

NEWCASTLE-UNDER-LYME BOROUGH COUNCIL

**EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT TEAM'S
REPORT TO CABINET**

Choose an item.

10 June 2020

Report Title: Back on Track - Coronavirus Pandemic Recovery Plan Update

Submitted by: Chief Executive

Portfolios: All

Ward(s) affected: All

Purpose of the Report

To inform the Cabinet of the actions being taken across the Council to respond to the coronavirus pandemic and to recover from its impacts.

Recommendation

1. It is recommended that Cabinet note this report and endorse the work being undertaken to recover from the pandemic

Reasons

To allow Cabinet to publicly consider the actions being undertaken in to recover from the pandemic

1. Background

1.1 The coronavirus pandemic is the greatest single risk to the health and economic wellbeing of the country since the Second World War. In February 2020 the Council established an Incident Management Team to plan the Council's response, ensuring that support to local residents and businesses was provided, that Council services were maintained, and the welfare of officers and members protected. Informal Cabinet have been regularly briefed on the work being progressed, including a daily briefing with the Leader. The approach adopted is based on existing business contingency arrangements and has put the Council in a good position in terms of stepping up its response.

1.2 The Incident Management Team interfaces with a range of groups which have been set up countywide to co-ordinate the response to the pandemic, including the Strategic Coordinating Group, and working groups on mortality management and vulnerability.

1.3 Cabinet has received reports at its April and May meetings detailing the work of the Incident Management Team. At May's Cabinet meeting, Members emphasised that the Council was firmly focused on recovery, with key elements of the response running in parallel.

2. The Recovery Plan

2.1 This report addresses the Council's current position across five areas of the recovery work:

- Reopening Safe, Successful Retail Centres

- Supporting Health & Wellbeing
- Economic Recovery
- Stepping-up Council Services
- Financial Recovery

2.2 With the lockdown beginning to be eased, efforts are now be focused on recovery, and ensuring that both the Council and the Borough get “Back on Track” – getting the economy back to its pre-lockdown position as swiftly and safely as possible.

2.3 This plan is delivered through more detailed action plans, with the Cabinet overseeing implementation through portfolio holders working closely with the Executive Management Team colleagues leading on each work stream. Key work undertaken to date is detailed below.

Reopening Safe, Successful Retail Centres

2.4 Arrangements have been put in place to facilitate the safe re-opening of Newcastle and Kidsgrove town centres and the various district centres across the borough. This includes provision of advice to all businesses about “Covid Secure” arrangements that they will need to put in place, and deploying signage wherever necessary.

2.5 A key step towards the reopening of Newcastle town centre was the relaunch of the market on Friday 5th June, which served as a “soft re-opening”. Good social distancing was in evidence, with a number of long standing traders returning to the town centre to benefit from the Council’s offer of 6 weeks of trading without incurring pitch fees.

Supporting Health & Wellbeing

2.6 The Council continues to operate a helpline and online facility for individuals to reach out for assistance. The helpline is staffed by colleagues from J2 and links into the national, and County support arrangements, as well as support arrangements established with the Realise Foundation and Support Staffordshire. Demand for this service fluctuates but is generally reducing.

2.7 Homeless & Rough Sleepers - In March the Government required District and Borough councils to provide emergency accommodation for any rough sleepers in their area and provided funds to support this. The Council is currently providing emergency accommodation for 22 individuals in a mix of B & B and range of temporary accommodation, with support tiered according to need.

2.8 The Council is currently working on an action plan for the ongoing support of each homeless person currently being housed, with a requirement to submit this plan to the Government in mid-June.

2.9 To ensure that vulnerable people, and people made vulnerable by the pandemic, continue to receive the support that they require, the Council’s help line facilities have been retained.

Economic Recovery

2.10 The Council has paid out approximately £20m to around 1700 businesses under the Government's grant schemes for small businesses and businesses in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors. The Council has paid out grants to over 90% of eligible businesses. Applications for these grant programmes continue to be received, and an ongoing effort to encourage applications continues.

2.11 The initial grant programmes were specifically related to the rateable value of the business premises, and as such excluded businesses which operated from shared premises where they paid a rent inclusive of rates (eg a business centre, or shared office space). To support this cohort of businesses, the Government launched an additional scheme, with a degree of local discretion, including on the level of grants paid. This discretionary grant fund was launched at the end of May with the expectation that grants will be paid to businesses in June.

2.12 The Council's economic recovery programme will involve a mix of immediate direct developments, alongside longer term strategic initiatives. The longer term initiatives include the Town Deals for Newcastle and Kidsgrove, and the Future High Streets Fund bid for Newcastle. In terms of direct developments, the focus will be on:

- Ryecroft
- Kidsgrove Sports Centre
- Sidmouth Avenue housing project
- Newcastle Mortuary Site

Stepping-up Council Services

2.13 Since the commencement of the lockdown, staff who have been able to effectively work from home have done so. This has meant that the majority of services have continued with minimal disruption. However, a number of services have been significantly impacted either due to the risk associated with continuing business as usual, the additional demands placed on the service, or due to Government guidance. The services experiencing the most significant change are:

- **J2** – remains closed to the public. The earliest this facility is likely to re-open will be early July, with a likelihood that even then, this would be a phased re-opening.
- **Museum** – Remains closed to the public. The earliest that this facility is likely to re-open will be early July.
- **Castle House & Kidsgrove Customer Contact facilities** – closed to the public, with all services being provided online or by phone.
- **Waste & Recycling Collection** – All waste streams are being collected, including Garden Waste. The collection schedule has been adjusted to make the best use of available resource, and to respect the guidance on social distancing. Service performance has been sustained despite a very significant increase in volumes of waste being presented. From week commencing 7th June, the new recycling collection system will start to be rolled out.
- **Bereavement** – Whilst still busier than usual, the workload of the bereavement team is now beginning to return to more normal levels. Whilst the numbers able to attend funerals will remain at 10 until further relaxation of social distancing is permitted, the service

anticipates being able to increase the time allocated to each funeral service to the normal 40 minutes.

- **Taxi Licencing** – the service is focusing on supporting existing drivers, with no new license applications currently being processed. Taxi testing has been suspended. Nevertheless, through holding remote licensing hearings and other measures in place, there remains an appropriately licenced adequate taxi and hackney carriage fleet in operation.

2.14 In order to bring Council services back to their original capacities in line with Government guidance for re-opening the economy, each service has prepared a “Stepping Up” plan. It is anticipated that some services will experience significant spikes in demand once the economy begins to re-open, with careful planning required to deliver this.

Financial Recovery

2.15 The pandemic has had a significant impact on the Council’s financial position through a mix of lost income and additional costs. As reported at May’s Cabinet meeting, Government funding of £1.3m has been secured, which has reduced the immediate pressure on Council finances.

2.16 The Council’s revenue budget relies on service income from fees and charges of c£850k per month across a wide range of services, with a significant proportion coming from J2 and car parking. The Council has been actively monitoring the impact of the lockdown and the working practices required to ensure safe practice. Across the business, it is estimated that net income of c£276k will be lost during each month that the lockdown prevails. This is slightly lower than reported in May and reflects increased income from recycling credits as well as action taken to minimise associated costs.

2.17 In addition to the loss of income, the Council is experiencing additional costs in some areas, amounting to c£147k per month.

2.18 In the longer term, any impact on either business rates collection (due to business failure) or Council Tax collection (due to non-payment) may materialise in 2021/22. A 10% reduction in the collection rate would cost the Council £180k per month in lost collection fund revenues.

2.19 The consequences of the Coronavirus on the Council’s financial position will depend significantly on the duration of the lockdown and on the scale and timing of further Government financial support. The Council is actively lobbying our local Members of Parliament and through national networks as part of the wider public sector family, to make the case for further Government support to address Covid-19 related costs and loss of income. Particular emphasis in our lobbying has been the impact on Business rate and Council tax collection.

2.20 The Council continues to strongly manage budgets and spending. Action has been taken to furlough a number of staff, primarily from Leisure, where there is no ability or need to redeploy. This will enable the Council to recoup a proportion of their salary costs from the Government. Staff continue to be on full pay, and their contracts of employment are unaffected, with them returning to their usual roles as soon as the easing of lockdown permits.

3. **Proposal**

3.1 Cabinet are recommended to note this report.

4. **Reasons for Proposed Solution**

4.1 This report serves to brief cabinet on the work being undertaken to address the coronavirus pandemic, and the financial impact that the pandemic is having on the Council, and the recovery arrangements being put in place.

5. **Options Considered**

5.1 N/A

6. **Legal and Statutory Implications**

6.1 Addressing the impact of Coronavirus locally has involved adjustment to some service provision. When making such changes there are a number of legal and statutory implications to take into account. These are all appropriately factored into decision taking by the Incident Management Team.

7. **Equality Impact Assessment**

7.1 None directly arising from this report.

8. **Financial and Resource Implications**

8.1 The Council's General Fund balance as at 31st March 2019 was £1.548m. Careful monitoring of the financial position will be required over coming weeks and months leading to prompt corrective action where necessary to ensure that reserves are not exhausted and the Council remains in a position of being able to deliver a balanced budget position in the current financial year and beyond.

9. **Major Risks**

9.1 The Coronavirus Pandemic, in the round, represents a significant risk to the Council. This report sets out how that risk is being addressed.

10. **Sustainability and Climate Change Implications**

10.1 N/A

11. **Key Decision Information**

11.1 This is not a key decision.

12. **Earlier Cabinet/Committee Resolutions**

12.1 None

13. **List of Appendices**

13.1 Back on Track – Recovery Plan

14. **Background Papers**

Published 10 June 2020

14.1 None

Appendix 1: Back on Track – Recovery Plan

Coronavirus Pandemic – Recovery Plan

The Coronavirus Pandemic is set to have a significant and potentially long-lasting impact on the economy of Newcastle-under-Lyme. It is as yet unclear what the economic impact will be in terms of business closures, job losses and the overall impact on GDP. Additionally, it must be anticipated that the measures necessary to combat the pandemic may have an enduring impact on how people live their lives and go about their daily business, whether at home, in the work place, in commerce, or in recreation.

This paper sets out some actions required to recover from the social and economic impacts of the pandemic. The plan assumes that social distancing, in some form, will continue for much of 2020 and therefore any release of the lockdown may not result in a rapid “spring back”. This plan will interface with the work of the LRF’s Staffordshire-wide recovery plan.

Recovery Vision – Back on Track

Recovery Aims

- 1. To return the economy, business, and infrastructure of Newcastle-under-Lyme to normality as quickly and safely as possible;**
- 2. To support the people and businesses of Newcastle-under-Lyme to adapt to, and benefit from, societal changes arising from the pandemic;**
- 3. Identify and exploit opportunities to improve the long-term economic prospects of the borough;**
- 4. Establish and maintain trust and confidence in a multi-agency recovery effort;**
- 5. Involve communities throughout the development and delivery of the recovery plan.**

Essential Foundations for Recovery

**Cabinet Lead: Cllrs
Tagg & Sweeney
EMT Lead: Martin
Hamilton**

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| | |
| 1 | Establish a clear understanding of the immediate, medium, and emerging likely long-term impacts of the pandemic on the economy of Newcastle under Lyme; |
| 2 | Maximise delivery of Business Support Grants, and access to government backed finance; |
| 3 | Establish and implement support packages for businesses in difficulty |
| 4 | Support Businesses to trade ahead of lockdown ending; |
| 5 | Establish & Implement support for residents experiencing hardship |
| 6 | Sustain support for Vulnerable People |
| 7 | Secure the immediate future of Newcastle Business Improvement District |
| 8 | Establish dialogue with business community regarding recovery |
| 9 | Understand and, where appropriate, align with Recovery Plans of key partners |
| 10 | Maximise use of developed and emerging technology to enhance the working from home experience for all staff including Microsoft Teams, video and sound capabilities |

Re-opening Safe, Successful Retail Centres

Cabinet Lead: Cllr Sweeney

EMT Lead: Simon McEneny

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| | Short Term: May- July |
| | <p>Establish and Implement a clear plan for the re-opening of Newcastle town centre as both an economic space, to include</p> <p>Arrangements for social distancing and hygiene Safe retail and hospitality arrangements Relaunch of improved outdoor market and new trading arrangements Promotional activity – use local media and social media to promote and communicate activities and improvements Car parking Bus Station Public Conveniences Look & Feel/Streetscene</p> |
| | Undertake Covid Secure assessments on Kidsgrove, and other district shopping centres and establish proportionate re-opening plans |
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| | Medium – Long Term |
| | Monitor contact tracing data |
| | Maintain ongoing monitoring and review of Covid Secure arrangements |
| | Maintain Buy Local Campaigns |
| | Foot Fall Campaigns/events |
| | Secure Future High Streets funding and progress associated projects |

Supporting Health & Wellbeing

Cabinet Lead: Cllr Maxfield

EMT Lead: Simon McEneny

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| | Short Term May- July |
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| | Prepare & Implement action plan to address homelessness and “rough sitting” beyond lockdown |
| | Prepare and implement action plan to address Domestic Abuse |
| | Maintain visibility of demand for Debt Advice and Welfare support, and respond as necessary. |
| | Establish dialogue with Voluntary and Community Sectors to understand community impact of the pandemic; Establish mechanism to sustain and build on community/volunteer response. |
| | Maximise out-door recreation opportunities |
| | Medium – Long Term |
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| | Review impact of LAPs on Community Response, and strengthen LAP capability |
| | Build on successful community response to build community resilience |
| | Bring Housing Advice Service in-house |
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Stepping-up Council Services

Cabinet Lead: Cllr Tagg
EMT Lead: Dave Adams

| Short Term May- July | |
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| | Each Council Service to prepare a plan for Stepping Up Services following lockdown; |
| | Prepare Covid Secure plans for key buildings ahead of building occupancy |
| | Prepare safe working practices based on latest government advice and commence stepping up |
| | Ensure that technological advances successfully tested during lockdown are fully utilised to ensure transparent local democracy re committee meetings, Cabinet and Council |
| | Support a culture of safety and flexibility; ensuring that all staff and particularly vulnerable groups and carers are supported to continue to deliver services. |
| | Review First Aid provision and training for staff |
| | Conduct individual risk assessments for staff where applicable |
| | Roll out new waste and recycling service New Recycling Service |
| | Review flexible working and agile working policies |
| | Review Carers and Special Leave policies |
| | Launch staff wellbeing survey and values discussion with a view to developing the wellbeing offer bespoke to NULBC |
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| Medium – Long Term | |
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| | Review working practices to maximise efficiency |
| | Review environmental impact of Council services – aim to be more low-carbon, ‘green’ and environmentally friendly to inform Environmental Sustainability Plan |
| | Review and update all Business Continuity Plans |
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Economic Recovery

Cabinet Lead: Cllrs Tagg & Sweeney

EMT Lead – Simon McEneny

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| | Short Term: May- July |
| | Establish a clear understanding of the immediate, medium, and emerging likely long term impacts of the pandemic on the economy of Newcastle-under-Lyme; |
| | Establish clear linkages into all business support advice and establish web links |
| | Establish clear links with redundancy triage and training service |
| | Medium – Long Term |
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| | Secure delivery of Local Plan |
| | Secure regeneration investment through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newcastle Town Deal; • Kidsgrove Town Deal • Newcastle Future High Streets Fund; |
| | Establish pipeline of economic growth projects |
| | Bring forward key Projects to help “Kick Start” the economy (eg Sidmouth Ave, Kidsgrove Sports Centre, Museum, Mortuary Site, Etc |
| | Deliver Air Quality Project |
| | Establish and implement SMART TOWN and Sustainability Programme |

Financial Recovery

Cabinet Lead: Cllrs Tagg & Sweeney

EMT Lead: Jan Willis

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| | Establish and implement Financial Recovery Plan for the Council |
| | Accelerate Digital Programme to deliver service improvement and efficiencies |
| | Accelerate Commercial Projects to secure financial return |
| | Continued lobbying regarding local government finance |