

## **NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL**

### **CABINET**

## **COVID-19 RESPONSE: GOVERNANCE AND PARTNERSHIPS**

### **1. OBJECT AND KEY POINTS IN THIS REPORT**

- 1.1 To outline the response to the Covid-19 outbreak across functions within Governance and Partnerships.
- 1.2 The response to date is set in the context of the business continuity governance arrangements described in the COVID-19 Response report on this agenda.

### **2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

- 2.1 The Council's approach to its business continuity response to the COVID-19 outbreak and actions taken to implement government guidelines have been rooted in the values, principles and ambitions of the council plan, and furthered through the strong partnerships within North Lincolnshire, framed under the following priorities:

- keeping staff safe and well
- protecting the local economy
- enabling communities to remain resilient
- protecting the most vulnerable

Whilst at the same time ensuring good governance and sound financial practice across the Council.

- 2.2 National advice and guidance has been incorporated into the local response as it has become available. The enactment of the Coronavirus Act 2020 has led to certain relaxations of statutory requirements and the introduction of new powers and statutory instruments.
- 2.3 Teams across Governance and Partnerships have demonstrated great resilience and flexibility during the COVID 19 outbreak. An early assessment based upon business continuity plans enabled some colleagues to volunteer to support the council's response to government

initiatives such as Shielding and Business Support Grant processing. Other functions made swift adaptations to systems, processes and professional practice to enable business as usual to continue to ensure organisational assurance and sustainability, including responding to the change in requirements for publishing draft accounts and Annual Governance Statement and application of procurement guidance in use of direct award and modification of contracts as part of the dynamic response needed.

2.5 Key headlines in Governance and Partnerships functions response to Covid-19 include:

**Keeping staff safe and well**

- Arrangements made to postpone the Annual General Meeting of The Council until May 2021. This confirmed that the Mayor continues in office for a further year.
- Introduction of Virtual Decision Making, which required a collaborative approach to plan, prepare and implement. Elected members have been fully equipped and enabled to participate in a very short space of time, supported remotely by the whole team. Feedback to date has been positive on the quality and experience of virtual meetings. With live webcasting to the public now available, during May we have hosted 4 different meetings and received 400 hits through the external link to view.
- Postponement of the local elections until May 2021, although work continues digitally for the annual electoral registration canvass applying the reformed canvass process issued by the Cabinet Office and Electoral Commission
- IT systems were quickly adapted and solutions put in place to enable an unlimited number of staff to access the networks at any one time, with 1,750 users accessing council systems remotely with agile devices on one day.
- Colleagues have access to IT support which better meets the needs of an agile organisation through a virtual 84 hour/7 days a week provision, including an IT delivery and collection service from homes. The increased capacity supported an 80% increase in contacts to IT service desk.

**Protecting the local economy**

- Solutions identified to enable Personal Search companies to request land search information when social distancing restrictions meant it was no longer possible for companies to physically access land registers.
- Swift response to the Cabinet Office Procurement Advisory Note - Supplier Relief which aimed to ensure service continuity, protect infrastructure, supply chains and jobs. The guidance requires public bodies to support suppliers at risk so they are better able to cope with the current crises and to resume normal service delivery and fulfil their contractual obligations when the outbreak is over. Payment processes were adapted to ensure faster

payments and arrangements for suppliers to receive contracted values. A targeted approach was taken to understand those suppliers and providers most at risk and with engagement with those affected.

- A range of new business rates reliefs have been applied to small business, day nurseries and retail, hospitality and leisure businesses. In most cases this account was updated prior to the expected April instalment were due through Direct Debits. A one council approach to facilitating a rapid response to the government's Business Support Grant scheme, utilising data and intelligence from the Ratings List and internal controls systems supported through Internal Audit and Finance.

#### **Protecting the vulnerable**

- Legal work has continued as the Courts adopted virtual hearings.
- Maintained strong contract management relationships with providers of commissioned services to ensure continued service delivery to vulnerable children, adults and families.
- Extension of the Contact Centre facilities to ensure dedicated contact point into the council for those people identified as clinically vulnerable. This technology enabled officers working from home to triage incoming calls and for those supporting Shield to make outgoing welfare check calls.
- Processes updated to ensure financial assessments were responsive with the social and health care system and supporting swifter payment mechanisms for care providers.
- Financial support was implemented in line with MHCLG legislation and regulations for residents through the Local Council Tax Support scheme through enhanced claim handling and £150 discounts. Working age LCTSS customers and Council Tax payers who may be struggling financially can amend/defer instalment plans and all reminder notices have been cancelled for April and May with a more intelligent approach implemented to debt recovery to support households that may be financially vulnerable.

#### **Enabling communities to remain resilient**

- Blue Badge applications payment process transferred on-line and telephone to ensure people were able to access a Blue Badge.
- Through technology and digital tools, a process introduced through WhatsApp for Shield staff to communicate and co-ordinate volunteers across North Lincolnshire to aid in the response to COVID-19 using the app to co-ordinate deliveries with volunteers to vulnerable members of the community.

### **3. OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION**

- 3.1 Cabinet are asked to consider the report and note the response made to date to the COVID-19 emergency and acknowledge that business continuity and emergency planning remain in place.

#### **4. ANALYSIS OF OPTIONS**

- 4.1 Business continuity across governance and Partnerships continues to be maintained.
- 4.2 The positive working practices that have been successfully embedded throughout this period will be considered and built on as part of planning for gradual emergence to a new normal.

#### **5. FINANCIAL AND OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (e.g. LEGAL, HR, PROPERTY, IT, COMMUNICATIONS etc.)**

- 5.1 The financial implications of COVID are being closely monitored against the emergency funding from government. The impact of funding assumptions and financial sustainability will be the subject of a future report to Cabinet.

#### **6. OTHER RELEVANT IMPLICATIONS (e.g. CRIME AND DISORDER, EQUALITIES, COUNCIL PLAN, ENVIRONMENTAL, RISK etc.)**

- 6.1 Decision taken as part of the response to the crisis phase have been made in accordance with the Council's schemes of delegation.

#### **7. OUTCOMES OF INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT (IF APPLICABLE)**

- 7.1 Not applicable for the purposes of this report.

#### **8. OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION AND CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS DECLARED**

- 8.1 Any decisions and actions taken have been done in consultation as appropriate.

#### **9. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 9.1 That Cabinet notes the response to COVID-19 as outlined in the report.

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**Background Papers used in the preparation of this report: None**