



REPORT OF: Leader of the Council
TO: Policy Council
ON: 1st December 2022

COUNCIL RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC 2020-22

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

The purpose of this report is to provide background information for the Covid-19 Response video. The video outlines key response highlights throughout the Covid-19 pandemic from various perspectives. Whilst it has not been possible to include all response activity in the video, previous reports to Council Forum and Executive Board have documented this activity in detail (Council Forum in March 2021 and Executive Board in June 2022).

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Policy Council:

- a) Note the video and supporting report
- b) Recognise that Covid-19 continues to remain a threat to public health and that eligible residents should utilise the offer of an Autumn Booster vaccination
- c) Acknowledge the Covid-19 response activities undertaken by BwDBC staff; residents; private and public sector partners and VCFS organisations and thanks them for their efforts in such a challenging period.

3. BACKGROUND

Between the first confirmed cases of Covid-19 in Blackburn with Darwen in March 2020 to the end of restrictions in February 2022, the Borough experienced one of its biggest ever challenges in the form of the pandemic. Residents, businesses and partners from across the sectors were faced with unique and unprecedented challenges which were further exacerbated by the profile of the Borough. High levels of deprivation, larger black and minority ethnic populations, higher density and overcrowded housing, greater numbers of workers in key frontline occupations and younger population profiles meant we had higher risks from Covid-19 in terms of infections, hospitalisations and deaths.

Covid-19 remains a risk and concern for many residents and partners and we are supporting them as they live with Covid-19. An increase in cases over the 2022 summer period has reiterated the importance of monitoring prevalence (where possible), continuing to encourage safe behaviours and encouraging eligible residents to take up the offer of booster vaccinations. We are working closely with many local settings to encourage people to undertake basics like hand washing, good ventilation, vaccination and staying at home when unwell. These behaviours remain the best defence against high transmission and the protection of our most vulnerable residents. Whilst there is government guidance in place for some settings (health and social care), we are continuing to offer support to more vulnerable settings such as Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs). This

activity will increase in importance now we are in the critical winter period when respiratory illnesses become more prevalent.

4. RESPONSE HIGHLIGHTS

Previous reports to Executive Board and Council Forum have outlined the Council's response to Covid-19 in detail. A significant number of internal and external groups were established with a direct link to the Chief Executive and Leader. Membership of these groups incorporated colleagues from other local authorities, health, police, the Business Improvement District, community groups, faith settings and the private sector. We also worked closely with regional partners, Public Health England and government departments and used these interactions to highlight the challenges that Blackburn with Darwen faced.

The Covid-19 response video will go live on Friday 2nd December at 10am at the following link:
[BwDBC Covid-19 response activity](#)

Adapting to new working conditions

Covid-19 response activity was built upon the swift response from the Digital and Customer Services team to allow staff to work from home or adopt a blended working approach. The rollout of new software allowed online collaboration to take place, hence reducing delays in providing support when required. The new technology also aided the swift establishment of necessary structures and teams both internally and externally. Colleagues from the Digital and Customer Services teams quickly produced a number of new online forms via the Digital Customer Portal (DCP) to enable the processing of grants and support payments as they were announced by Government.

All service areas had to adapt to new ways of working including the Registrar's Service, which had to ensure that registrations of birth, marriages and deaths as well as citizenship ceremonies continued to be carried out as outlined by legislation. Death registrations were carried out by telephone rather than during a face-to-face appointment. Although this was implemented to reduce the risk of virus transmission, many registrants have preferred this method as it has enabled their families to be near during the difficult conversations. There is a legal requirement for deaths to be registered within 5 days and the introduction of this new policy helped to improve timeliness performance.

Supporting vulnerable residents

As local authority and partner organisation staff moved to working from home and services paused or moved online to meet government guidance requirements, the Council launched its Help Hub. It was, and continues to be, a valuable tool in our efforts to support our residents. Throughout its existence, the Help Hub has provided support ranging from the delivery of food/essential supplies via the food warehouse to Household Support Fund payments. It continues to support residents through the cost of living crisis and has adapted well to changing needs.

The Council delivered a successful Self-Isolation Support project, *10 Days Your Way* as part of a government-funded programme. BwD's self isolation support project was part of the Lancashire Lab Covid Self-Innovation Pilot Programme that ran across Lancashire Councils between May 2021 and June 2022. The pilot programme concluded prematurely due to the end of self-isolation restrictions across England. In addition to the self-isolation project, 3rd sector funding was directly allocated to 5 projects across the BwD Strategic Youth Alliance who had been engaged through the Council's Children's Services team. A national outcomes evaluation of all pilot programmes has been commissioned and findings will be published in due course.

The *10 Days your Way* project contacted individuals and households, who had been told to self-isolate, within 24 hours of their positive result to offer a bespoke plan to support self-isolation. The project did not restrict support to any particular group and it was made available to all residents. It provided valuable insight into what worked best to support those who tested positive and their contacts to do the right thing to protect themselves, their families and the wider community. The project also allowed data to be closely monitored and matched with referrals in order to identify trends around non-compliance. This also helped in identifying trends which allowed targeted engagement work to be carried out and monitored in local communities. Alongside the *10 Days your Way* project, a number of 3rd sector groups from across the borough were granted funding to support children and young people through and post their self-isolation period. This included expanding the Youth Zone's Zone to Home initiative which proved extremely popular with young people from across the borough.

The Home Delivery Library Service was vital to its customers who, in many cases, live alone and in isolation without a network of friends and family to support. With the introduction of rapid adaptations and safety measures, the fortnightly delivery of books and other resources by a friendly face was maintained throughout each full lockdown and during periods of restrictions, with new customers who were shielding, signing up for the service. Feedback from those receiving the deliveries confirmed that the service is a 'life line', helping them to remain connected and engaged in reading and positive activity.

At the start of the pandemic, the government introduced an "everyone in" initiative, which was aimed at Local Authorities supporting all rough sleepers to help them come off the streets and into accommodation. At Blackburn with Darwen, we achieved this with the introduction of 10 self-contained homeless pods, which provided accommodation and onsite support services to rough sleepers. A team of case navigators were quickly established and they worked on the streets each day providing support and advice to rough sleepers and helping them secure accommodation. The team also worked in partnership with East Lancashire Hospitals NHS Trust and developed a hospital discharge protocol that helped free up hospital beds. This was achieved by the Housing Needs team providing accommodation within a 2 hour timescale for all patients who were ready for discharge from hospital but had no address to return to. The team also co-ordinated Covid-19 testing and vaccination programmes in all of the HMO's as well as the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) and education around safety measures including regular sanitising and social distancing. The Housing Needs team continue to work in partnership with Public Health to develop a Covid-19 outbreak plan for HMO's.

The Changing Futures team continue to work with the most vulnerable people in the community who are experiencing multiple disadvantages. The aim of the work is based around upstream prevention and repeat prevention. The Housing Needs team work on an intervention basis when somebody is homeless and the Changing Futures team look at the future picture and how to prevent homelessness and repeat homelessness. With face to face intervention, the team can see the challenges our beneficiaries face both socially and economically and can attempt to amend the way systems work to achieve sustained change that will have lasting effect on people. This is alongside the daily support offered to beneficiaries and the lived experience of our navigators, which will inform what the systemic changes look like such as access to housing and the difficulties people face acquiring accommodation when they have multiple disadvantages.

Volunteers

Another key component of the Council's response was the work of the volunteers who played a huge part in our support to residents. Building on an existing successful volunteer programme in the Borough, the Covid-19 volunteer programme brought out the best in our communities who were keen to offer their support to those who needed it. The Covid Community Champions, who were established to directly communicate with the community, have helped to deliver accurate information regarding vaccinations and have provided essential feedback to the Council and the NHS. They continue to support Covid-19 and other activity which impacts on our most vulnerable residents and communities.

Supporting young people

An Education Response Team was established swiftly to support schools, other educational settings and childcare providers. This support helped settings to keep young people in school where possible. Colleagues in Health Protection Teams bolstered this support with an active role in the management of outbreaks and any increase in cases. Following the removal of all Covid-19 restrictions in April 2022, a revised risk assessment was developed for schools focusing on managing infections, including Covid-19, in their setting.

Protecting businesses and residents

Public Protection & Environmental Health maintained an enforcement presence on our streets through to the end of Covid-19 regulations and supported businesses through the changes as restrictions were lifted in stages in April, May and July 2021. The Council had a key role in promoting and enforcing Covid-19 secure workplaces based on the five main steps to working safely as set out in government guidance. A resource pack was developed collaboratively to provide clear advice and guidance to support businesses in managing their response to the situation; together with contact details for further information.

The Public Protection Team were responsible for working with businesses to promote Covid-19 secure practices, monitoring compliance and taking action where necessary. This included close working with local business networks. A wide range of data was used to identify those workplaces that would benefit from further intervention and support, ranging from common exposure and postcode incidence alerts via the Public Health England hub to local grass roots intelligence via the Local Authority

Managing outbreaks

Data, analytics and epidemiological analysis was fundamental in our approach to understanding the spread of Covid-19. We used it to develop 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. During the pandemic we developed a suite of reporting mechanisms that included publication on the website, daily reports, dashboards and a series of specifically commissioned reports and studies. Data was published on our website and we also produced a weekly user-friendly dashboard of key statistics which was published on our social media channels. We are no longer able to report on Covid-19 at the same depth we have previously, now drawing on the data from the regular Office for National Statistics (ONS) survey for a more accurate picture of case rates. We have continued with the multi-disciplinary group to effectively manage Covid-19 incidents and outbreaks.

Getting people tested and vaccinated

Summer 2021 saw Blackburn with Darwen experience a surge of the Delta variant along with many other northern Local Authorities. The severity of the surge resulted in the deployment of Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACA) for military resources to support the surge testing programme. To aid response activity, internally and across the partnership network, the Core Covid Team was

established by the Council. A Council-led contact tracing service, which worked closely with NHS Test and Trace to give help, advice and support to those who needed to self-isolate, was also set up. Our local contact tracing services and holistic support model was launched in July 2020 and was amongst the longest standing and most well-established in England. The team also maintained a significant doorstep test and trace presence until the cessation of contract tracing in February 2022.

Whilst the vaccination programme was led by the NHS, the Council worked 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. Despite overall high levels of vaccine uptake, there were signs locally of lower vaccine uptake in lower income and some ethnic minority groups. Staff from the Community Connectors team worked in communities and with some specific groups to increase uptake where there was hesitancy. They also used this engagement activity to understand the barriers to having the vaccine for some members of the community and helped develop projects to overcome these.

Keeping everyone informed

An electronic Members Bulletin was established early in the pandemic to keep elected members up to date around changing restrictions and guidance. This was replicated internally with Operational and Strategic reports which were published on alternate weeks to provide Corporate Leadership Team and Extended Leadership with a detailed breakdown of Covid-19 activity across the organisation.

The Council's Communications team responded swiftly to the changing nature of the pandemic and used various campaigns to ensure residents, partners and businesses were kept informed of developments and availability of support. Below is an outline of a few of these campaigns:

Covid Community Champions - Communications were developed to support a programme for Community Champions including the recruitment of volunteers to be Covid Community Champions and then providing weekly updates to share the key messages we needed their help with to share across their communities and networks. Communications were developed to promote the Long Covid Peer Support Group and the Communications team facilitated a report on BBC North West Tonight about the support on offer in the Borough and its impact on people with Long Covid.

Self-isolation Support Pilot - Communications were developed to highlight the support available to people testing positive for Covid through the Self-isolation Support Pilot, including developing '10 Days Your Way' branding.

Delta variant wave in Blackburn with Darwen - Communications were developed to support surge testing and surge vaccination programmes in those areas with highest cases of the Delta variant. This included media relations, social media messages and a variety of communications assets to support community engagement work including translated assets delivered to homes and used on ad vans and videos shared on social media, by email, text and WhatsApp.

Wider roll-out of the Covid vaccine to over 12s - Communications were developed and national assets were shared to encourage take-up of the vaccine, targeting groups with lower take-up. Working with the local Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) (NHS structures have now changed) we supported by amplifying their messaging around the roll-out of the Covid vaccine programme to over 18's then 16 & 17 year olds and then 12-15 year olds through a school vaccination programme, boosters for all over 18's and Spring boosters. Communications supported the hyperlocal pop-up

vaccination clinics and the engagement work in communities with lowest take-up of the Covid vaccine and a Vaxx Facts social media campaign was developed to address myths still circulating including videos from midwives addressing vaccine safety for pregnant women.

Helping local businesses

BwD spent a significant amount of time under government restrictions when the tier system was in place. The extended restrictions placed on businesses in the Borough took its toll, particularly on the leisure and hospitality sector. Throughout the pandemic the Health and Safety and Public Protection teams offered guidance and support to workplaces, including faith settings. They offered support to businesses to enable them to reopen safely and be Covid-19 secure as required by legislation at the time. This support took the form of a combination of site visits, telephone and online support. We provided resource packs for businesses which included posters, leaflets, templates and best practice tips. The guidance and legislation from the Government was complex and our Legal team and Policy Officers provided help to businesses to understand the restrictions.

5. FUTURE PLANNING

We have undertaken a programme of debrief activities to help us identify good practice from our pandemic response. These activities will provide valuable information about what needs to be included and improved in planning for future emergency situations. The National Covid-19 public inquiry has started and we are working closely with the Local Government Association on requests for information from the Inquiry team. We will be writing to the Chair of the Covid-19 Public Inquiry to invite their team to visit the Borough. This would be organised and led by the Council and would include an opportunity for their team to engage with partners from the public, private and voluntary sector. Any learning from the Public Inquiry will also be considered in future emergency planning.

6. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

There are no policy implications.

7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Details of the financial impact of Covid-19 have been included in various reports to the Council's Executive Board and the Council's Statement of Accounts as appropriate.

8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no legal implications.

9. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

There are no resource implications.

10. EQUALITY AND HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

Please select one of the options below.

Option 1 Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) not required – the EIA checklist has been completed.

Option 2 In determining this matter the Executive Member needs to consider the EIA associated with this item in advance of making the decision.

Option 3 In determining this matter the Executive Board Members need to consider the EIA associated with this item in advance of making the decision.

11. CONSULTATIONS

There are no consultations.

12. STATEMENT OF COMPLIANCE

N/A

13. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

All Declarations of Interest of any Executive Member consulted and note of any dispensation granted by the Chief Executive will be recorded in the Summary of Decisions published on the day following the meeting.

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DATE:	December 2022
BACKGROUND PAPER:	Council Forum March 2021 Executive Board June 2022