

NEWCASTLE-UNDER-LYME BOROUGH COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT TEAM'S

REPORT TO CABINET

Choose an item.

11 November 2020

Report Title: **Coronavirus 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 in response to the Coronavirus restrictions on the Borough.

Recommendation

1. It is recommended that Cabinet note this report and endorse the work being undertaken in response to the Coronavirus restrictions.

Reasons

To allow Cabinet to publicly consider the actions being undertaken in relation to the coronavirus pandemic and the associated restrictions.

1. Background

- 1.1 Cabinet has regular reports detailing the Council's response to the Coronavirus pandemic and delivery of the recovery plan.
- 1.2 At time of writing, the 7 day infection case rate in Newcastle under Lyme was 430 cases per 100,000 population. This is above the England average (240/100,000), and the Staffordshire average of 382/100,000. The figures include a cluster associated with students at Keele University.
- 1.3 From 5th November the Borough has been subject to the national restrictions announced by the Government as part of the national lockdown, having previously briefly moved into Tier 2 of the previous three tier system of restrictions. As such, the Council's efforts have shifted to responding to the new restrictions, as detailed in this report.
- 1.4 With the infection rate at its current level, the Council is heavily engaged in its outbreak control work, with specific avenues of work being progressed:
 - The Leader of the Council sits on the County-wide Local Outbreak Board which has regular oversight infection rates and action being taken to respond. This Board is intensifying its work in light of the increased infections.

- The Leader of the Council is chairing a Local Incident Management Team, drawing together expertise from the Borough Council, County Council, health sector, and other agencies actively involved in responding to the pandemic;
- A multi-agency board, under the chairmanship of the Deputy Leader, Cllr Sweeney, has been convened to ensure that all possible steps are being taken across the key anchor institutions to reduce infection rates in the Town Centre, particularly in the 18 to 25 year old age group.
- Colleagues from Environmental Services continue to work closely with the Director of Public Health and colleagues from across the public sector to investigate infections in high risk premises in the borough and provide advice to those running high risk premises to minimise infection spread. Government funding of c£115,000 has been secured, via Staffordshire County Council, to assist in resourcing this work;
- A team of colleagues has been assembled from across the Council to work as “Covid Marshalls”, who have recently switched their emphasis away from encouraging the public to socially distance and to practice good Covid security in the town centre, to supporting businesses to adhere to the new restrictions.

2. **Priority Actions**

- 2.1 In response to the move to national restrictions, the Council has stepped up work in two key areas – support for businesses and support for the vulnerable.

Support for Businesses

- 2.2 The Local Restrictions Support Grant (LRSG) will be paid by Government to support businesses forced to close or severely affected by local or national restrictions. There are four elements of funding:

- Local Restrictions Grant (Closed) - to meet the cost of payments to businesses within the business rates system that are required to close. Newcastle’s initial allocation is £1.674m.
- Additional Restrictions Grant - to be used as discretionary grant funding to support businesses that are either closed but not in the business rating or open but severely impacted (e.g. because of closure of their suppliers or the customers they supply to). (£2.588m Newcastle allocation).
- Local Restrictions Grant (Open) – backdated funding for the period between NUL going into tier 2 restrictions and the start of the national lockdown to enable grants to be made to businesses that were severely impacted during that period.
- Local Restrictions Grant (Sector) – backdated funding from 1st November to meet the cost of grants to businesses that have been required to close on a national basis since 23 March 2020 – i.e. nightclubs, dance halls, discotheques, hostess bars, etc.

- 2.3 The Council has immediately begun to process the non-discretionary grants, with the 230 businesses being paid within days of the scheme going live. The other schemes will go live from later this week. This funding is crucial to enable businesses to weather this particular phase of the pandemic, and be in a position to recover once restrictions have been eased.

Support for Vulnerable People

2.4 The Council has stepped up its support to vulnerable people, with three specific lines of work being prioritised:

- The support service delivered through the Realise Foundation has stepped up in readiness to receive calls from people made vulnerable by the restrictions. Typically this call centre and web portal provides advice and support to individuals who are isolated, or who need help to access food and medicine.
- The Revenues and Benefits team are processing applications for payments to individuals who have been required to self-isolate as a result of either contracting the virus, or being in contact with someone who has, and as a result are unable to work. The Test & Trace Self Isolations Support Scheme is focussed on individuals in receipt of particular benefits and aims to incentivise people required to self-isolate, but who would lose income by doing so.
- The Council's homelessness team continues to work with vulnerable people who are sleeping rough, or who are at risk of homelessness, placing them into temporary accommodation.

Council Services

2.5 As with the previous national restrictions, some Council services have been impacted, although the nature of the current restrictions has meant that this is less severe than previously. Key areas of impact are:

- J2 Leisure Centre has been required to close, although the centre staff are providing an extensive on-line offer to the centre's membership. Classes are available either "on-demand" where the customer may download a class and take part at a time that suits them, or can take part in "programmed" classes which take place at set times, led by members of the team;
- Brampton Museum, in line with other such venues nationally, has been required to close.
- Customer Services – all services continue to be available on-line or on the phone, but face to face service at Castle House is now restricted.

2.6 Other services continue to be available with minimal disruption.

Economic Recovery

2.7 The Council is continuously monitoring the situation and is making preparations for a successful reopening of the town centre and other high streets in time for Christmas. Notwithstanding the shift in restrictions, the Council is continuing to work towards the recovery of the local economy, focussed on progressing the major regeneration and growth schemes.

- As previously reported, a bid has been submitted to the Future High Streets Fund for schemes to facilitate the regeneration of Newcastle Town Centre, with a specific focus on the Ryecroft site;
- Advance Town Deal Funds of £1.75m have been secured for initiatives in Newcastle & Kidsgrove
- Town Investment Plan for Kidsgrove has been prepared, and will be considered elsewhere on this agenda as part of the Government's Town Deal programme
- Town Investment Plan for Newcastle is in preparation with the Town Deal Board

3. Financial Recovery

- 3.1 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. Taking account of the current lockdown period it is forecast that income losses for the financial year will amount to £2.475m. The Government's income compensation scheme offset these income losses to the amount of £1.700m, the first instalment of this is due imminently.
- 3.2 To date emergency Coronavirus Government funding of £2.152m has been secured (including £170k of new burdens funding to offset the costs of administering Coronavirus business support grant and hardship relief schemes), which has reduced the immediate pressure on additional spending and on the Council finances. The current forecast is a net revenue overspend of around £0.350m in this financial year, this assumes that the current lockdown period is not extended. Close management of the financial position will continue and remains absolutely essential.
- 3.3 The Council continues to work closely with the Borough's Members of Parliament and the Local Government Association to lobby central government for the ongoing support which will be required.

4. Proposal

- 4.1 Cabinet are recommended to note this report.

5. Reasons for Proposed Solution

- 5.1 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.

6. Options Considered

- 6.1 N/A

7. Legal and Statutory Implications

- 7.1 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.

8. **Equality Impact Assessment**

8.1 None directly arising from this report.

9. **Financial and Resource Implications**

9.1 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.

10 **Major Risks**

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

11 **Sustainability and Climate Change Implications**

11.1 N/A

12 **Key Decision Information**

12.1 This is not a key decision.

13 **Earlier Cabinet/Committee Resolutions**

13.1 None

14 **List of Appendices**

14.1 None

15 **Background Papers**

15.1 None