how to report and concerns to the Council.
- c. Reduce their operating costs through minimising the use of their utilities.
- d. Be prepared for the Council's continued statutory inspections of community centres.
- e. Apply for business grant support

57. At this stage, it is too early to identify what the process of reopening the community centres may look like until further government and or industry advice is received. However, at the appropriate time Officers will support the management committees of the community centres by:

- a. Ensuring that they are informed of any guidance notes and how to implement these. We are working with the organisation Community Matters in this regard.
- b. Support management committees to develop appropriate risk assessments and safe systems of work prior to opening community centres.
- c. Develop a generic communications for community centres advising their communities what approaches have been adopted to ensure that the community centres are safe to use.
- d. Support the management committee's in their marketing activities although they would need to incur any costs associated with this.

Member & Officer Wellbeing

58. Prior to lockdown, all reasonable and prudent measures were taken in line with government advice in terms of the applying the advice about self-isolation if returning from certain destinations, or if symptomatic. Advice on protective hygiene measures was given through a communications campaign and measures taken to increase cleaning and the availability of wipes/hand sanitisers in council buildings and vehicles. Assessments were undertaken to identify and protect vulnerable staff, and to plan for likely absences or unavailability on account of caring commitments. In some service areas, full-scale working from home was trialled and implemented before the formal Government lock-down was imposed.

59. Since the start of lockdown, NULBC teams have been working hard to support both the physical and mental health of staff. Daily Incident Management Team meetings have been receiving reports from across the organisation on the health (particularly suspected and confirmed CV-19 cases), wellbeing and attendance of staff to ensure service continuity and planning, but also to ensure the wellbeing (as far as the council is able to) of every member of staff. Where service delivery has transferred to staff working from home it has, almost without exception, operate no less effectively than prior to the lockdown and has, in a number of areas, operated more efficiently. The Planning Service, in particular, has received feedback praising it for continuing to conduct business and hold committees in circumstances where other authorities have ground to a halt.

60. Recognising that working from home or in different ways can impact on staff, the communications team have sent regular advice to staff regarding developing a healthy routine, healthy eating and keeping active. Advice has been shared both by email and on the organisation's intranet pages.

Additional IT and office equipment has been provided, where required, for home use to ensure similar levels of comfort and safety for those working from home (chairs/screens etc.). It has also enabled instantaneous and ad hoc “face to face” contact between team members which essential for monitoring and maintaining wellbeing and morale, but also enables the process of team meetings, 121s, supervision and organisational culture to be maintained (and in some cases improved) despite widespread working from home.

61. Where staff have been required to continue to work on site, Risk Assessments have been undertaken to ensure safety which has resulted in changes to some operational models, for example, changes made within Waste and Recycling services to limit the number of officers working in a single cab at any one time. Additional Personal Protective Equipment has been sourced, additional cleaning regimes and resources (such as hand sanitisers and wash facilities) have been put in place to ensure the safety of staff.
62. We have recognised that the lockdown has impacted on people in different ways depending on their personal circumstances and home lives and as such may need to work more flexibly and at different times of the day. There has been a particular emphasis on flexibilities around those with caring commitments, and those themselves shielding in vulnerable groups. We have suspended the flexitime and core-hours scheme and promoted an ethos of trust and confidence.
63. The council has signed up to VIVUP, an online wellbeing platform which provides staff with free access to health and wellbeing advice as well as access to a 24/7 phone line should people need some support with their wellbeing at any time. In recognition of Mental Health Awareness Week, the council has asked staff to celebrate positivity and share examples of times that a colleague’s kindness has helped them feel supported.
64. Member wellbeing has been accommodated by ensuring that member needs are met without the need to attend council offices. Measures include postal re-direction, responding rapidly to direct requests for assistance, close ICT support and early, successful adoption of video conferencing technology to allow all decision-making bodies to continue to meet remotely. Those measures will continue, as appropriate, and in light of prevailing regulations, government advice and technical capabilities to ensure the safe participation of members in council and committee meetings as far as is reasonably practicable.
65. As we consider a move to a recovery model, departmental Risk Assessments are being produced in partnership with Trade Unions to ensure that any sites and services looking to re-open do so in line with Covid-Secure requirements. Furthermore, as officers return to the workplace, individual Risk Assessments will be undertaken where necessary, to account for a diverse range of personal circumstances including vulnerability of the individual or any householders. We will continue to review our wellbeing work stream to ensure that the needs of staff are met accounting for flexible circumstances. We will also continue to support working from home in all appropriate cases in recognition of the improved bio-security that offers, prevailing government advice, the need to implement effective social-distancing in the workplace whilst seeking to maintain and capitalise upon a number of newly discovered or proven digital efficiencies that have been realised through a sustained period of wide-spread home working.