

## **NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL**

### **CABINET**

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

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

- 1.1 To provide an update on the current position in respect of the Covid-19 response across functions within Governance and Partnerships.
- 1.2 The response to date is set in the context of the business continuity arrangements, national guidance and the Council's Mid-term recovery plan.

### **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 people safe and well
  - protecting the local economy
  - enabling communities to remain resilient
  - protecting vulnerable people

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 most recent national restrictions were announced on 4 January 2021 and The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 3) and (All Tiers) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 came into force on 6 January 2021.
- 2.3 Teams across Governance and Partnerships have demonstrated great resilience and flexibility during the COVID 19 pandemic and as reported to Cabinet in June 2020 provided a comprehensive input to the additional

expectations required in response to adapting to and preventing the impact of COVID-19.

- 2.4 Throughout the pandemic there has been minimal disruption to the delivery of services and functions across Governance and Partnerships. The vast majority of teams have been working from home and adapting systems and process accordingly to ensure performance has been maintained in response to change in activity and demand patterns over this period:
- Customer Services – service delivery has been maintained across housing benefits, council tax, business rates, customer contact centre, adult financial assessments, personal budgets, blue badge with remote access and on-line tools developed to enable service continuity. In addition to COVID-19 response: council tax hardship; self-isolation payment; business rates reliefs; personal payment plans; flexible extension of contact centre operating and adaptation of customer portal for COVID-19 related enquiries and new financial hardship response in partnership with Citizen's advice bureau.
  - IT - enabling the council to operate in an agile way, access systems remotely; ensuring continuity, availability, safety and security of all council systems, data and information; enabling new contact methods for COVID-19 whilst supporting the implementation and development of new systems and digital capabilities and robust information governance arrangements including the processing of Freedom of Information, Subject Access and Environmental Information Requests.
  - Legal and Democracy - Legal work has continued as the Courts adopted virtual hearings and we have extended the use of electronic case bundles for court proceeding. The electoral register has been fully updated, making use of enhanced online processes. The civic duties of the Mayor have continued, enabled through increase use of remote access and virtual events throughout the pandemic. Remote meetings of neighbourhood action teams, education appeal hearings and Youth Council activities have meant business continues.
  - Finance and Commissioning - Maintained strong contract management relationships with providers of commissioned services to ensure continued service delivery to vulnerable children, adults and families in addition to ensuring contracts being delivered are COVID-19 regulation compliant. The Council's finances have been managed well, ensuring healthy cash-flows available for the additional payments for residents and business in respect of COVID-19 grants. The Accounts for 2019/20 being prepared ahead of revised timescales – and received by Audit Committee with a clean bill of health from the External Auditors.
- 2.5 Key headlines in Governance and Partnerships functions as part of the council team response to Covid-19 include:

### **Keeping people safe and well**

- In line with the 'Stay at Home' requirements of the national restrictions, all democratic decision making meetings continue to be held using MS Teams, with public access available to view live meetings. The regulations that were introduced at the start of the pandemic to enable 'virtual' meetings to take place with elected members attending remotely up to 7 May 2021. During this time there have been 51 executive and non-executive public meetings of the Council, including a Full Council meeting. Over 1,000 hits have been made from remote public access to these meetings to date.
- Preparations have commenced in respect of the local by-elections and Humberside Police and Crime Commissioner Elections on 6 May 2021. The arrangements will be guided by the Electoral Commission in respect of COVID-19 requirements and risk assessments in consultation with Public Health advice.

### **Protecting the local economy**

- Access to the local land registry is now available digitally, enabling personal search companies to safely access the required information remotely.
- As part of the initial response to support suppliers with their cash flows we changed our payment processes to enable speedier payments, these continue to operate. Also, mechanisms are still in place for supplier relief support for those providers where delivery against contracts have been affected.
- Finance and Audit contribution to ensuring accurate, robust and timely payments to local businesses affected by the national restrictions whilst managing the impact on the council's cash flow of grants paid out compared to the government funding received.
- As the business rates billing year draws to a close, we continue to offer advice and support in respect of payment plans for businesses who may have been financially impacted by COVID-19.

### **Protecting vulnerable people**

- Ensuring that commissioned services are operating to the national restrictions and guidance and co-ordinating contact between providers and the Clinical Commissioning Group lead for the purposes of the vaccination implementation.
- The Contact Centre facility has been mobilised as part of the whole team approach to supporting the clinically extremely vulnerable.
- Continuation of the financial support mechanisms available for people facing economic hardship due to the pandemic. The Test and Trace Self Isolation grant has been extended to the end of March 2021. In addition, council tax hardship support and advice and guidance with council tax payment plans remain an integral part of the COVID-19 response.

### **Well led Council**

- The financial impact of COVID-19 continues to be closely monitored. Additional reporting requirements in respect of national funding have been maintained alongside responding to new allocations made in the context of the latest restrictions. This includes audit and assurance of our systems and processes being reported as required.

## **3. OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION**

- 3.1 Cabinet are asked to consider the report and note the update

## **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 continue to inform our plans for recovery and emergence from the current restrictions.

## **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 are regularly reported 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.

DIRECTOR OF GOVERNANCE AND PARTNERSHIPS

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