



<b>REPORT OF:</b>	<b>LEADER</b>
<b>TO:</b>	<b>COUNCIL FORUM</b>
<b>ON:</b>	<b>16<sup>TH</sup> JULY 2020</b>

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## **COUNCIL RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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### **1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

The purpose of this report is to update elected Members on the Council's initial emergency response to Covid-19 and the preparations for the next phase and transition to longer-term recovery.

The Council provides a wide range of services to our residents and businesses. This is a highlight report outlining how some of our key services and functions have adapted to the pandemic.

### **2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is recommended that:

- a) Council note the content of this report.

### **3. BACKGROUND**

Elected Members will be aware that the coronavirus outbreak began overseas in December 2019 and has had a significant impact across the world.

The first transmission of Covid-19 within the UK was confirmed in February 2020 and on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 the UK government published its action plan to respond to the pandemic with a phased approach – Contain, Delay, Mitigate.

At this stage, the Council activated its Corporate Business Continuity Plan and emergency planning protocols and, through the Lancashire Resilience Forum (LRF), the Council and partners have responded to the outbreak at pace, working extremely hard to put in place all of the new measures and guidance expected of us by the Government.

Guidance has usually been issued towards the end of the day, often as part of the Government's daily press briefings. This has frequently meant that the Council has needed to respond quickly to introduce measures, changes and closures to some services with urgency and with little time to plan ahead.

The outbreak and subsequent national lockdown has, and continues to be, a frightening and isolating time for many of our residents, council employees and elected Members. Businesses and employers are facing an uncertain and unprecedented future. As civic

leaders, the Council has played a crucial role in delivering essential services whilst continuing our support for communities, faith, voluntary and private sector organisations.

#### **4. CRITICAL RESPONSE ACTIVITY**

Early guidance from the Government was to advise that everyone practices social distancing to reduce transmission, regular hand washing and self-isolation.

On 16<sup>th</sup> March, the Prime Minister said everyone in the UK should avoid “non-essential” travel and contact with others to curb coronavirus. This included working from home if possible and avoiding crowded places such as pubs, clubs and theatres.

In direct response the Council initiated business continuity plans and advised employees that if they were able to work from home to do so with immediate effect. 70% of our employees live in the Borough and it is likely that this early rapid action has helped to reduce the overall transmission levels as we have had approximately 1500 employees working from home.

We closed our leisure centres on 11<sup>th</sup> March, and on 17<sup>th</sup> March, we took the difficult decision to close our branch libraries, museums, King George’s Hall and Darwen Library Theatre. Over the following few days other services and buildings began to close in order to contain the spread of the virus locally and in line with national guidance. A number of festivals and events were also either cancelled or postponed. We introduced social distancing measures in our Town Hall with taped areas and footfall into those public buildings, which remained open, began to fall.

Our interface with partners moved remote including daily teleconferences in the LRF.

On 20<sup>th</sup> March schools were closed to most pupils. The Prime Minister ordered all pubs, cafes, restaurants, bars and gyms to close and the furlough scheme was introduced. This was closely followed by a nationwide lockdown announced on 23<sup>rd</sup> March with vulnerable people asked to shield and the police granted powers to enforce social distancing measures.

The Council was already preparing for these measures. Throughout this early period, we worked closely with schools providing advice and guidance and made preparations for children of key workers and vulnerable children to continue to attend school settings where they needed to do so. We also began to identify locations for the new community hubs, linking with the existing Lancashire Volunteer Partnership to co-ordinate support.

We have had a fantastic response from our employees who were no longer able to report to their normal place of work but wanted to help, and were temporarily redeployed to deliver other crucial council services.

Access to adequate supplies of PPE was a significant issue locally, which was also reflected across the Country and, alongside the LRF we continued to press the Government for adequate equipment to support our care workers and other front line staff.

On 25<sup>th</sup> March, the Coronavirus Act was passed granting the government and authorities unprecedented powers including prohibiting events and gatherings and strengthened

powers to the police to issue fines for those people leaving home without reasonable excuses.

By the end of March the Council, along with other public sector organisations across Lancashire moved to a command and control model of the LRF in order to manage the major incident period of the civil emergency in line with arrangements under the Civil Contingencies Act.

Throughout the period, Government has continued to liaise with each part of the country through the established system of LRF partnerships. The scale, duration and impact of the pandemic has meant exceptional measures have had to be introduced and the Council needed to operate in partnership within the LRF. Senior officers from different organisations have been leading work streams and making decisions for all parts of Lancashire with the overriding objective to protect and save life. The Council has been represented on each of the LRF cells and our senior managers have influenced and contributed to the response by the LRF partnership.

Over the following weeks and months further instructions and guidance was issued by the Government to which the Council responded promptly. Outlined below is an overview of some of the arrangements we have introduced to protect our employees and residents and support our businesses.

Appended to this report is our local tracker capturing, in figures, the actions taken by the Council to support the national response to the pandemic.

### **BwD Help Hub**

With unprecedented speed and excellent multi-disciplinary and cross-departmental working, a brand new service was set up on 26<sup>th</sup> March the Council launched the BwD Help Hub, operating 7 days per week, providing a range of support to residents, including providing information and advice and delivering food and essential supplies to people in need, including those who were shielding and vulnerable people who were isolating and had no other means of support. Staff working at the Help Hub also made regular weekly telephone calls to help keep people's spirits up during periods of isolation.

The Council has worked closely with local organisations from the voluntary, community and faith sectors and public health partners to run this new essential service. Food parcels contain enough food and drink for one week and are packed and dispatched from the food warehouse and distribution centre set up at Frontier Park with support from businesses partners in the borough.

At 30<sup>th</sup> June 2020 the Help Hub has received 6489 calls, supported 3437 vulnerable people, and the food warehouse has provided 30,493 food parcels for delivery. Our environment health team supported volunteers supplying food to vulnerable residents, ensuring that the risk of food-borne illness is minimised. By 11<sup>th</sup> May, we were delivering up to 2780 parcels per week. Alongside our own staff, over 40 volunteers were making weekly reassurance calls to vulnerable people.

The food operation ceased on 30<sup>th</sup> June and phase 2 of the hub focuses on offering support to promote resilience post crisis. As well as helping people to access food and drink, with our local partners we are offering advice on finances; mental health support; wellbeing and loneliness; learning and employment; using technology and getting online.

The hub will provide access to a range of internal and public sector agencies alongside the Voluntary Community and Faith sector. This multi-agency co-ordination has been crucial to the phase 1 crisis effort and will ensure sustainability of the offer in phase 2.

### **Vulnerable groups**

On 26<sup>th</sup> March, the Government wrote to Councils asking them to urgently accommodate all rough sleepers and focus on the provision of adequate facilities to enable people to adhere to the guidance on hygiene or isolation, including for those who are at risk of sleeping rough.

The council quickly responded to this request and has been leading a Pennine Lancashire approach as part of the LRF Protect and Care response. This extended offer has been built on the back of our existing offer with the Salvation Army, expanded to include additional properties let using the government's Covid emergency fund. These properties were made available, alongside the sublet of a hotel in Pendle used to support the hospitals across Pennine Lancashire. The hospital was required to discharge people within two hours, putting those who have no fixed address, at risk of homelessness or having to use poor quality, temporary accommodation.

In addition, working with colleagues in health, social care, housing and probation, wrap around support has been provided to all rough sleepers and those in temporary accommodation. Lockdown has helped to engage and maintain engagement with people previously refusing support with positive results.

As part of the council's planning for a return to normal business, all persons accommodated have been offered tenancies with the council, securing lets with social and good quality private landlord's where their support will continue.

On 31<sup>st</sup> March, the government introduced easements to statutory obligations under Care Act legislation. However, the Council has not needed to make use of these easements as the Adult Social Care Neighbourhood teams have continued to undertake assessments and reviews, arranging packages of care and support for our most vulnerable residents.

Our teams have followed all government and corporate advice in respect of social distancing and PPE. There has been a marked shift towards digital working, however given the relational nature of social care, face-to-face assessments and interventions have at times been necessary. Adult Social Care Neighbourhood teams remain co-located with health colleagues although attendance within office bases remains minimal. Partnership working remains central to providing effective and joined up care, and our integrated neighbourhood teams continue to meet virtually each week.

In terms of occupational therapy and the Disabled Facilities Grant, shielding and social distancing restrictions have made adaptations to individual's properties difficult to achieve. As social distancing measures ease, building work will resume.

National Hospital Discharge Guidance was issued at the outset of the pandemic. All requirements have been met and implemented, and we continue to work with system partners to ensure that discharges from hospital are safe. The additional requirements

included the provision of an extended 7-day offer across hospital discharge and intermediate tier pathways in readiness for the increased demand due to the pandemic. In addition, our Home First, Reablement and Hospital Teams combined rotas and working patterns as a means to increase resilience and flexibility across a 7-day, 8am – 8pm service offer.

Planned Day Services and Short Breaks were amongst the services temporarily halted at the outset of the pandemic. Day support for families and carers who are keyworkers continued, as did emergency respite to prevent carer breakdown at home. Shared Lives matching continued where it was possible to conduct meetings virtually.

Plans are underway to resume Day Services and Short Breaks in line with all relevant Government and Public Health guidance. This will require a degree of transformation to ensure our services are safe and effective.

Across the Integrated Care System, a number of work streams were established in order to support all providers of care to continue to deliver services to our most vulnerable residents. As a part of the system approach, the Council put in place a care home support plan, supporting care homes and other providers, which includes:

- Infection Prevention Control PPE.
- Supply Testing (and Tracing)
- Auxiliary Workforce Support
- Data gathering and Intelligence
- Clinical Support and Training
- Modelling and identification of alternative accommodation
- Communication and Provider/Market Engagement and Support

This has included daily calls to providers tracking and responding to Covid issues, sourcing and providing supplies of PPE, providing advice and guidance and financial support.

Our commissioned services have maintained their services throughout. For our substance service users, significant work has been undertaken to risk assess and allow more regular pick-ups from pharmacies where appropriate. The service has also introduced deliver for needle exchange and increased the availability of naloxone kits to support the prevention of drug related deaths. Our sexual health provision has introduced telephone consultations for initial assessments and better triage.

## **Education and Early Years**

On 18<sup>th</sup> March, the Prime Minister announced that all schools in the country would shut from the afternoon of Friday 20<sup>th</sup> March, for all pupils other than children of key workers and vulnerable children. The Government identified our own employees as key workers. It was also announced that no formal exams would take place this academic year.

Throughout this pandemic, we have worked closely with our schools using guidance from the Government and our own local knowledge and intelligence.

From the moment Lockdown was announced for schools, the Council produced a safeguarding and attendance document for all schools, which has been updated throughout lockdown and in line with government guidance.

A protective factor for our most vulnerable young people is school. We requested all schools and settings hold a vulnerable child register, for weekly discussion with the safeguarding team in school. If a child on their vulnerable register was not attending school and parents have requested they stay at home, this must be discussed with the child's social worker or in some instances, their virtual headteacher. Our SEND team was also on hand to for discussion on SEND pupils.

The Council also requested additional safeguarding procedures for those children not attending school including daily calls with young carers (both family and child if possible) and twice weekly or weekly calls with other children on registers. Any changes to the frequency of calls were risk assessed with social care. As usual, our professional teams continued to provide support to schools and children throughout.

The Council has been proactive in planning for extended opening of schools. From 22<sup>nd</sup> April, our School Improvement Strategy Group met weekly with the focus on extension of the wider opening of schools. Alongside the council's professional teams, the Group includes secondary headteachers, post-16 leads, teaching schools, health colleagues, mental health trailblazer colleagues, education leads within the LA and wider children's services support staff.

The Education team have engaged fully with lead headteachers of our school improvement groups, trust leaders, dioceses and unions. There is a twice-weekly headteachers bulletin.

On 15<sup>th</sup> June, we advised our schools and settings to prepare for the extended opening to identified year groups from Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> June, including safety precautions, identifying numbers of children due to attend and undertaking school risk assessments. In line with government guidance, we advised to begin with Early Years, Reception, Year 1 and Year 6. If capacity allows, we hoped to see the return of these year groups no later than the end of week beginning 29<sup>th</sup> June.

We also advised secondary schools and sixth form colleges to begin to welcome back young people from 22<sup>nd</sup> June for some face to face learning, with around a quarter of the year group at any point. Recognising that each setting is different and that leaderships are best placed to adopt an approach to meet pupil needs. We advised our special schools to begin a cautious phased extension to more children and young people based on government guidance and a review of risk assessments of each learning from 22<sup>nd</sup> June.

The Council developed a risk assessment, agreed by the unions and diocese, for all maintained schools to adopt, this was shared with a number of stand-alone academies and trusts within the Borough. Our Health and Safety Team also supported schools in preparation for the wider extension of opening and our HR team have provided advice and guidance to schools to enable them to support vulnerable staff. Both teams have been available to answer questions from schools and have also prepared a FAQ publication.

Our complex needs special school, Early Years settings and maintained schools have all received free PPE equipment from the Council for use in line with government guidance. This has included hand sanitisers, gloves, aprons, masks and goggles. To support our

stand-alone academy and trust we were also able to procure PPE equipment on their behalf.

The Government introduced regulations to allow School Admission Appeals to be held remotely via video/audio conferencing, or by written representations to ensure that pupils have a confirmed place for September. These new regulations will remain in place until 31<sup>st</sup> January 2021.

### **Physical activity and cultural enrichment**

Following closure of leisure centres and facilities, we put a freeze on all memberships, with no fee payments taken whilst facilities remain closed. Annual memberships were extended where necessary. Our instructors have developed and filmed on line class content for people to continue to exercise at home and shared helpful fitness tips to stay in contact with customers over the last few months.

Our re:refresh website was completely redesigned to provide appropriate health and wellbeing information and signposting to support the public and our own employees. Helpful hints and tips to staying safe, working safe and keeping active during the national lockdown are included as well as guidance as the lifting of restrictions has occurred.

To help people managing their long-term conditions, our healthy lifestyle teams, health trainers and specialist exercise instructors have continued to support vulnerable groups and those who are self-isolating or shielding. These video calls, window conversations and home exercise packs, have been hugely valued by participants. Feedback and thanks received has indicated that this has really helped maintain mental and physical health during challenging times.

Based on Government guidance and advice we closed our branch libraries and Blackburn and Darwen libraries on 24<sup>th</sup> March but have continued to ensure our residents are able to access cultural resources and activities.

We maintained our online e-resources and home delivery service which have been extremely well used by residents. On 15<sup>th</sup> June, we extended the library offer and launched our Call and Collect library service at Blackburn Central Library. All returned stock is kept in 72-hour quarantine in line with official guidance. We re-opened Blackburn Library on 6<sup>th</sup> July and will re-open Darewn Library from 13<sup>th</sup> July.

Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery closed in line with government guidance on social distancing but we continue to engage online using #MuseumsFromHome posting pictures of our collection and social and virtual tours of Turton Tower over social media. We also created a YouTube page for the museum, adding short films of the gallery and collections, and made education learning sessions available to children. We have also launched a Get Crafty at Home section with activities for children. We plan to reopen the museum from 15<sup>th</sup> July. A booking system will be in place with hourly entrances for visitors.

Like all theatres and venues, King George's Hall and Darwen Library Theatre have closed during lockdown. Working closely with agents and promoters some shows are rescheduled into 2021 as the industry awaits guidance to support its re-opening.

## **Faith activities and places of worship**

Throughout this pandemic the council has been working with faith partners to establish common principles for places of worship. The Government guidance in March was very clear, that large gatherings including gatherings with friends and family should be avoided. Based on this advice and on consultation with Public Health we wrote to the Borough's Mosques with strong recommendations that both daily and Friday congregational prayers and other significant gatherings should be suspended.

Based on Government guidance and instruction on 31<sup>st</sup> March we changed arrangements for funerals and burials at our crematoria and cemeteries, limiting the number of attendees, putting measures in place to facilitate social distancing and additional cleaning between services. This action was undertaken in consultation with the LRF and local faith groups, with the council regularly reviewing the limits on attendee numbers at both cremations and burials. Numbers attending funerals have increased from the initial limit of 10, including officiates, at both burial and cremation services. Due to improved management of social distancing, we can now allow upto 30 mourners plus officiates at burials and 14 and officiate at cremations.

Additionally, the council introduced webcasting of cremation services and relaxed its rules and regulations in the cemeteries to allow for video recording of burials by mourners, in order to allow those who were unable to attend the funerals to feel part of the service for relatives and loved ones.

Our approach to ensuring religious needs of residents are met has been recognised as good practice by the Local Government Association (LGA) who have published a case study on our partnership work to find solutions associated with Muslim burial rites.

Places of worship reopened on 13<sup>th</sup> June for private prayer and from 4<sup>th</sup> July government guidance provides for gatherings of more than 30 people for acts of worship in churches, mosques etc.

## **Registrar service**

Following government guidance, we closed both Blackburn and Darwen Register Offices to the public, with weddings cancelled and all deaths/still birth registrations completed by telephone and birth registrations postponed. Given the likelihood of staff absences due to Covid and the anticipated number of excess deaths, we trained a number of our employees with the skills to undertake Registrar duties on a temporary basis to provide additional capacity.

Our registrar services are aiming to re-open by the end of July. We also hope to resume weddings at the end of July in the Northgate Suite of King George's Hall as this is the most suitable venue in terms of social distancing and hygiene measures. Outside venues such as hotels will be visited by registrars and Environmental Health to make sure they comply with the new guidelines before any further weddings can go ahead as we continue our re-start.

## **Refuse collection and recycling centres**

We have maintained our refuse and recycling collections throughout the pandemic, putting measures in place to support our staff, in conjunction with Government advice and the support of the Trades Unions. We also issued guidance to residents on how they can help themselves and the council with keeping bins clean, double bagging rubbish for those self-isolating and managing food and general waste. During the lockdown period, the 12 weeks have seen an increase of 11% in the total amount of waste generated by householders in their burgundy bins, with a 6% increase in recycling.

On 25<sup>th</sup> March, we temporarily closed our household waste recycling centres. However, following further guidance and clarification from the Government, we have been able to reopen these since 18<sup>th</sup> May with new social distancing arrangements in place. Unlike many other waste disposal authorities, we have been able to accept all waste types, plus vans and trailers. Our residents are now able to book appointments to attend the recycling centres to dispose of waste. The appointment system has proved very popular, with a number of compliments received about how the new system is easy to use, makes the sites safer for both the staff and the residents and requesting that the council continue to use the booking system into the future. The booking system allowed for up to six vehicles to use each site every 30 minutes. This has enabled up to 132 bookings to be made at each site, 6 days a week. We are making further improvements to increase overall capacity with timeslots changing to 20 minutes soon.

Following the successful reopening of the sites, the council is presently reviewing access arrangements to allow more booking slots to become available. We also agreed a trial with our contractor to open up the sites on the previous closure days, Darwen on Tuesday's and Blackburn on Wednesday's. This is for an initial period, to allow access for permit users, who needed to use the sites with their vans and trailers, plus the disposal of builder's waste, with the number of users limited to 66 per day, per site.

## **Support to our businesses**

As the national lockdown was introduced, customer facing businesses were ordered to shut down with other organisations needed to introduce social distancing measures or support employees to work from home if able to.

The council responded quickly to support businesses offering advice and guidance as it was released from the Government.

Working with the Blackburn Town Centre BID and Blackburn with Darwen Hive Business Network the Council has introduced fortnightly Ask the Experts online Q&A sessions with businesses invited to submit questions focused on supporting businesses during this crises. We have helped people to access financial support, navigate issues relating to employees, customers, social distancing, and the safe reopening of businesses

Our Public Protection professionals have been responsible for enforcing business closure regulations and have been monitoring compliance and intervening where businesses refused to close. In general, our business community have responded positively to the government restrictions, although a small number of prohibition notices have been served

to certain businesses who have disregarded advice. No prosecutions have been necessary to date.

For those businesses able to remain open, we have provided advice and guidance to implement covid-secure measures to protect staff and customers. This will continue as restrictions begin to lift.

On 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020, the Government released funds to all Councils to provide a range of direct financial support to local businesses impacted by the crises. Within the first few days of the announcement, we were busy identifying businesses in the Borough who could qualify for government funds; by 12<sup>th</sup> April we had processed more than 1100 grants and paid out £13,345,000. At 28<sup>th</sup> June we had made payments totalling £39,245,000 to 3,578 businesses.

On 29<sup>th</sup> May, the government issued guidance on the Discretionary Grant Fund. A local scheme has been developed and agreed in line with national guidance with the additional local flexibility to provide financial support to small manufacturing and production businesses that can evidence Covid-19 economic impacts. The first application window closed on 14 June and over 400 applications are currently being assessed and checked. At 3<sup>rd</sup> July, the Council have made discretionary grant awards to 40 businesses totalling £268,000, and will continue to make further awards over the coming weeks.

### **High Streets and markets**

On 23<sup>rd</sup> March, we took the tough but necessary decision to close both Blackburn and Darwen markets to the public in order to protect traders, customers, staff and the wider public. The national lockdown saw all non-essential shops across the Borough close on 26<sup>th</sup> March.

Despite the uncertainty our market traders faced, they responded positively with mainly food traders in both Blackburn and Darwen adapting their businesses to support customers with home deliveries. Our market traders were extremely busy delivering orders across the borough and neighbouring areas with a large demand clearly unmet by the supermarkets. The Council's markets team worked throughout both keeping the market open, clean and safe for the traders as well as helping with deliveries too, getting essential food items out to customers.

Following the government's announcements in May that non-essential retail could open from 15<sup>th</sup> June, the Council's Town Centre and Markets team alongside the Mall and the BID in Blackburn and our Public Protection and Highways teams have supported businesses with a number of interventions to ensure that our high streets opened safely and Covid-19 secure. This has included one-way systems in our Markets and the Mall, restrictions on numbers, enhanced security, portable public toilets and highways adaptations to support the legislation and guidelines on social distancing.

All partners including our teams are experiencing a very high and intensive demand on resources to enable this and in addition are preparing for the second phase of reopening hospitality businesses announced from 4<sup>th</sup> July.

## **Digital development and remote support**

Covid-19 has accelerated and enhanced the way we use digital to deliver council services and enable our employees to work flexibly. Technology is moving at pace in our organisation like never before.

On 16<sup>th</sup> March, in line with Government guidance, we advised our employees to work from home if able to do so. This led to 70% of our workforce becoming remote workers. Prior to covid-19 we had an average of 100 remote workers each day, increasing to approximately 1500 employees when restrictions were introduced. The digital team quickly had to build more digital solutions. We replaced our firewall, put in a new VPN system and accelerated completion of Office 365 email and Teams.

We have enabled over 10,000 virtual meetings to take place within the Council, provided kit and software where needed, and provided digital support through Tech Bootcamps alongside hints and tips in short videos.

We have distributed 693 devices and hubs to our most vulnerable children across the borough and we are now trialling the Kaizala App to communicate with our care leavers.

We accelerated the use of digital forms, crucial for our help-hub, which enabled residents to request help with food, supplies, medication and general support. The form was accessible 24/7 with a contact centre staffed by redeployed workers from around the council. We have developed this further into a case management system linked to our food distribution warehouse. The system has dealt with thousands of requests.

We also launched the Gov.Notify, a text messaging service for our citizens, which is free for up to 25,000 messages per service.

As the waste and recycling centres reopened, we needed an online booking system through our new digital platform for residents. It was difficult and complex and whilst there was some early technical hurdles to overcome, two days before sites opened our system was live. Handling thousands of requests, the new system has enabled minimal queuing, proper social distancing and safer highways around the recycling centres.

We have also increased our use of data and intelligence by creating live dashboards for our senior teams. This has supplied officers with the latest management information throughout on key indicators around Covid-19 cases and deaths, staffing, Help Hub requests and more.

Initially all formal Council meetings were cancelled, including Council Forum in late March and Executive Board in April. Legislation was introduced, up to May 2021, to enable local authorities to make decisions remotely and hold virtual meetings. In response, the council adapted its decision making arrangements, embracing technology and held its first formal virtual meeting of Annual Council on 4<sup>th</sup> June via Microsoft Teams Live, including introducing the new Mayor. Council meetings will continue to be held remotely until there is a further change in the government guidance.

## **Protecting our staff**

On 17<sup>th</sup> March, many of our office based employees began to work from home. Business Continuity Plans were put in place, and our senior leadership team put measures in place to ensure all those working from home were supported, had the necessary equipment and that positive health and mental wellbeing could be maintained.

Those staff whose normal work places closed, have been redeployed where possible into alternative roles on a temporary basis and provided with the necessary support and training needed.

Where people have needed to attend workplaces we have enhanced our cleaning routines and ensured that additional hand sanitisation and wipes are available along with social distancing measures and screens for front-facing employees in public buildings.

Based on Government guidance two-metre social distancing measures have been in place and for some buildings, revised fire evacuation and first aid procedures have been implemented. This will continue to be monitored and adapted in line with Government Guidance.

Colleagues from Health & Safety and Property & Facilities Management have been undertaking site based risk assessments of buildings, to prepare for any re-openings subject to Government guidance, including the provision of protective screens for any public facing counters.

Early in the crisis, we identified that PPE being in short supply was a significant issue and we commenced procurement of stocks from a diverse range of suppliers to protect our own staff across all Council functions and for our providers in Adult Social Care. Given the significant global demand, this became increasingly challenging. Government guidance changing added to this challenge. We worked with the LRF and used our collective buying power to purchase essential items and have them shipped from China. This, combined with supplies from MHCLG, has meant that we have been able to keep our staff provided with appropriate PPE, provided schools with supplies to support their re-opening and responded to urgent requests from our providers and those of the LRF across the region.

Managing the receipt, storage and delivery of this stock has been a collaborative effort across multiple Council teams, including a number of staff working in evenings and weekends to meet requirements. We now have a stock that will ensure we can continue to meet demand internally and externally for the upcoming months and are assessing the best way to manage this.

For many of our services it has been business as usual, but in a new way. Our corporate resources teams have adapted and responded in this new environment, supporting those critical front-facing services. Our highways have been maintained throughout this pandemic, whilst ensuring safe working practices.

## **Financial challenges**

Our Finance Team have worked extremely hard, and at pace, to process and administer the range of financial support packages in place for our businesses and residents. We

have re-billed business rates to reflect the additional Business Rate reliefs the government has announced. We have also applied the provisions of the government's Hardship Fund by reducing the Council Tax bill by £150 for all individuals of working age who are in receipt of Council Tax Support. We have prioritised the processing of supplier invoices and moved to daily supplier payment runs to ensure we get cash out as quickly as possible to all our suppliers, particularly those in the care sector.

The council was quick to introduce a system to respond to financial pressures faced by providers in terms of increased cost of care provision, increased costs of PPE, agency and staff cover. No reductions in block contract arrangements (or new contracts for 2020/2021 have been made) to ensure that provision could be re-directed to support emerging areas of need. Additional commissions have been sourced to support hospital discharge. Payment schedules have increased in terms of frequency to aid cash flow and facilitate payment in advance or immediate payment for some services, and weekly meetings put in place to consider provider requests for financial assistance, enabling a quick turnaround and prompt payment.

We are facing significant financial pressures due to the increased costs due to covid-19 and loss of income. An outline of additional financial pressures as at 19<sup>th</sup> June 2020 is summarised below:

- £1.430 million on PPE
- £0.870 million spent on setting up the food hub and associated costs to distribute food to shielded and vulnerable groups.
- £0.168 million to support the homeless and secure beds for rough sleepers.
- £10.514 million loss of sales, fees, charges and commercial income.

We also expect a loss of income on council tax and business rates and additional cost pressures for those residents who become eligible for council tax support. As outlined in Executive Board papers for 9<sup>th</sup> July 2020, forecast additional expenditure in 2020/21 due to Covid-19 is £9.802 million and loss of income is forecast at £18.691 million. To date we have received Covid-19 Government grant of £9.297 million, resulting in a financial gap of approximately £19.394 million for 2020/21.

These costs and loss of income will continue to escalate as we come to terms with the longer term impact of Covid-19 on our council services, how we support our businesses and residents, and also the wider economic downturn the country is facing.

In April and May, the Leader of the Council wrote to both the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, highlighting concern that the funding made available will leave the council in very serious financial difficulties.

Elected Members will be aware of the significant financial pressures that the council has been under, prior to Covid-19, as part of the Government's austerity programme, with a 36% reduction in funding income over the past 10 years. Working with the Local Government Association and councils colleagues across the country, we will continue to press the Government to ensure that Local Government, particularly areas such as Blackburn with Darwen, receive the crucial funding needed and that the Government honour their commitment to stand behind local councils providing resources for all of our covid-related expenditure.

The Secretary of State for MHCLG announced a further funding package for local government on 2<sup>nd</sup> July which looks to address costs and some loss of income from fees and charges. We await the full detail of this package to be able to assess the impact on the Council's overall financial position for 2020/21 and beyond. A Spending Review for future years is also expected later in the year.

### **Keeping people informed**

Effective communications has been a priority from day one and continues to play a key role. We have kept our employees, communities, businesses, media and other partners up-to-date with key government guidance, advice and information about changes to our services and the support available.

Over the past 100 days our residents have accessed the Council's online news platform, the Shuttle, 141,164 times - a 93% increase in readership compared to the same period last year. This highlights a real shift to accessing online digital news and how residents chose to seek important updates from the Council.

The most read news stories for the latest period included Coronavirus updates, VE Day 2020 stay at home street party advice, changes to funerals, burials and cemeteries, help hub information and education updates. Our Director of Public Health's weekly coronavirus column has been one of the most read news items.

Over a million people also accessed the Council website during this period, a 41% increase in web access for the equivalent periods. The top pages that our residents have been accessing include household waste recycling centres information, Do it Online, jobs, waste and recycling and Council Tax. Other popular pages include Accounts, Coronavirus: support for business, the garden waste brown bin collection scheme, bin collections, bulky item collections and planning.

Engagement on our digital platforms has seen a significant spike – with the council's corporate social media pages being a go-to channel for our residents looking for trusted updates. In the period since the Government implemented its action plan, the Facebook and Twitter accounts have been viewed more than 5 million times with 20% audience growth.

As well as sharing important public health updates, including a well-received corporate campaign to support people's mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic, the pages have become a place to celebrate the work of the council with popular posts including the rainbow sign-writing at the entrance to the hospital and the football pitch-sized message of support at Pleasington.

Residents actively thanked staff in their thousands – providing a morale boost as well as highlighting the full range of services the Council has continued to offer during lockdown. The success of the social posts is now being built on further with a new 'Worker Bees' campaign showing how workers have stepped up.

Being able to respond instantly has also been a huge benefit to having the well-established social channels with issues including the closure of key council buildings,

schools, the household waste recycling centres and leisure facilities, being able to be communicated quickly and explained in detail.

We were also able to instantly respond to residents' comments, questions and queries – often outside of normal office hours - providing them with the very latest information and a personal response to what could be highly emotive topics – including the closure of cemeteries.

We have continued to use video to record interviews and messages, including the video explaining the decision to delay the wider opening of schools and the appointment of the new Mayor.

Our local response to the national lockdown has received positive feedback from our residents who have called on our support. Comments have included:

- “its made a real difference having someone to talk to”,
- “the regular support me and my mum have had since lockdown has been great”
- “Blackburn with Darwen Council have gone above and beyond to help people throughout this pandemic and you should all be very proud”,
- “this year has been tougher than most, but your response to the challenges we’re facing has been exceptional”,
- “it has been amazing how you guys have all pulled together and supported people like us in such horrific times. It has been quite humbling. Great that a police officer delivered my parcel!”
- “I can’t thank you enough for the food parcels at this awful time in all our lives. You have all put yourselves on the line for so many people”.

## **5. TRANSITION AND THE NEW NORMAL**

Our response to the initial emergency actions has been at pace and we expect to continue our adaptable and flexible approach to service delivery as further guidance develops and restrictions begin to relax or reinstate and Local Government will continue to play a crucial part in this pandemic for a long time. This national crisis has highlighted the central role that Councils have in local leadership across the public sector.

As lockdown restrictions are eased across the country, a key element in keeping the outbreak suppressed at national and local level is the identification of cases of infection through testing, and tracing their contacts, who are then advised to self-isolate for 14 days. We have developed a Local Outbreak Control Plan, which outlines our control arrangements. The Council has been allocated £1.36 million to implement this plan.

Our new Elected-member led Local Outbreak Engagement Board will have political oversight of the local delivery of the plan and response and be responsible for communicating and engaging with residents and communities. Health, community, voluntary and faith colleagues are also part of the new Board.

£500 million funding for Councils was announced on 2<sup>nd</sup> July, complemented with additional resource for loss of income. Further details are awaited. LGA analysis last month, suggests that councils across the country are facing a funding gap of £7.4 billion.

We continue to play a central role in the LRF, which is now led by Local Government as we move away from critical response, and our Chief Executive is chair of the Transition and Recovery cell for Lancashire.

On 30<sup>th</sup> June, our Prime Minister announced a “New Deal for Britain” setting out the first steps to rebuild the country and fuel economic recovery. With £5 billion for infrastructure spending, the Prime Minister has promised that the Government will “build back better, build back greener, build back faster”. A policy paper to reform the planning system is expected this month.

As part of this economic recovery, we have already seen funding directed to Mayoral Combined Authorities and announcements this week by the Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government make it clear that devolution and powers will go to those areas that have a directly Elected Mayor. A Devolution White Paper is due in the Autumn and we expect this to set out a way forward for areas such as Lancashire, including options for new unitary authorities. A separate report is presented to Council Forum on this matter.

For Blackburn with Darwen we will continue the focus on our own transition and economic recovery as we prioritise the short, medium and long-term needs of our residents and businesses. This includes developing the Darwen Town Investment Plan, which will need to address covid-19 issues and opportunities in line with the new Town Deals guidance published by the Government. We expect the Darwen Town Deal Board to submit their plan by January 2021.

We have continued our work with Lancashire authorities and the Local Enterprise Partnership and prepared a joint submission that sets out key priorities and actions to progress with Government, as part of an emerging strategic economic recovery plan for Lancashire. We are expecting more detail soon on the national economic recovery strategy and the local economic recovery plans that will underpin this approach.

We have already started our own four phased transition planning – rise & fall; containment; exit; recovery to take us to 2022, keeping our business plans flexible to respond to changing and new guidance, new government announcements and policies and responding to our local needs.

We will further refine our performance reporting and bring a detailed report to Policy Council in December when we will be able to further understand the impact of our decisions as we respond to Covid-19.

## **6. POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

We will continue to monitor government advice and guidance and tailor any policy requirements as necessary.

## **7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There have been, and will continue to be significant financial implications in our emergency response to Covid-19. Reports to Executive Board on 9<sup>th</sup> July 2020 provide further information. We will continue to work with lobbying groups to press the Government for additional resource and financial support.

## **8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

The Council must ensure that it fully complies with the various Coronavirus legislation and Government guidance introduced from time to time, in respect of all its services, powers and duties. The Council must also continuously monitor the changes in legislation and guidance, to ensure the provision of its statutory and other responsibilities.

## **9. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

Please refer to section 7. Financial implications, in this report.

## **10. EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

Given the pace of response to the crises, an EIA has not been undertaken. As we move forward through transition we will undertake EIAs as necessary.

## **11. CONSULTATIONS**

No consultations have taken place.

### **Chief Officer/Member**

Background papers:

Contact Officer: Denise Park, Chief Executive

Date: 07.07.2020