

Coronavirus (COVID-19): Recovery Plan

Scrutiny

Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Emergency Response

Date: January 2021

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Key Decision? **NO**

Local Ward Members All Wards



Overview and Scrutiny COMMITTEE

Combined report with key areas of focus

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 Coronavirus has had a significant impact on all council services throughout 2020 affecting how we deliver existing services to the district as well as the rapid introduction of new services to support residents and businesses.
- 1.2 This report seeks to update members on the activity and ongoing issues around recovery and provide a narrative regarding the progress and achievements against the [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): Recovery Plan](#) developed and issued in May 2020. Whilst this has been a significant body of work, the longer term impacts of the pandemic on both the authority and the district as a whole have yet to be fully quantified.
- 1.3 The recovery plan was split into four areas of focus; maintaining key services; helping those in need; supporting our businesses and keeping you informed. It outlined the things we needed the plan to achieve and how we planned to do so and who we would work with.
- 1.4 To support scrutiny of the plan, and due to its broad and overlapping nature, a series of key questions and areas of focus for this committee are detailed in section 6 so that the relevant scrutiny committee deals with relevant topics and prevents duplication.

2. Maintaining key services

- 2.1 Mobile and flexible working has now become business as usual for many of our staff. This transition was achieved relatively early on during the first lockdown where all staff who could work from home were equipped to do so within the first few weeks.
- 2.2 Many staff have continued to work from home and this in turn has helped us to become more resilient, as homeworking has allowed for better work life balance and flexibility to support childcare and any isolation or further lockdown periods. It has also enabled office based staff to continue to deliver services, with minimal impact on customers.
- 2.3 Where staff have not been able to work from home service delivery to the public has not been adversely affected with staff absence rates remaining very low. A recent flash audit on staff health and wellbeing showed substantial assurance regarding the support we have given to staff and that they have coped well with the rapid change in working practices since March. Good practice was noted in adapting policies to cope with absences and caring responsibilities, availability of support, regular communications, surveys and wellbeing activities.
- 2.4 Maintaining front line services has been a focus for Operational Services. The Joint Waste Service was able to continue to deliver a complete service across both Lichfield and Tamworth, throughout 2020. JWS was one of fewer than 10% of collection authorities able to continue the collection of refuse, recycling, garden waste and bulky waste, along with the delivery of new bins.

- 2.5 Similarly both the Streetscene and Grounds Maintenance teams were able to continue to deliver business as usual, maintaining the district to its usual high standards. A number of residents commented on a visible difference in the standard of presentation when travelling into Lichfield from neighbouring authorities. The teams also worked effectively with County Council colleagues in addressing the doubling of fly-tipping experienced in 2020.
- 2.6 The district's parks have continued to provide essential green open space for residents to the benefit of their physical and mental wellbeing during the Coronavirus period. Necessary changes have been made promptly to support Covid-safe park usage and to respond to evolving government guidance.
- 2.7 The Coronavirus restrictions necessitated either the complete closure of leisure centres or their restricted operation for most of 2020 and into 2021. Officers and members have worked with Freedom Leisure, the Council's leisure operating partner, to stabilise their operation and provide necessary support to ensure continued leisure provision for Lichfield residents. Alongside the management of the Freedom relationship through 2020, officers have continued the strategic development of the district's leisure estate, commencing the essential works to Friary Grange Leisure Centre and agreeing the site of the new Lichfield Leisure Centre subject to planning.
- 2.8 For our customers we have worked hard to ensure they feel comfortable in using the new ways of accessing our services and website. Dedicated webpages have been developed and continue to be updated with relevant information to support residents and businesses throughout the pandemic.
- 2.9 To keep staff and residents safe, our reception area has not been reopened to the general public yet. All key services have remained available through a variety of other channels. Where essential, home visits and business inspections are still carried out under Covid 19 Secure protocols.
- 2.10 We have rapidly introduced several new services including five (and counting) grant schemes in response to government announcements.
- 2.11 We have built upon our strong working relationships with the voluntary and community sector (VCS) to provide support to our most vulnerable residents.
- 2.12 We are working hard to plan for Covid 19 secure elections, carefully following government and Electoral Commission advice and encouraging the take up of postal votes as an alternative for polling in the elections currently scheduled for May 2021. It will be a challenging election year with multiple ballots; Police and Crime Commissioner (postponed from 2020); Staffordshire County Council Elections; a number of district and parish by elections and a neighbourhood referendum.
- 2.13 Covid 19 regulatory advice to businesses has been dealt with by Environmental Health, with pressure being brought to bear on traditional work streams. Some traditional work has been dropped or delayed but as this has restarted it has been a tough balance to maintain. Covid 19 enforcement work has also been undertaken, protecting the public and ensuring a more level playing field for all businesses affected by the pandemic.
- 2.14 The pace of change and constant updates to the advice and guidance brings new challenges for us around enforcement and community leadership. Provision of testing and vaccine facilities remains a priority as we continue to deliver our key services.

3. Helping those in need

- 3.1 Over the last nine months our housing team have worked exceptionally hard to ensure people are supported to prevent them from being made homeless. During the initial lockdown, we accommodated all rough sleepers and those in danger of rough sleeping who were willing to engage and also provided alternative accommodation for all the occupants of a women's refuge after it was forced to close due to staffing shortages as a result of coronavirus. The team worked closely with accommodation providers in both the social and private housing sectors, to ensure that we had sufficient capacity to accommodate anyone who needed assistance with accommodation. Between 22

April and 7 October 2020 we delivered 141 County supplied food parcels to temporary housed homeless people to support them.

- 3.2 Since the start of the first lockdown in March 2020 we have worked closely with the Voluntary and Community Sector to identify community support needs and how these can be met. As a result we pioneered a shopping service in partnership with the Co-Op. Between 30 March and 3 July 2020 we made 891 essential shopping deliveries to 220 vulnerable households. In July it was then staffed by volunteers from MHA Communities (Live at Home) and they have since made 178 shopping deliveries for 23 users. As other shopping options have developed there are now only 11 customers regularly using this service regularly but some of these are also benefitting from other MHA communities activities. They do have capacity to support more people should the need arise in the current lockdowns.
- 3.3 The LDC Coronavirus 'Just Giving' fund raised £25,000 and has to date distributed just over £15k to 19 different voluntary organisations so far to help them adapt their support offer, provide extra help and purchase PPE to ensure a Covid 19 secure environment.
- 3.4 We have also worked with the VCS to ensure that we share good practice and learning and participated in a Digital Engagement - Celebrating Successes and Learning event where organisations shared what they have been doing to adapt their service offer and make good use of digital options. This included top tips for use of social media, what organisations need to consider when working online with young people and vulnerable adults and how digital technology has been used to engage with older people.
- 3.5 We have paid 102 people the £500 grant payment because they have had to isolate under the test and trace rules and this has impacted on their income. We are limited as to the number of discretionary grants we can pay under this scheme but the statutory payments will continue to be paid to eligible applicants and the government will meet the full cost of these.
- 3.6 To date we issued 3,385 people with council tax hardship funding amounting to £475,001 and put a hold on Council Tax recovery during the lockdown and into summer 2020.
- 3.7 Number of new benefit claims received (Housing Benefit plus Council Tax Relief) increased from 155 in March 2020 to 521 in April 2020 and then 498 in May 2020 making Q1 of 2020/21 one of the highest in volume since Q1 of 2007/08.

4. Supporting our businesses

- 4.1 In June 2020 we were allocated £92,501 funding from Central Government to support the safe reopening of high streets and other commercial areas addressing the health and safety concerns of the public and businesses. The monies could not be used for capital spend or supporting salaries of existing staff so a plan was developed to employ an Information Officer for the district, initially on a six month temporary contract. This officer successfully liaised with local businesses and was a physical presence on the high street to reassure and advise the public. It proved so successful the role has been extended until March 2021. The information officer works directly with licensing and environmental health officers to ensure any queries were shared and responded to effectively.
- 4.2 Twelve pavement licenses were approved for hospitality businesses to accommodate seating outside and the fee waived. As we moved into the gradual loosening of lockdown we became focussed on supporting the businesses on our high streets and shopping areas to be safe for people to visit and slowly encouraging footfall across the district. We did this by providing floor stickers to enable safe queuing in shops and liaising with the county council, city council and three spires shopping centre to ensure the safety of shoppers was a priority. Ongoing support and signposting has been given to licensed premises and regular mailshots sent to the taxi trade. We also ran a successful communications campaign, digital and print to ensure government messages were being circulated

- 4.3 Over the last 6 months unemployment has dropped in Lichfield by 5%, against a Staffordshire wide decrease of 2% and 2% increase nationally. The number of people unemployed for England has increased from 2,188,335 to 2,248,430 Staffordshire has moved from 25,055 to 25,270 and Lichfield from 2,750 to 2,795 in the last month (December 2020).
- 4.4 To assist recovery, the online directory marketing campaigns aimed at a national and regional audience, undertaken by the Lichfield Place Board will help raise the profile of Lichfield District as a great place to visit and encourage visitors from a wider area to visit the district. Promotional videos of the city and district will also be used in the marketing activities.
- 4.5 The Visitor economy team are working with Lichfield Cathedral and Peter Walker to update the Lichfield Sculpture trail to include the new 3m high, bronze statue of St Chad, the sculpture trail will be promoted as an outdoor visitor attraction to attract new visitors to the district. New guided tours are being developed for visitors to enjoy in line with updated restrictions advice.
- 4.6 Free and reduced car parking was provided in Lichfield City Centre for key workers and to encourage a return to support local businesses. The Lichfield Group Travel Partnership will increase marketing activity to encourage groups and coaches to include Lichfield as a destination to visit as part of their tours programme. Monthly e-newsletters are being sent to consumers promoting Lichfield as a great place to visit once restrictions are eased, this e-newsletter provides businesses with an opportunity to be featured in it.
- 4.7 During the first national lockdown we issued £11,455,000 to 1193 businesses for the Small Business Grant Scheme (£10,000 per claim), £7,120,000 to 385 businesses in Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Scheme (£25,000 maximum) & £951,000 to 105 local businesses for the Discretionary Grant Scheme (£9,096.15) and again recovery was held off during the first 6 months to allow businesses more time to pay.
- 4.8 We have received 117 applications to the Additional Restrictions Grant, which is a discretionary grant for small businesses that have seen their income drop due to coronavirus. So far we have paid 38 businesses a total of £285,000.
- 4.9 To date 14 pubs have been identified as eligible for the Christmas Support Payment for wet- led pubs and we are now proactively mailing other businesses we have identified as potentially eligible to ensure they get the support they are entitled to.
- 4.10 The Visitor economy team developed an online gift guide on the popular Visit Lichfield website which provided businesses a platform to promote their online shops and sales in the run up to Christmas. In addition they provided a further opportunity for food and drink businesses, with a platform to promote take away/delivery options whilst Staffordshire was in tier 3.
- 4.11 We have also launched the Visit Lichfield Card, a new initiative designed to encourage both local people and visitors to use the shops, restaurants, accommodation and attractions In Lichfield District. The card is available free of charge, and qualifies card holders for unique discounts and offers at participating tourism businesses, shops and restaurants in Lichfield District. All offers are posted on the Visit Lichfield website – making it easy for cardholders to see what offers are available. Most importantly, it is also a chance for participating businesses to benefit from additional promotion.
- 4.12 We continue to support tourism businesses by providing weekly e-newsletters that include information on grants, funding, business support, training opportunities and numerous options to help businesses market and promote their business, through the Visit Lichfield website, social media platforms and various publications.

- 4.13 The Building Control team had 2235 applications in 2019/20 and an estimated 2308 for 20/21 (3.3% increase). The team have remained busy throughout the pandemic and it is likely to show an increase despite the impacts felt elsewhere in our economy. Planning have also seen an increase in applications of 2.5% for the same period (1522 against 1482 for 2019/20), though valid applications have decreased by 9% (1343).
- 4.14 Information on inspections and advice to business will be reported when available.

5. Keeping you informed

5.1 People are regularly updated and informed. Since March the Communications Team has delivered;

- 203 outgoing Twitter dedicated posts covid-19 resulting in 360,598 impressions
- 174 Facebook posts resulting in a reach of 324,690.
- 65 Covid 19 related press releases, covering service updates, housing, benefit claimants, emergency shopping, business support and grants and more.
- Website text and updates for the dedicated LDC website section

5.2 Social media output/impact has increased significantly since the start of lockdown (March 2020), highlighting both the increase in output from LDC and the demand from the local community for on-going information about local and national developments. This can be highlighted with reference to increased activity and engagement measure on Twitter.

	Pre- March 2020	Since March 2020
Average monthly tweets sent	52	97
Average impressions	54,000	130,000
Average profile visits	960	1580
Average mentions	235	359

5.3 In order to maintain a visible presence for Covid related information in and around open spaces and to provide direct information to residents the team has provided creative design for:

- Six different parks posters related Covid-secure rules at the park during the first lockdown
- Nine designs when park facilities opened up again.
- Building information signs for the District Council House
- Bin tags with resident support information
- Social media artwork for the #HereForYou campaign
- Floor plans and direction signs for the District Council House and depot.

5.4 Alongside the general Covid 19 communication activity, the Communications Team has also supported the development, launch and updates to the #LoveLocal and #LoveLocal this Christmas campaign including;

- Covid-secure checklist leaflet for all businesses
- Floor stickers, window vinyl and poster for shops
- Roadside and park banners
- Information leaflet to all residents
- Dedicated website section including a resource library and directory of Lichfield and Burntwood shops still operating during the second lockdown.
- Birmingham Road billboard advert
- Bus station post series
- 59 Facebook posts resulting in a reach of 69,104

- Eight boosted Facebook posts resulting in a reach of 66,800
- 43 tweets resulting in 68,407 impressions.
- Eight #LoveLocal press releases

5.5 Since May 2020 all of our council meetings have all been broadcast live and then available on our YouTube Channel. These have received over 5,039 views reaching far more people than ever before. Overall, attendance at meetings is higher via zoom supporting members to balance their role with other responsibilities.

5.6 Since March 2020 over 50 messages have been issued by the Chief Executive and leadership team, sometimes on a daily basis, to ensure all staff and members have the most up to date information to pass on to residents and stakeholders. The messages have covered the current infection rates, latest guidance to keep people informed and hold teams together during this busy period. It has been used to share good news stories and thanks received from customers for the key services and support we have given. Over the pandemic period, Managers Briefings – our internal staff cascade has continued via zoom with more than 40 managers in attendance to each session.

6. Areas of focus for this committee

6.1 The committee is asked to consider items in section 2, namely 2.4 to 2.7 and to note the remainder of the report, which will be covered by the relevant scrutiny committee(s).

Alternative Options	The Council could have presented the recovery plan in a variety of ways, this narrative style is in keeping with the original plan format and puts in context some of the metrics which otherwise would be very difficult to interpret.
Consultation	Wherever feasible, aspects of the plan have been consulted with local ward members, task groups, overview and scrutiny committees, the community, service users and key stakeholders.
Financial Implications	<p>The full financial impact of Covid 19 is very difficult to quantify – however the quantified financial impact (prior to the third national lockdown) is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2019/20 – an impact on the Council of £50,000 (reduced income and additional expenditure of £62,550 with Government Grant of (£12,550) used to offset the financial impact. • In 2020/21 – a projected impact on the Council of £2,639,800 (reduced income and additional expenditure is projected to total £4,615,960 with Government Grant of (£1,301,160) and the compensation from the sales, fees and charges loss scheme of (£675,000) are being used to offset the impact. • The Government will allow Council Tax and Business Rate Collection Fund deficits to be spread over three years rather than a single year. • The Government will also provide 75% support for Council Tax and Business Rate uncollectible losses in 2020/21 (projected reduced income for this Council included in the projection of £4,615,960 in 2020/21 is £930,900). However the guidance is currently being developed and it is therefore difficult at this stage, to quantify the level of compensation. • The Government will provide additional further support in 2021/22 related to grant of (£440,578), Local Council Tax Support Grant of (£126,451) and an

extension of the sales, fees and charges loss scheme for the first three months of 2021/22 estimated to be **(£124,000)**.

Contribution to the Delivery of the Strategic Plan Covid 19 response and recovery actions are now reflected in the councils Delivery plan to support the District Council's Strategic Plan.

Equality, Diversity and Human Rights Implications Contributions to the Council's equalities objectives have been captured and will be reported in our annual objective statement published at the end of January 2021. Where an impact on people with protected characteristics has been identified, this has been assessed and wherever possible, mitigated.

Crime & Safety Issues Our duty to prevent crime and disorder within the District (Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act, 1988) has been taken into account

Environmental Impact The move to online meetings and home working has greatly helped reduce carbon emissions of members and officers of the council.

GDPR/Privacy Impact Assessment All data used to support Covid 19 response has been provided or covered under relevant data agreements with Staffordshire County Council, NHS and other partners.

	Risk Description	How We Manage It	Severity of Risk (RYG)
A	That members are not aware of the full impacts of Covid-19 on the operation of the council	Keep members aware through regular briefings and ongoing overview of progress and reports to relevant committees	Green (tolerable) Likelihood (low) Impact Assessment (Med)
B	That the impacts of Covid-19 undermine the financial stability of the council	That regular assessments are undertaken of the financial impact and reflected in our MTFs. Lobby of relevant ministers for funding to offset.	Yellow (material) Likelihood (Med) Impact Assessment (Med)
C	That the impact of Covid -19 fundamentally undermines our ability to achieve our strategic objectives	That we monitor impact on our residents and the local economy, lobby and deploy any funding provided as quickly and effectively as possible.	Yellow (material) Likelihood (Med) Impact Assessment (Med)
D			
E			

Background documents

Relevant web links

<https://www.lichfielddc.gov.uk/downloads/file/1582/lcd-coronavirus-recovery-plan>