



REPORT OF:	LEADER
TO:	COUNCIL FORUM
ON:	25th MARCH 2021

COUNCIL RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC – ONE YEAR ON

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the key highlights of the Council's response to the COVID-19 pandemic over the last 12 months.

Our council website has lots of further information about our response to the pandemic, including our COVID Response Plan and our Key Achievements.

In July 2020 Council Forum received a detailed report on the Council's early critical response to the pandemic and a further update at Policy Council in December 2020

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

- a) Council note the content of this report.

3. BACKGROUND

Elected Members will be aware that the in March 2020 restrictions were introduced in England to control the spread of COVID.

The Council activated its Corporate Business Continuity Plan and emergency planning protocols and, through the Lancashire Resilience Forum (LRF), the Council and partners 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.

Since the first case in Blackburn with Darwen last March, the Pandemic has seen more than 17,500 positive cases of COVID in the Borough; the highest cumulative rate for any local Authority in the Country.

This has been a frightening and isolating time for many of our residents, council employees and elected Members. Businesses and employers continue to face 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. RESPONSE HIGHLIGHTS

In November 2020, the Council published its COVID Response Plan outlining some of the core measures in place to assist the Council in responding to the pandemic and preparing for recovery. We also have a number of other strategies that outline our initial priority responses that complement our Local Outbreak Management Plan. All of these are available on our website. We will soon be publishing a more detailed report on Covid – one year on in the Borough.

Throughout the pandemic we have worked with regional convenors, PHE and government departments, highlighting the challenges that Blackburn with Darwen faces, particularly given the high numbers of positive cases in the Borough. We do not yet know the long-term impact of COVID on society from a health, economic or wellbeing perspective. We will continue to lobby the Government directly and raise issues through the national media and trade press, to outline the disproportionate impact COVID will have on areas such as Blackburn with Darwen.

Governance, Leadership and Partnership

As the pandemic began to unfold the council's emergency plans were triggered. These plans provide a set of predefined procedures to follow and provide a framework of considerations to take into account based on legislation, good practice and historic events. The Council worked in partnership with the Lancashire Resilience Forum providing mutual aid and support as we began our response to the emergency.

We quickly introduced a number of internal groups and cells with a direct link to the Chief Executive and Elected Members, including a Local Outbreak Engagement Board, Incident Management Hub, education response cell, adult social care response cell as well as a core COVID team to co-ordinate the response. We have worked closely with colleagues elsewhere in local government, health, police, BID, community groups, faith settings and the private sector.

The COVID response plan on the Council website provides a high level outline of the governance and partnership frameworks we have been working within.

Adapting our services

On 16th March 2020, and in line with Government guidance, we advised our employees to work from home if they were able to. Over the following days services began to pause or move on-line as further restrictions were introduced.

We quickly accelerated digital support to employees and moved meetings on-line. Our office-based services have continued throughout with large numbers of staff moving to home-working or a blend of office/home working. Our staff have been flexible and adaptable responding to change at pace, providing 24/7 service where needed.

Many employees have redeployed into different roles to support critical areas as some services paused, or have refocused duties to response to the pandemic.

To support vulnerable groups, our children's and adults support had to work differently, finding new ways to engage with young people and families such as virtual visits walks and bike rides. We also quickly established an Education Response Team, supporting our education establishments as they respond to the pandemic and also manage covid-19 outbreaks. Our schools have been fantastic in supporting young people to remain in a school setting where possible.

Our residents and communities have embraced on-line engagement. We have hosted a range of virtual events and award ceremonies; our Council meetings are now on-line; our libraries moved to click and collect when closed; fitness sessions and activities have been on-line; and we have created a Blackburn Museum YouTube page and also posting pictures of collections over social media. Our registrar services accepted registrations on-line or by phones and we have also conducted citizenship ceremonies via Microsoft Teams.

Many of our services have continued as business as usual, with some adaptations to enable social distancing, such as burials with funeral services streamed live from Pleasington Crematorium; waste collection has continued throughout and we have adapted our household waste recycling centres to enable social distancing. Our planning service and building control has remained open with COVID secure measures in place for site inspections.

All of our workplaces and council buildings are COVID-secure and include additional cleaning and sanitisation, protective screen, social distancing measures and access to PPE where needed.

Using Data

Data, analytics and epidemiological analysis is fundamental in our approach to understanding the spread of COVID. We use it to inform the development of strategies and measures for local restrictions, outbreak management and communication with our communities. We have used a wide range of data from key Public Health England (PHE) sources to inform our approach.

Since the start of the pandemic, we have developed a suite of reporting mechanisms that include website publication, daily reports, dashboards and a series of specifically commissioned reports and studies. Data is published on our website and we also produce a weekly user-friendly dashboard of key statistics published on our social media channels.

Testing programme

Blackburn with Darwen has led the way in testing. We had the first Local Testing Site (LTS) in Lancashire and introduced early community and workplace testing programmes.

The Community Testing Team was introduced for a four-week pilot, and located in wards with the highest positive cases per area. The Teams worked on foot knocking on doors and engaging with residents about the importance of getting tested and providing home testing kits. During the pilot a total of 2862 test kits were distributed to residents.

We have led on local test and trace to support the national system and been successful at drawing in resources to increase local testing with the Regional Testing Centre at Blackburn Hospital, two Mobile Testing Units and two Local Testing Units in Blackburn and Darwen providing significant local testing capacity.

At the peak of our capacity we could undertake upto 2500 tests per day.

As the Government rolled out SMART testing, we have been working with businesses to undertake workplace testing. Our dedicated COVID website has lots of useful information on workplace testing and the testing team are available to provide advice and support and guide businesses through the programme.

Contact Tracing local programme

Creating an effective contact tracing system to break the chains of transmission has been a crucial element of the Council's COVID-19 response. In July 2020, we introduced a local enhanced contact tracing service to complement the national system. We integrated staff across neighbourhood engagement and wellbeing services to support the service. This cross department team has the invaluable local knowledge and experience of supporting individuals' health and wellbeing.

As at 16 March 2021, 3366 cases have passed from the national team to the Council contact tracing team.

Supporting residents

In addition to our usual services to support all residents, in March 2020 we quickly launched the Blackburn with Darwen Help Hub. It has, and continues to be, a valuable lifeline to many of our residents. Since its launch, the Help Hub has provided a range of support for residents such as organising delivery of food and essential supplies, providing information and advice, regular phone calls and befrienders and more recently co-ordinating support to enable people to travel to receive their vaccine.

At the height of the first lockdown the Help Hub co-ordinated delivery of over 1000 meals each week in partnership with 150 organisations which formed the VCFS Crisis Food Group. We received tremendous feedback from users of the Help Hub. So far, throughout the pandemic 4632 people have been supported by the Help Hub.

Volunteering has played a huge part in our support to residents. We already had a successful volunteer programme in the Borough and the COVID-19 pandemic has brought out the best in our communities who have been eager to support each other. Over 50 residents, across a range of age-groups, have signed up to be telephone befriender volunteers since March 2020. Volunteers are also supporting the vaccination programme.

Our care homes and residents have also received additional support with daily welfare calls, PPE, infection control support.

Our website contains lots of useful information on the support available to residents including financial support, wellbeing and of course the HelpHub.

Residents can also access the self-isolation support payment on-line. At 16th March 2021, we had processed 1270 isolation grant claims and paid £623,836 in support grants through the scheme.

Supporting businesses and workplaces

The extended restrictions placed on businesses in the Borough has taken its toll, particularly on the leisure and hospitality sector. Throughout the pandemic our health and safety team and public protection team offer guidance and support to workplaces, including faith settings, and support for businesses to reopen safely and be COVID-secure. This support is available through a combination of site visits, telephone and online support.

We have provided resource packs for businesses, which includes posters, leaflets, templates and best practice tips. The guidance and legislation from the Government has often been confusing and our legal team have been on hand to support businesses in understanding the restrictions.

Customer services and our business team have guided businesses through the complex business grant system introduced by the Government. To date we have paid out £60,543,105 in grants to our businesses and with payments continuing to be made. We have also provided on-line Q&A sessions with business experts for our businesses.

In March 2021, we launched our Taxi Driver COVID-19 grant with a one-off grant payment of £500 to taxi drivers who have continued to operate but are affected by the on-going restrictions. The council has recognised that restrictions on travel, as well as closure of many venues across the hospitality and leisure sectors, has reduced overall demand for taxi services.

As referenced elsewhere in this report, all of our businesses and workplaces have access to the national and local testing programme and our officers are on hand to guide them through the process.

We will of course continue to press the Government for support to our businesses, particularly those who have been hit hard by the extended restrictions in the Borough.

Vaccination programme

The vaccination programme has provided great hope for overcoming the worst effects of COVID-19 and has been progressing effectively through the most vulnerable groups starting with Care Home Residents and carers down the age groups based on age and level of vulnerability.

Whilst this is an NHS programme, we have been working closely with health colleagues to facilitate the vaccination centres in the Borough, providing marshalling at the sites and

also setting up the Cathedral Crypt as a national vaccination centre. More than 45,000 residents have now received their first vaccination.

However, despite these overall high levels of vaccine uptake, there are signs of lower vaccine uptake in lower income and some ethnic minority groups. Our community connectors will be working in communities and with some groups to increase uptake where there is hesitancy, and also to understand the barriers for having the vaccine, for some members of the community.

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.

Given the high number of positive cases in some wards we have undertaken targeted communications and engagement in those areas across a range of media platforms. This has included radio, social media, leaflets, ad-van and also through our community groups and with faith sector partners.

We have launched a number of campaigns such as 'Picture This' to promote compliance with restrictions as a route to returning to 'normal life' as quickly as possible. Partners, local celebrities, business owners, headteachers, NHS staff and more have all taken part in the campaign.

We have produced a series of videos, infographics and stories throughout the pandemic outlining the support available, where to access information, latest data, case studies, local stories and up-to-date guidance which are shared with our residents and businesses through a range of platforms.

Pandemic progress

The first positive case in the Borough was on 13th March 2020 and in the last 12 months there have been more than 17,500 total cases. It's worth noting that in the first wave, testing only took place on people that had been hospitalised so it's likely that there were huge underestimates on figures in the early part of the pandemic.

The pandemic has put a great strain on hospitals with high numbers of COVID inpatients. To date 446 of people have unfortunately lost their lives in the borough, and mortality in 2020 was significantly higher than in the previous three years. This pattern is reflected nationally.

5. SAFE BWD AND THE NEW NORMAL

As we move into the second year of the Pandemic there will continue to be positive cases in the borough and it is almost certain that there will continue to be new strains and variants of the disease that emerge from all over the globe.

The range of Vaccines will grow and as we begin to understand their effects we will be able to utilise them as protection for individuals and as a control measure for the spread of the virus.

As infection numbers come down, the importance of effective local test and trace will increase and the addition of backwards tracing will be able to improve the ways in which we are able to manage incidents and outbreaks. COVID is a global phenomenon and as the UK begins to move out of the third national lockdown, it will be important to understand the continuing risks to local citizens, communities and business.

In February 2021, the Government published its four stage process to move out of the third national lockdown with the intention for this to be the final roadmap. To complement the roadmap, we are developing our own reopening plans to support our residents, businesses and workplaces to move forward as we live alongside COVID. We all want to get back to doing the things we love in a safe, secure environment.

We are updating our business plans to reflect the restart of services that have paused, and continue to offer a hybrid of face-to-face and on-line services where these have worked well during the restrictions. We want our residents, businesses and communities to access the broad range of services in a way that best suits their needs as we move to recovery.

We are refreshing our Corporate Plan priorities to reflect the new normal and embrace the unprecedented acceleration of digital over the last 12 months.

The local elections will go ahead in May 2021 and our election team are making preparations for these to be conducted in a safe and secure manner, both at polling stations and the count. This includes social distancing measures, one-way system, hand sanitisers, and the need for wearing face coverings. Candidates have also been issued with information on campaigning safely.

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 response to COVID-19. Reports to Finance Council and Executive Board 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

Analysis to capture the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on equality groups and the Council's actions to mitigate these impacts is being undertaken and updated as the pandemic progresses. The analysis is being supported by partners from across the public sector.

11. CONSULTATIONS

No consultations have taken place.

Background papers: Please refer to previous reports to Council Forum and Policy Council and extensive resource on the council website – www.blackburn.gov.uk/coronavirus

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