

**NEWCASTLE-UNDER-LYME BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT TEAM'S**

**REPORT TO CABINET**

Choose an item.

**09 December 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 231cases per 100,000 population. This is above the England average (147/100,000), and the Staffordshire average of 185/100,000. The figure reflected a marked decrease in infections over the past few weeks, having been over 400 cases per 100,000 population during November.
- 1.3 From 5<sup>th</sup> November to 2<sup>nd</sup> December the Borough was subject to the national restrictions announced by the Government as part of the national lockdown. When the national restrictions ended, the Borough, along with the rest of Staffordshire, was placed under Tier 3 restrictions. 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.

- 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;
- A team of colleagues has been assembled from across the Council to work as “Covid Marshalls”, delivering a mix of public engagement to encourage social distancing in key retail areas, and engagement with businesses to encourage and advise on good practice on Covid security.

## 2. **Priority Actions**

- 2.1 In response to the move to Tier 3 restrictions, the Council has maintained its focus on 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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 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.

### **Extended Opening Hours**

- 2.4 Under Tier 3 restrictions both essential and non-essential retail businesses are able to open and trade. The Government has directed that businesses will be able to trade 24hrs per day during December and January in order to maximise the trading opportunity whilst spreading the footfall over a longer period of time, and thereby reducing crowding and the risks associated with that. In response, Newcastle under Lyme Borough Council will not be taking enforcement action against any retail business which opens beyond the times set out in their planning or licensing conditions for the duration of this trading incentive.

### **Attracting Footfall**

- 2.5 In the run up to Christmas the Council has permitted three Special Markets to attract shoppers to the town to benefit all traders. These events, detailed below, will be run with social distancing measures in place to ensure good compliance with covid secure practice:
- Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> December – Love Local evening market (5.30 – 9.00pm)
  - Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> December – Artisan Market (9.45am – 3.00pm)
  - Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> December – Artisan Market (9.45am – 3.00pm)

### **Support for Vulnerable People**

- 2.6 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 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**

- 2.7 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 re-opened for personal fitness training and swimming, but is not able to offer group activities such as fitness classes. The centre is providing an extensive on-line offer to the centre's membership.

- 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.

2.8 Other services continue to be available with minimal disruption.

### **Economic Recovery**

2.9 Notwithstanding the restrictions in place, 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 submitted to Government for consideration under the Town Deal programme
- Town Investment Plan for Newcastle is in preparation with the Town Deal Board

### **3. Financial Recovery**

3.1 The Council has secured over £4.5m from central government to cover income losses and activities required to mitigate the impact of covid in areas ranging from support for the homeless to the Council Tax Hardship Relief Fund. In addition it has received just over £30m to fund grants to businesses in the borough impacted by the pandemic, bringing the total amount of financial support provided by central government to over £34m. This financial support covers financial pressure which has been put on Council services together with income losses and support provided to small business within the Borough. Further details are provided below.

3.2 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 was received in November. In conjunction with the income compensation scheme the Council has received £196k from the Furlough job retention scheme in connection with those income loss services.

3.3 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 continues to be a net revenue overspend of around £0.350m in this financial year. Close management of the financial position will continue and remains absolutely essential.

3.4 Further Government funding to assist with the Council's response to the Coronavirus has also been secured in relation to rough sleepers (£0.196m), outbreak control (£0.179m), enforcement (£0.061m) and the reopening of the high street (£0.115m).

3.5 In addition to the initial business grants funding administered by the Council (£21.673m paid over to businesses), a further £4.326m has already started to be distributed (as per para 2.2).

This is in addition to funding allocated by Government for the Council to administer to assist with Council Tax Hardship (£1.036m) and self-isolation (£0.109m).

- 3.6 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 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020 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 stable 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

Published 8<sup>th</sup> December 2020

14 **List of Appendices**

. 14.1 None

15 **Background Papers**

. 15.1 None