

Report for Overview and Scrutiny Committee
9th September 2020

Nottingham City Council's Response to Covid-19

Overview

This paper looks at the Council's response to Covid-19, including the commencement of key work streams to support citizens and staff and efforts to protect the local economy.

Immediate response

- Early measures to manage the spread of Covid-19 were shaped by national guidance and local plans for dealing with the early phases of a pandemic of influenza. Planning for this had been happening with partner agencies for a number of years.
- The City Council's Public Health team led on the response, both within the Council and across the wider health and social care system via the Local Resilience Forum (LRF).
- A Strategic Response Group (SRG) Coronavirus meeting was established, led by the Director of Public Health and former Assistant Chief Executive. This involved officers from all key services and a named lead representative for all Council departments.
- Although full lockdown was not announced until 23rd March, on 17th March the Council asked all colleagues to work from home where possible, commencing the next day.
- In advance of the announcement about working from home, the IT service began acquiring any equipment needed to enable this, and had secured additional connections to the Virtual Private Network (VPN), which provides remote access to Council networks.
- A daily situation report (SitRep) was begun to inform the Council's leadership about developments, plus local and national intelligence including case numbers and deaths. This is now presented weekly.
- A weekly management information report was prepared for the Corporate Leadership Team and senior Councillors looking at activities for the five Covid-19 work streams. This now also includes recovery efforts and the impact of lockdown easing.

Work with the Local Resilience Forum (LRF)

- The Government has directed much of their response through the LRF structures. Sub-groups established in response to Covid-19 include:
 - Tactical Co-ordinating Group (City Council co-chairs)
 - Health and Social Care Economy Tactical Co-ordinating Group
 - Communications Cell
 - Excess Deaths Cell (City Council chairs)
 - Humanitarian Assistance Group
 - Care Homes and Home Care Cell
 - Recovery Group (City Council chairs)
- The Council has worked with the LRF to procure and distribute PPE to care homes.

Five work streams

- Five work streams were established to lead on the Covid-19 response, the first three were requested of local authorities by the Government, the last two were commenced by the City Council to ensure an effective response and help the city to recover quickly.
- Keeping Social Care Going
 - Supported increased staffing for key frontline Council services and obtained PPE
 - Kept regular contact with care homes on cases, deaths and requests for help
 - Supported schools to open to vulnerable and key worker children, helped with the provision of laptops for children with no device or internet access and supported schools to create robust risk assessments for partial reopening in June.
- Mobilising Civil Society

- Provided support for medically and socially vulnerable people, including checking their wellbeing and helping obtain food and medicine if they had no other support
- Conducted Safe and Well checks and helped provide food parcels
- Established the Council's 'golden number' for all support queries.
- Supporting and Protecting the Economy
 - Included the distribution of different grants to businesses, totalling around £55m
 - Supported businesses to re-open, including signage in the city centre and quickly obtaining licences for an outdoor seating area in the Old Market Square to support food suppliers to cater safely for more people
 - Supported individuals seeking work to apply for roles within Council or private sector care homes as additional short term support
 - Worked closely with the D2N2 Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and the Growth Hub, and other partners such as Nottingham Business Improvement District (BID), Creative Quarter and Marketing Nottingham colleagues to ensure joined up front line support for any business.
- Financial resilience
 - Focussed on Council finances due to additional spend and lost income.
- Welfare of the Workforce and Corporate Resilience
 - Referred staff members with symptoms to HR for testing. Once testing was more widely available, this service was discontinued as it was no longer required
 - Managers interviewed every employee of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) heritage to determine if modifications to their duties could be made due to the increased risk of complications for BAME people who contract Covid-19
 - Monitored staff sickness absences to ensure key teams had sufficient cover
 - Established an internal email account for staff members' Coronavirus queries, along with a 'frequently asked questions' page on the intranet
 - Initiated a text messaging service to get key messages out to staff
 - Circulated 'Wellbeing Wednesday' emails each week to support colleagues' mental and physical health during lockdown – these continue to be sent.
- Other support
 - Set up a Coronavirus page on the Council's website to give information and advice to citizens and helpful tips, like keeping children entertained in lockdown
 - Undertook work with Framework and other partners to get rough sleepers into accommodation to limit the spread of the virus. This included housing rough sleepers in hotel rooms and providing them with health care and other support
 - Additionally, rough sleepers have been supported into 'move-on' and permanent accommodation. The Council is applying for Government funding to retain hotel provision until the replacement to the night shelter is available, providing temporary accommodation for rough sleepers to socially distance.

Learning from the five work streams

- All five work streams are now reporting into relevant Portfolio Holder Briefings.
- Lessons learned include:
 - Ensuring all teams adopt the same programme management approach – this will make it easier to coordinate and evaluate efforts – also ensuring officers are aware of any changes to approval processes
 - Giving the project manager access to decision-makers for a quick response
 - Scaling up flu pandemic plans so that they can be effectively used for an outbreak of this magnitude
 - Although IT responded well to supporting colleagues to work from home at short notice, the different equipment needed and the variety of systems people used made this more difficult – contingency planning by teams should include consideration of equipment required to enable staff to home-work at short notice

- A smaller scale, more voluntary register, would have mobilised redeployed staff more quickly.

The work of the Outbreak Cell and local outbreak control planning

- The cell works across Nottinghamshire, sharing resources and capacity.
- Membership includes officers from the Council's Public Health team, Public Health England, Infection Prevention Control, Environmental Health, Secondary Care and Communications. They also have lots of analysts at their disposal to look at data.
- The group continues to meet every weekday at lunchtime and looks at data provided nationally, including any geographical hotspots, plus local intelligence and details of any setting-based outbreaks.
- They determine whether an incident management team needs to be set up; there are four or five of these groups active at the moment (across the whole county).
- A weekly surveillance report is published on the Council's website each Thursday to ensure everyone is kept informed of any developments or issues.
- Every upper tier local authority (UTLA) published a local outbreak plan by the end of June. Nottingham's Plan, which was produced in close conjunction with Nottinghamshire County Council, is available in summary and in full on the City Council's website, and has been highlighted as good practice.
- The plans had to cover the following themes:
 1. Healthcare and education settings – including planning for local outbreaks
 2. High-risk workplaces, communities and locations – including identifying them
 3. Local testing deployment – ensuring readiness to deploy mobile testing units to high risk locations
 4. Contact tracing in complex settings – assessing local and regional capability
 5. Data integration – integrating national and local data and scenario planning
 6. Vulnerable people and diverse communities – supporting vulnerable local people to get help to self-isolate and ensuring services meet the needs of communities
 7. Local boards – establishing governance structures led by existing Covid-19 health protection boards and supported by existing 'gold' command forums and a new member-led board to communicate with the general public.
- A supporting Engagement and Communication Strategy sits alongside the Outbreak Control Plan with three core strands:
 - Prevent – helping to prevent an outbreak
 - Explain – explaining the plans in place, roles and responsibilities
 - Respond – making clear what people need to do.
- In addition to the overarching Outbreak Control Plan, setting-specific Incident Management Plans have been produced for key high-risk or complex settings (care homes, universities, factories etc.). These have been developed by task and finish groups combining Public Health, Environmental Health and setting-specific expertise.
- The Local Resilience Forum (LRF) recently ran an initial testing exercise of these plans to begin to identify if there are any gaps.
- There is also a Crisis Comms Plan attached to each of the Incident Management Plans.

Other groups

- Linked to the Outbreak Cell are other meetings which provide governance to assist this strategic group.
- Locally, Directors of Public Health are accountable for controlling local outbreaks, working with Public Health England and with the local Health Protection Board and the Engagement Board. Both of these Boards have been established in recent weeks and are meeting fortnightly.
- The Health Protection Board covers both Nottingham City and the County and is chaired jointly by the Directors of Public Health. The Engagement Board, chaired by Cllr Longford, started with a public session streamed on the Council's YouTube channel.

Service reinstatements

- A clear step-by-step process has been established to consider any service reinstatement. This includes information provided by Finance, HR, Health and Safety and IT, and consultation with trade unions. Council leadership then makes a decision.
- Decisions have been taken, adhering to Government guidance, on recommencing a range of Council services including museums, libraries, passenger transport services and leisure centres.

Next steps

- Local authorities will support the test and trace programme, aided by the Outbreak Control Plan led by local authority leaders and local Directors of Public Health. These will focus on identifying and containing potential outbreaks in settings such as workplaces and schools.
- The Government has indicated that local authorities will be given a greater role in directing and delivering contact tracing, to break the chain of transmission. Whilst further information is awaited, the local authority is working with others to put this service in place.
- Local authorities have been awarded a ring-fenced 'test and trace service support grant' to resource the delivery of the outbreak plans. Nottingham City's allocation is £3.1m.
- Central to Nottingham and Nottinghamshire's Plans is the Outbreak Cell, detailed above.
- Upper Tier Local Authorities now have powers to close individual premises, public outdoor places and prevent specific events, should it be necessary and proportionate to prevent the further spread of Covid-19. The appropriate local decision-making processes are being put in place to facilitate this should it be required (as a last resort).
- Planning is in place to fully reopen Council buildings, including Loxley House. The immediate proposal is for building occupation to be at 40% capacity to enable social distancing and for all desks to be clear so they can be cleaned more easily.
- A staff survey is underway to consider how employees feel about getting back into Council buildings safely. Staff have been asked whether they are happy to continue working from home beyond the end of September or if they would like to return as soon as it is safe to do so. Plans are being considered for part-time returns for teams.
- Nottingham City Council is planning a 'lessons learned' event to improve future planning in the event of a second wave or a new pandemic.
- The City Council is introducing a Health Inequalities Impact Assessment to assess the impact of new or changing policies and practices. A communications plan is being created to enable messages to reach BAME colleagues and communities, and a citywide ambition to reduce health inequalities is being worked on.
- As schools reopen in September, there is a risk of increased rates of infection. Colleagues in the Education department and Public Health will continue to work with schools to offer support and guidance, including in the event any staff members or students test positive.
- The Council is currently undertaking consultation and engagement with citizens on how the Covid-19 situation has affected them in their everyday life. The aim is to find out how citizens have been doing things differently during lockdown and what they think the Council's priorities should be as we enter the recovery phase. A report on the outcomes of the engagement will be written and shared with senior officers and councillors.
- In October 2020 the City Council will publish a Covid-19 supplement to the 2019-23 Council Plan. This will detail the new work the Council has undertaken to support the city's most vulnerable people, including support for those living with existing mental health issues and those most impacted by lockdown, anxiety, isolation and loss, and to help keep businesses running.

Ongoing impact

- The Office for National Statistics (ONS) released a report on 18th August 2020 confirming that the number of adults in Great Britain experiencing depression doubled during the Coronavirus pandemic. Those most at risk of experiencing depression are:
 - Those aged 16-39
 - Females
 - Disabled people
 - Those unable to afford an unexpected expense

This is likely to be an ongoing concern for health officials for the next few years.

- Unemployment in the UK, and in the city, has risen and is expected to increase further over the next few months as the furlough scheme reduces and eventually ends. Latest figures suggest that 29% of working age people in Nottingham City and 28.8% of those in Greater Nottingham are either unemployed or furloughed from work. This increases to 33.3% for the East Midlands and 34.7% for England.
- The closure of schools to all but vulnerable and key worker children is likely to have had a significant impact on children's wellbeing and educational attainment. Although work was being set, not all children were able or supported to do the work at home and their educational attainment will have suffered. Time away from peers and friends will have had an impact, and the pressure on families from being at home all of the time will have adversely affected some of the most vulnerable children and young people. Tutoring and catch-up sessions may help some children to catch-up, but some may struggle to do so.

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