

NEWCASTLE-UNDER-LYME BOROUGH COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT TEAM'S REPORT TO

Economy Environment and Place Scrutiny Committee **18 June 2020**

Appendix 1 – Discussion Paper: CV-19 implications for the Economy, Environment and Place Scrutiny Committee

Commercial Development and Economic Growth Services

Background

1. The unprecedented national and local developments continue with the coronavirus pandemic creating a huge challenge. Many residents are impacted either in a personal capacity by the illness, or by having to self-isolate and live through lockdown with significant economic and social implications. The focus has been to contribute to efforts to minimise the effects, especially on the most vulnerable, and to keep Borough residents safe. This will continue to be our focus through this next challenging phase. Whilst it is not possible to do justice here to all the work that has been done in the Borough, by our communities, our partners, and by Borough Council services, this report describes the approach that has been taken in relation to the town centres and their re-opening and economic recovery.
2. In this regard we need everybody's continued cooperation to ensure restrictions can be eased safely, enabling us to support strong economic recovery, while delivering public services and continuing to protect and support vulnerable residents. We are working to resume economic and social activity safely and effectively with social distancing measures in place, in line with national guidance and advice.
3. The complete process of recovery and the Council's approach is influenced by the guidance from central government and informed by learning from our partners, with the Council's response being led by its Incident Management Team (IMT).
4. The entire process of recovery will be influenced by the central government recovery strategy where a phased return to normal, locally, will be in line with the national approach. The government strategy sets a three phase approach with staged adjustments to lockdown measures. Each phase gradually seeks to reopen society and kick start the economy and will therefore require careful management at a local level complementing the national guidelines and transition.

Town Centres Reopening

5. The majority of businesses in the town centres closed at the beginning of lockdown and in line with Government Guidance there is a phased approach to reopening. In line with the Government guidance the Council has sought to introduce measures to enable the safe use of our high streets. In the main town centres of Newcastle and Kidsgrove this has included signage and marking of the streets to support town centre users to abide with the 2m social distancing measures. In the smaller areas significant queuing outside of businesses is not anticipated and advice is being offered, alongside working with Parish Councils where appropriate.
6. The Council has also undertaken a thorough cleansing operation in the town centres in advance of reopening, installing a new suite of litter bins, removing graffiti, jet washing under market stalls, applying weed killer and removing fly posting. It has implemented the annual floral displays of hanging baskets, barrier troughs and bedding plants and resumed maintenance of the ring road roundabouts to ensure that the town centres look attractive and cared for to support economic recovery.

7. The Council has been working closely with Newcastle Business Improvement District (BID) on a work programme to support businesses and the safe reopening of the town centre. The Council and BID have jointly introduced a range of marketing and safety measures.
8. On 1 May, the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) announced that Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) will receive £6.1m funding in response to the coronavirus pandemic. These monies have been distributed via a grant to local authorities and passed on to the BID, and will cover funding for 3 months and contribute to their operational costs.
9. The Newcastle BID was also due to re-ballot this summer for its 5 year renewal, the Government have extended BIDs where renewal was due until the end of the financial year. Newcastle will therefore re-ballot on a new Business Plan in spring 2021.

Markets

10. The market was closed as part of lockdown and in line with Government guidance plans are in place to commence a phased reopening. The General Market (operating Friday and Saturday) will be opening on Friday 5 June. The Antique Forum Group (operating Tuesday and Thursday) will open on Tuesday 16 June and the Farmer's Market on Friday 19 June.
11. Control measures now in place include the following:
 - Reducing the General Market trading days from four to two. This ensures a controlled and potentially phased opening in consideration of staff resources, trader and shopper safety.
 - A 2 metre minimum distance will be maintained between traders on stalls. Traders will be positioned to work side by side or facing away from each other, rather than face to face.
 - Stalls to trade in the safest possible direction to make use of available space and to avoid queues that may form outside high street shops.
 - 2m distancing markers on the floor in front of stall for social-distancing measures.
 - Safe distancing signage at head-height on every stall, in front and at the rear.
 - Contactless, cashless payment being introduced for the collection of rents by the Market Supervisor – at an advanced stage and being finalised by ICT/Finance.
 - Sanitizer to be provided and used by traders. Public toilets in Hassell Street to remain open for trader and shopper use.
 - Online ordering and click-and-collect encouraged and supported on social media advertising, website, etc as a safe option for shoppers.
 - Supervisors to act as advisers for safe distancing of customers in the market.
 - To protect our staff and shoppers, traders will only work from a stall if they are well and no one in their household is self-isolating.
 - Hazard tape and barriers to small walkways through some stalls.
 - Increase the frequency of cleaning and disinfection of table tops.
 - Safety advice based on guidelines available will be given to traders still dealing in cash.
12. As part of a continual Market remodelling plan, 10 stalls have been removed from the lower end of the market where there was the lowest occupancy rates. This is approximately 20% of the 55 permanently erected stalls. The reasons for this are:
 - Follow NABMA review recommendations
 - Increase the occupancy percentage
 - Concentrate the market nearer to the Guildhall
 - Improve the aesthetic of the town
 - Create valuable space for click and collect parking in consideration of safe shopping practices

13. Discussions are ongoing with Staffordshire County Council Highways department to find the most effective solution for the newly-created space. The likely outcome being 12 cars being able to park for a short duration enabling efficient collection of high street produce and goods ordered online.

Car parking and Bus Station

14. Enabling safe access to the town centre is crucial to ensuring town centre users feel safe to do so. A range of measures have been introduced:
 - Surface level car parks have remained open throughout, discussions are ongoing with the Roebuck as to the opening of the Midway as access through the Roebuck's second stairwell and lift are required. This is anticipated to be in line with general shops opening on 15th June. Whilst the Midway has been closed, work has been undertaken to make improvements including internal painting to cover the graffiti.
 - The car parking team are regularly cleaning the ticket machines with sanitiser. Initial spray 2m social distance marking around machines has been put in place and floor vinyls are on order.
 - Orders were placed for the new car park ticket machines prior to lockdown, however installation has been delayed and is now expected in June. These machines will have the capability of taking card payments which is seen as good practice in light of Covid. Subject to the contractor confirming delivery timescales the card transactions should be operational around the beginning of July.
 - Within the Bus Station signage for social distancing and floor markings are being implemented. In addition exterior hand sanitisers have been ordered for the key entry/exit points to the buses.

Economic Recovery

15. Supporting local businesses is a key aspect of the recovery plan and a range of actions have been undertaken to support businesses across the Borough:
 - Early in the lockdown an enquiry form was established to enable businesses to seek support including advice on the government grants, this received over 800 submissions. All enquirers were sent information regarding the government grants administered by the Council and how to apply, as well as information about other government support. In addition, many follow-up emails and phone calls have been dealt with. The advice given was updated as new information was released.
 - All businesses seeking advice through the enquiry form have been e-mailed to request permission to keep their details on file to keep them updated with businesses news via future newsletters. This email also included a re-opening checklist and the link to form to register for the Shop Local page.
 - The existing Business Support and Advice pages were revised to include links to information about financial and other support available to businesses (updated regularly when new information is received).
 - A 'Business Recovery – countdown to re-opening' page has been set up, providing a range of information to aid businesses recovery and re-opening.
 - A Shop Local page is shortly to be launched so that businesses can alert residents that they are open for businesses and the measures they are taking to ensure customer safety. An online form has been produced for businesses to complete so that their details can be uploaded to the website.
 - A new business information Twitter account has been set up to guide businesses to sources of advice and assistance.
 - A hard copy of the Council's re-opening checklist is being sent to all retail businesses in the Borough.
16. In addition, the Council administered the Government Grant Schemes for small businesses. These schemes saw around £20m in grant aid paid to approximately 1700 businesses, with over 90% of eligible hereditaments receiving payment. The Council has sought to contact the remaining eligible businesses, making direct contact through a call centre team, and applications continue to be submitted. The Council is currently rolling out a further grant scheme to small businesses not eligible for the initial government support, and a verbal update on this will be provided at the meeting.

17. A key aspect of the recovery process is being led through the Future High Street Fund and two Town Deals. The government has acknowledged that these are an important part of the recovery process and this is reflected in the Council and respective Town Deal Boards' approach to developing the Town Investment plans. A long list of projects is currently being produced following consultation with a variety of groups and individuals for both Kidsgrove and Newcastle. Alongside this a prioritisation framework is also being developed, scoring projects on a variety of parameters including strategic fit and deliverability to ensure that the Investment Plans are effective. Smaller working groups are also being set up based around key themes to discuss deliverability.
18. Supporting residents who unfortunately find themselves unemployed as a result of the economic situation also need to be supported as part of the recovery process. Work has commenced to review the impact on residents to ascertain the extent of residents now claiming Universal Credit and key metrics such as concentrations in particularly employment sectors and household groups / locations. Through the Newcastle Employment & Skills Group the Council will be working with a range of key partners including the DWP Job Centre Plus, Aspire/PM Training, Newcastle College Newcastle Libraries, the County Council, Business Enterprise Support and Support Staffordshire. Membership of this group changes to reflect the needs of the support required. Through this group, the Council is seeking to develop appropriate targeted support to help people back into work.

Recycling & Fleet services

Background

19. Under normal conditions the recycling and waste service makes on average 1,216,322 collections from householders a month, and the Covid 19 pandemic has put considerable pressure on to the Council's Recycling & Waste Services department.
20. Faced early on with a 25% reduction in operational staff, from mid-March, through Covid related sickness, self-isolation, and shielding, EMT and Informal Cabinet agreed a range of options which could be deployed if staff shortages continued to grow, and that some early planning on services such as how to maintain recycling refuse and garden waste collections was a practical way forward.
21. At the same time waste arising have increased by over 20%, a result of people being at home, clearing things out, gardening, and buying more food and drink, due to not being able to go out. This put substantial added pressure onto the collection service, however the aim was to maintain all collection services as reasonably practical.
22. The source separated recycling service is very labour intensive, and posed the greatest risk to maintaining operations if staff shortages continued to grow. As part of the options developed for EMT and cabinet, a decision was taken to collect the recycling materials comingled, which would drastically reduce the number of vehicles and staff needed to carry out collection of this material, effectively 16 vehicles down to 6 plus a support vehicle. Implementing this worked, and with recycling volumes increasing, has been the right thing to do. Collections have remained very reliable, and it's easier for the crews to operate. The disadvantage of this process is that the material has had to go to a material recovery facility (MRF) to be processed, which incurs a high cost gate fee per tonne of material processed. This is an additional cost, although offset by the reduction in the number of staff required to collect material, and those needed in the transfer station to process it. In total staff requirements, including transfer station, have gone down from 52 to 20 (assuming three man crews).
23. Social distancing measures were bought in following the announcement of the lockdown ensuring, where practical, people were kept 2 meters apart. There was some confusion to how this applied to people at work, in particular refuse collection services, which mainly operate with three man crews. The Council took the decision to start to implement two man crew operations with a combination of additional vehicles manned by two, effectively tacking two existing collection rounds and putting three vehicles into them, and some with operatives following in cars and vans, this element has worked less well. To date the Council is the only authority in Staffordshire to implement these working practices.

Service Impact

24. COVID-19 has had a number of impacts on the service, some of which have been positives in helping bring forward the change for the recycling collection service.
25. Suspension of food waste (residents have been told to temporarily put food waste into the residual bin.) Separate food waste collections were suspended when the decision was made to use RCV's to collect recycling comingled, as there was nowhere for the food waste to be stored on the vehicle. This service will need to be reinstated, as part of service change for the new recycling service. This presents an opportunity to relaunch the food waste collections and increase participation. It is anticipated that this will happen in the autumn, once the new service has fully settled in.
26. A move away from kerb sorted recycling to co-mingled collections to speed up service times. This has proven that the new collection method is considerably faster and demonstrated that the anticipated efficiency gains can be made. It has also been very well received by the staff and has therefore proven to be a step in the right direction for service change. The down side has been the increased cost for dealing with sorting fully comingled material, which could not be sustained. It was evident, however, that the service shouldn't revert back to kerbside sorted prior to service change planned for September 2020. As a result of the high financial costs, and the risk associated with reverting to the source separated system, a decision was taken to bring forward the introduction of the new twin stream recycling collection service. Details of this are given later in this report.
27. Garden waste collections were able to continue, but on the same week as residual. It had already been identified, as part of the route optimisation exercise that efficiencies could be gained with refuse and garden waste crews and vehicles in the same part of the borough where they can be used to support to each other. The decision was made to implement this as part of the COVID-19 response, in case of additional pressure on the service due to staff sickness/self-isolation. This collection pattern is to be maintained going forward as savings can be realised without the need to make a change to the collection pattern at a later date, where confusion may result.
28. A dedicated Facebook page has been implemented. This allows RWS to communicate targeted messages directly out to followers and respond promptly to queries. This will be extremely beneficial in order for the service to be responsive in the face of service change. Within a couple of weeks almost 1,000 followers had been achieved, providing a base to build from regarding the September service change. Many neighbourhood groups also link to it, meaning that the coverage across the borough is good. To build this in normal times prior to a major service change would have been very difficult. The page is associated with positivity towards collection staff and services, and has helped the service to be seen as hard working and successful, even whilst under extreme operational pressures.
29. Paperless working - the situation has also forced developments on the Bartec development plan that support paperless operations such as vehicle defect reporting. We have been able to continue with the service improvement programme despite huge operational issues. Bartec is our main back-office database and increasing use of the facilities it offers increases the value for money of the license. In-cab use by crews under pressure has been excellent, confirming that use of it is firmly embedded by operational staff, providing reassurance for delivery of service change.
30. Statistics – from the announcement of the lockdown to the end of May 2020, R&W have handled the following:
 - Collections – 2,055,000 containers emptied
 - Tonnage – 8,364.97 tonnes collected
 - Increases in recycling and waste collected (%) –
 - Recycling + 3.6%
 - Garden waste + 15.87%
 - Refuse + 21.83%

Early introduction of the Councils new twin stream recycling collection service.

31. As stated, continuing to run a fully comingled collection service is not sustainable financially, so a decision was taken to bring the implementation of the new twin stream recycling service forward. Wheeled Bin and bag deliveries to residents for the new recycling collection service began on the 26th May, and run over an eight week period to the end of July to complete the distribution across the borough. In order that residents don't have newly delivered bins unable to be used for a number of weeks, a plan has been developed, so bins and bags can start to be used by residents as soon as they have received them, and effectively can be put out on their next scheduled collection for recycling after delivery.

The Phased Roll Out

32. All recycling collections from when a resident receives their bin and bag for the new recycling service will be fortnightly on a rolling process from 8th June 2020, starting in the south of the borough, and will be fully rolled out and operational across the borough by the 3rd August 2020. Collections of recycling will be on the opposite week to residual and garden waste collections.
33. Co-mingled collections will continue for those residents remaining on boxes until their bin and bag is delivered, and will continue on a weekly collection basis. Again, once the bin and bag has been delivered, box collections from those properties will cease and the service will move to a fortnightly collection. If a resident subsequently puts boxes out for collection, once their new bin and bag has been delivered, it will not be collected and a sticker will be placed on the box, informing the resident that they need to use their new containers. This approach has to be taken for two reasons, firstly emptying boxes into a twin pack collection vehicle will incur significant manual handling risks to our staff, secondly, card and glass is presented currently in the same box, but will need to be separated in the new service, and the twin pack vehicle has no means of an operative being able to sort material during the collection.
34. Operationally, to minimise the impact of having to run two different collection processes at the same time, rounds will remain as they are, and support vehicles will be available to aid collections of the 'new' twin stream service, to ensure it is reliable from the start.
35. A communication plan is in place with residents, members, and internally, particularly around contact centre staff and driver/loader training.
36. During what is a period of intense activity as result of Covid 19, staff are rising to the challenge to make the new service a success and provide residents with a simpler and much improved recycling collection service.

Garage Workshop

37. The Council's garage workshop has continued to operate during the Covid 19 process with a full complement of staff working, but adhering to social distancing rules. The increased number of hire vehicles employed to operate the Council's recycling and waste service has kept the team busy, but MOT's and taxi testing operations ceased from the 23rd March, as part of the government's lockdown initiatives, and DVLA's temporary relaxation of legislation relating to vehicles. Statutory inspections of the Council's own fleet of vehicles has continued for best practice purposes.
38. With lockdown restrictions easing, plans are in place to recommence MOT's with new safe systems of work and risk assessments developed. Taxis are slightly more problematic, as they pose a greater risk of potential virus contamination on surfaces both inside and outside the vehicle, due to the number of people who travel in taxis on a day to day basis. Adequate hygiene cleansing of these vehicles is essential to protect staff, and it is for this reason we want to start with normal MOT's. Once staff are happy and confident with this process, we will look to reintroduce taxi testing, working with our colleagues in Licencing.

Streetscene

Parks and Open Spaces

39. 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.
40. 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.
41. 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.
42. 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 in parks.

Street Cleansing

43. The Council has continued to provide a range of street cleansing services to town centres, neighbourhoods and parks throughout the lockdown period, including mechanical street sweeping, street-side bin and dog waste bin servicing, litter collection, fly tipping removal and other reactive work.
44. The Streetscene service has had to flex and adapt to essential service prioritisation, providing support to other areas where required, most notably recycling and waste collections. This has meant that cleansing activities such as road sweeping to residential areas and rural highways have been reduced for the time being, and will be stepped up again when capacity allows. However, reduced vehicle and pedestrian traffic during lockdown has meant that these areas have not suffered too badly from litter and detritus build up as a result.
45. There has been a moderate increase in fly tipping incidents, both of domestic waste and of industrial/commercial waste, and these have been dealt with reactively by the Streetscene team and, where tipping has caused an obstruction to the highway, Staffordshire County Council.
46. In terms of general litter, reduced vehicle and pedestrian traffic has resulted in less litter being present, and the Streetscene team have dealt with this on a reactive basis thus far. However, as lockdown eases, it is anticipated that a return to more scheduled litter clearance to known hotspots will be required, and this will need to be programmed in and balanced against other priority tasks. Community volunteer assistance and community payback team support with litter clearance has not been available during lockdown, but it is anticipated that this will gradually come back on line over the coming weeks and will be deployed in areas of need.

47. The most recent focus of the Streetscene team has been on preparing the town centres and other local high streets for business reopening, and a programme of cleansing activity, including fly posting and graffiti removal, sweeping, jet washing and bin replacement is in progress to assist with this initiative.

Development Control

48. Whilst fewer major, minor and other development applications have been determined during lockdown than in the same period last year, this is not as a result of any impact of the restrictions on our ability to determine applications.
49. In anticipation of the restrictions, officers visited the sites of applications already in the system in early March, earlier than would otherwise have taken place. Due to this, and through obtaining information through a variety of other sources, we have been able to continue to determine planning applications throughout this period.
50. Site visits are still being undertaken as applications continue to be submitted during lockdown, where such visits can be done safely and where the information obtained is required to enable the proper consideration of the impacts of the proposed development. This, together with the continuation of the holding of Planning Committee, has meant that we have not developed a back log of undetermined applications.
51. Our performance from 1st March until 4th June is as follows.

Performance by application type (Team)

From: 01/03/2020 - 04/06/2020 23:59:59

	Majors No's	Majors % in time (72.5%)	Minors No's	Minors % in time (77.5%)	Others No's	Others % in time (85%)	Non- Reported No's	Non- reported in time
TOTAL	3	100%	54	98.1%	98	99%	168	99.4%

Only three applications have been determined after the agreed determination date and as such we have continued to maintain excellent performance in the determination of applications for planning permission and those in the non-reported category (which include applications relating to conditions of planning permission).

52. During the same period last year our performance was as follows:

Performance by application type (Team)

01/03/2019 – 05/06/2019

	Majors No's	Majors % in time (72.5%)	Minors No's	Minors % in time (77.5%)	Others No's	Others % in time (85%)	Non- Reported No's	Non- reported in time
TOTAL	8	75%	85	72.9%	109	90.8%	111	55.9%

Conclusion

53. This report provides an update on the ongoing progress made by the services working with partners and communities in response to the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic. With the gradual lifting of lockdown there remain a series of challenges which will require harnessing of strong multi-agency relationships as well as engagement with wider partners going forward.