

**NEWCASTLE-UNDER-LYME BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT TEAM'S**

**REPORT TO CABINET**

Choose an item.

**17 March 2021**

**Report Title:** Back on Track

**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, and to ensure the Borough is well placed to recover from the Pandemic.

**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 c.75 cases per 100,000 population. This is broadly in line with the Staffordshire rate of c.72/100,000 and above the England average of c.60/100,000. The figure reflected a marked decrease in infections in the early part of 2021. In addition to the reducing infection rate strong progress is being made in the roll out of vaccinations across the County, with over 400,000 vaccinations having been administered, and the programme now offering vaccinations to the over 55 year old cohort.
- 1.3 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”, mainly focussed on engagement with businesses to encourage and advise on good practice on Covid security.
- The Council is encouraging, through its Communications activity, the drive to recognise the whole borough as a Covid “hotspot” and encourage take up of testing regardless of whether individuals have symptoms. It is recognised that identifying asymptomatic carriers is an important means of breaking the infection chain and reducing spread.

## 2. Easing Restrictions

2.1 In mid-February the government published its roadmap for easing restrictions from early March, when schools returned, to 21<sup>st</sup> June, when it is hoped that all remaining restrictions can be stood down. This roadmap provides a guide to the work of the Council in supporting and facilitating the rebuilding of the local economy.

### Support for Businesses & Economic Recovery

2.2 The Council continues to administer the Local Restrictions Support Grant (LRSG) to support businesses forced to close or severely affected by local or national restrictions. Across a number of grant programmes the Council has now paid out over £32m and is paying out approximately £2m per month.

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. The Council has moved quickly to ensure that funds get paid to eligible businesses at the earliest possible opportunity.

2.4 The Council is working to prepare the town centre for the phased re-opening, starting with the non-essential retail and outdoor dining from 12<sup>th</sup> April. The Council’s re-opening plan includes:

- Allocating resource to support the Police to prepare the licensed trade for re-opening
- Administering applications for pavement licences (café/ restaurants/pubs) to enable premises to re-open to take advantage of serving food/drink in outdoor area
- Refresh of social distance/covid secure markers around the town
- Proactive work by Environmental Services and Covid Marshalls promoting compliance in targeted workplaces, in particular hairdressers/barbers/ gyms.
- Business Covid Marshals - monitoring of compliance across the business sector.
- Licensing anticipate an increase in the number of Temporary Event Notice applications and Premises Licences for events as organisers start to plan post 21 June and a return to normal.
- Reopening the Market, and continuing the programme of special event markets, to encourage visitors to the town

2.5 Officers are conscious that a heavy burden from this work falls on the Environmental Services team, which is also the team at the centre of work to deal with the complaints from Walleys Quarry, and particular attention is being paid to ensuring resources can be flexed to adequately address both of these priorities.

2.6 The Council, in partnership with Staffordshire County Council, has developed a wide ranging business advice and support programme, funded from the government's Additional Restrictions Grants, under the banner "Staffordshire Means Back to Business" which will see a range of training and support rolled out to local businesses.

## **Major Programmes**

2.7 Earlier reports to Cabinet highlighted the role which the Future High Street Fund and the two Town Deals would have on the longer term recovery of the local economy. Progress continues with those programmes:

- The Council bid under the Future High Streets Fund has been successful, with provisional agreement for just over £11m being announced in December 2020. These funds will facilitate the regeneration of Newcastle Town Centre, with a specific focus on the Ryecroft site; The Council has submitted further information to the government regarding the bid and an announcement to enable the release of funds is expected imminently.
- Advance Town Deal Funds of £1.75m secured for initiatives in Newcastle & Kidsgrove has enabled work to begin on a range of projects including the refurbishment of a unit in Lancaster Buildings for use as a employment and skills advice hub, expansion of town centre WiFi, Improvements to the "bear pit" subway including CCTV and artworks, redevelopment of the Zanzibar site, and reconfiguring the Guildhall reception to increase usable space and improving market infrastructure. In Kidsgrove, works include the strip out of Kidsgrove Sports Centre as part of the refurbishment and development of a 3G pitch, and park improvements in Newchapel Recreation Ground, and Clough Hall Park.
- Town Investment Plan for Kidsgrove submitted to Government in October 2020 has been successful, with £16.9m allocated to the town to deliver a range of physical and social regeneration projects.
- Town Investment Plan for Newcastle has been submitted to the Government and a decision is awaited.

## **Support for Vulnerable People**

2.8 The Council has maintained its support to vulnerable people, with three specific lines of work being prioritised:

2.9 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.

- 2.10 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. Additional accommodation in St George's Chambers has been brought on line for use in severe weather.

### **Council Services**

- 2.11 From 12<sup>th</sup> April, Jubilee 2 will be able to recommence some services, with access to the Gym and Swimming Pool being the first functions able to come back on stream. The full operation, with classes will not be re-opened until mid May 2021.
- 2.12 Other services continue to be available with minimal disruption.

## **3 Financial Recovery**

- 3.1 The Council has secured over £5m from central government for the current financial year 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 £39m to fund grants to businesses and residents in the borough impacted by the pandemic, bringing the total amount of financial support provided by central government to over £44m. 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 restrictions to date it is forecast that income losses for the financial year will amount to £2.963m. The Government's income compensation scheme offset these income losses to the amount of £2.079m, 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 £2.280m has been secured (including £299k of new burdens funding to offset the costs of administering Coronavirus business support grant, self-isolation and hardship relief schemes), which has reduced the immediate pressure on additional spending and on the Council finances. The Monthly report monitoring actual spending against budget at period 11 show a balanced position against the budget and it is anticipated that a balanced outturn will be presented at the year end, any variance will be paid into or from the general fund reserve. Close management of the financial position will continue for the remaining weeks of the current financial year and into the first quarter of 2021/22 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 £10.688m has been 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 (£0.104m).
- 3.6 Further funding will also be paid to the Council to assist with COVID-19 related pressures in 2021/22. Again, this will represent un-ringfenced grant support and uses the distribution

methods applied to funding received during 2020/21. The Council's initial allocation is for £0.675m.

- 3.7 The Government has also indicated that it is providing funding to broadly meet the additional costs associated with increases in local council tax support caseloads in 2021/22. The funding will be un-ringfenced and can be used to provide other support to vulnerable households, including through local welfare schemes. Allocations have not yet been published.
- 3.8 The Government also intend to continue the current income compensation scheme to support local authorities for the first quarter of 2021/22, it is anticipated that the Government will continue to use 2020/21 budgeted income as the baseline to assess losses.
- 3.9 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

Published 16<sup>th</sup> March 2021

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