

Report

To: South Lanarkshire Council
Date: 22 September 2021
Report by: Chief Executive

Subject: COVID-19 Recovery Arrangements and Service Re-introduction

1. Purpose of Report

1.1. The purpose of the report is to: -

- ◆ advise Council on the actions that have been taken to date in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and those being planned and implemented with regards to service re-introduction

2. Recommendations

2.1. The Council is asked to approve the following recommendation(s):-

- (1) that the contents of the report are noted.

3. Background

3.1. On 11 March 2020 the World Health Organisation declared Coronavirus (COVID-19) as a global pandemic and in response to this on 23 March 2020 the United Kingdom and Scottish Governments introduced a range of measures to reduce its spread.

3.2. Both the impact of the virus and the measures taken to minimise its spread had a significant impact on the work of the council. Plans had quickly to be developed and put in place to temporarily withdraw or reduce some services in order to:-

- allow physical distancing measures to be followed
- take account of higher than normal absence levels
- enable services to focus resources on vital frontline services
- assist the council with taking on an extensive range of new services to support residents and communities

4. Initial response and recovery

4.1. From April through to June 2020 regular consultation and engagement took place with senior council officers and partners through a Recovery Working Group put in place to develop and implement plans for organisational recovery whilst considering new service delivery solutions, improved use of I.T. and the introduction of agile working arrangements.

4.2. As part of its remit, the Recovery Working Group also considered supports that could be provided to aid Service Recovery, how it could assist the Health and Social Care Partnership with a service wide re-design and how the substantial contribution that was being made by Community and Voluntary Organisations could be recognised and retained.

- 4.3. The council's COVID-19 Recovery Plan that was subsequently developed was published on 16 June 2020.
- 4.4. Elected Members continued to be kept apprised of ongoing developments through a comprehensive series of briefings. A Recovery Board was also put in place for the initial recovery period whilst normal committees were not meeting and had responsibility for the ongoing monitoring and scrutiny of the council's Recovery Plan as it continued to develop and be delivered and highlighting the financial implications from this. The Board was stood down when committee meetings resumed on a virtual basis.
- 4.5. Over the remainder of 2020 and early 2021, local authority areas in Scotland continued to have restrictions imposed as part of the effort to tackle the pandemic, and in response to local rises in the number of cases or because of local clusters or outbreaks.
- 4.6. In February 2021, as part of its planning process the Scottish Government published the COVID-19 Strategic Framework - [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): Strategic Framework update - February 2021 - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-scotlands-strategic-framework-update-june-2021/) - which set out the plan to support the country move out of full lockdown through a series of timetabled steps. This took account of the new strains of the virus and the tools that would be used to continue to suppress them and support re-opening plans including:-
 - the vaccination programme
 - the Test and Protect programme
 - the use of the Levels system throughout the country
 - travel restrictions
 - support for people and businesses affected by lockdown
 - an extensive suite of sectoral guidance and activity guidance that indicates what can and cannot take place at each level.
- 4.7. In line with the rest of the country, restrictions in South Lanarkshire were reduced to Level 3 on 26 April 2021. These were then further reduced to level 2 on 17 May 2021.
- 4.8. A revised COVID-19 Strategic Framework update was issued by the Scottish Government in June 2021 - <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-scotlands-strategic-framework-update-june-2021/> which set out how and why the COVID-19 response strategy would change in light of new conditions and what a move beyond Level 0 would look like.
- 4.9. In early August 2021 Scotland moved out of the COVID-19 levels system to beyond Level 0 but with the key message remaining that everyone should continue to act carefully and remain cautious.
- 4.10. Throughout this period Resources continually assessed and amended their plans for a gradual, fuller re-introduction of services whilst taking account of the restrictions that remained in place as well as other factors, including competing council priorities for resources such as transport, facilities services and property assets. All plans were the subject of continuous monitoring and review to ensure that they reflected the current circumstances and met the needs of the council and its stakeholders.

5. Service Delivery

5.1. Despite the many challenges faced, council Services in partnership with South Lanarkshire Leisure and Culture, Community Planning Partners and Community Groups and individuals, continued to deliver essential services alongside a range of new services that were needed to support residents and communities. In order to do this, in many cases, innovative and new ways of working had to be developed and implemented. Some examples include:-

- introduction of remote/online teaching arrangements
- continuity of care services
- delivery of enhanced cleaning and sanitisation arrangements to support safe service delivery
- housing, sheltered housing and homelessness services adapted to meet increasing demands whilst utilising agile working methods
- continued delivery of essential repairs, maintenance and improvement programmes across the land, roads and property portfolio
- partnership initiatives to tackle Anti-Social Behaviour issues
- provision of a wide range of business supports grants to those impacted by restrictions
- introduction of a Community Wellbeing Line to connect with households with medical or food needs which by August 2020 had:
 - contacted over 11,000 shielding individuals
 - received 17,000 calls
 - assisted with over 5,000 food supports and over 3,000 pharmacy supports
- supporting the vaccination programme and delivering a new testing service
- provision of breakfasts, lunches and dinners through Community Hubs to groups and/or children of emergency workers
- Free School Meal support to 9500 pupils at a cost of £5.653m
- Winter payments:
 - Winter Hardship Payment (£100 per eligible child) to 9932 children
 - Winter Fuel Payment of £50 to 6444 households
 - TopUp Winter Payment of £75 to 9299 children
 - £100 payment to those in receipt of clothing grants (but not Free School Meals) to 2719 children
 - £60 winter payment to 561 residents in temporary accommodation at a total cost of £2.318m
- Low Income Pandemic Support Payments to 33946 people at a cost of £4.413m
- introduction of a PPE hub to take delivery of, store and distribute PPE supplies to council services and partners

5.2. Further details on the full range of Service performance are included in the Resource Plans and other Strategy/Plan updates reported to the Executive and Resource committees as well as through the Annual Performance Spotlights report presented on 17 August 2021 to the Performance and Review Scrutiny Forum.

5.3. To support the delivery of these services there was a need to in many cases adapt our working practices and service delivery models and develop revised Safe Systems of Work so that we could continue to work in ways that complied with the remaining restrictions and took cognisance of industry and government guidelines. One of the most significant areas of need identified to maintain service delivery was to enable as many council staff to work from home as possible.

5.4. When developing and implementing revised working arrangements regular consultation took place with the Trades Unions. Employees were also engaged with through both their regular communication arrangements as well as through 2 surveys carried out in June 2020 and in November/December 2020 which sought their views on working from home during the pandemic specifically around:-

- Previous experience of working from home
- Awareness of Council activity
- Support and equipment
- Access to IT systems
- Learning and development
- Health and Wellbeing
- Further contact

Overall, the response to both surveys highlighted that employees had a positive experience of the adapted working arrangements and of the supports put in place around these in terms of engagement, communication and equipment. Feedback provided was used to further develop/amend our working arrangements and any other supports needed.

5.5. During this time the IT service also quickly expanded the council's existing remote working capabilities and delivered new solutions including:-

- sourcing and deployment of Windows 10 laptops to replace office desktop PCs
- expansion of the central IT infrastructure to provide additional capacity and resilience for remote working
- remote PC takeover for staff without laptops to access desktop PCs from personal devices at home
- accelerated rollout of Microsoft Teams to enable videoconferencing and collaboration both internally and externally
- implementation of Outlook Web Access secure remote access to Office 365 (including email/Teams) from personal devices
- roll out of softphones to extend office telephony to laptops
- set up of virtual contact centres for remote users
- blended then virtual committee meetings and support of elected members
- helpdesk support of home-working staff in new technologies and agile working in general, provision of training materials and guidance
- refresh of mobile phones

5.5 These new capabilities continue to be evaluated by service managers to help further inform and develop new working arrangements. Further details of this are set out in section 10 below.

6. Governance

6.1. As a result of the pandemic and the relevant public health advice, Council offices were closed to the public and elected members and officers were unable to attend meetings in person within Council offices. The Chief Executive was initially given delegated authority to take decisions in consultation with political group leaders with agendas, reports and minutes published to the Council's website.

- 6.2. Following successful trials and training for elected members, from June 2020 committee and council meetings were held virtually using Microsoft Teams. Members of the public remained unable to attend or view committee meetings etc as the council offices remained closed to the public. However, from January 2021, meetings that would normally have been open to the public were recorded and uploaded to a Council Committees YouTube page which had been established for this purpose. The recordings are subtitled in compliance with equalities legislation. The public are directed to the You-Tube page via a link on the Council's website.
- 6.3. The Council subsequently sourced software, trained staff and carried out successful trials which allowed the Council to begin to live stream meetings of its Standing Committees from Wednesday 28 April 2021 directly to the South Lanarkshire Council Committees You-Tube page.
- 6.4. Arrangements were made to facilitate, as required by law, remote attendance by applicants at Regulatory meetings or hearings.
- 6.5. Following members return from this summer's recess plans are being progressed so that meetings can be conducted with some elected members being in physical attendance with others participating remotely via MS Teams.
- 6.6. In general, Full Council and Committee meetings are conducted in either the Council Chambers or Committee Room 1. The current audio visual (AV) hardware in these rooms requires to be replaced and a total upgrade of the system is now being taken forward which is also more flexible in Committee Room 1 and which would enable different layouts to be accommodated.

7. Service Re-introduction

7.1 Generally

- 7.1.1 On 15 July 2021 a Service Re-Introduction toolkit - http://intranet.southlanarkshire.gov.uk/downloads/file/7727/covid-19_recovery_-_service_reintroduction_toolkit_july_2021 was issued to managers and employees to help to continue to support the workforce as part of the council's COVID-19 recovery process.
- 7.1.2 This toolkit noted that when re-introducing services account will continue to be taken of any ongoing restrictions as well as guidance published by any industry or national representative body.

Services are being re-introduced in ways which consider service user priorities, and which take account of the advances in technology that have been made with the aim of improving:-

- Accessibility for customers/service users
- Service delivery
- Efficiency and effectiveness of services
- Employee health and wellbeing
- Energy efficiency and reducing carbon outputs

7.1.3 This includes the permanent implementation of some revised service and working arrangements which were put in place to deliver services over the course of the past 18 months, and which have been identified as being efficient and effective and suitable for permanent implementation. Some examples of these include:-

- Virtual meetings – cutting down on unproductive travel time, reducing travel costs and reducing the council's carbon footprint
- Agile working arrangements – including the ability to work from home, alternative council or partner facilities etc
- Virtual Customer Contact/Call Handling
- Increased partnership working with community groups

7.1.4 The current status of service delivery across all Resources is attached as Appendix 1. This also includes details of where services continue to be disrupted or stood down.

7.1.5 Resource and Service Management Teams will continue to review service delivery options with a view to the full re-introduction of services as early as possible. It should be noted that this will continue to be affected by other matters including:-

- any rise in COVID-19 infection levels, leading to increased absence or self-isolation across the workforce or affecting service users and thereby preventing service delivery
- general seasonal absence trends over autumn/winter
- workforce recruitment to fill vacancies
- ongoing restrictions e.g., vehicle usage
- supporting wider community vaccination and testing programmes
- potential industrial action
- availability of materials and supplies and price increases

all of which may require some services to be temporarily suspended or scaled back in order to concentrate resources on priority work areas.

7.1.7 By re-introducing services through new, more agile ways of working which embrace the new technology available opportunities will be provided for increased efficiency across our portfolio of office accommodation as well as on employee travel, fleet and telephony.

7.2. Office Accommodation

7.2.1 When continuing with the re-introduction of services cognisance will be taken of any ongoing restrictions as well as guidance published by any industry or national representative bodies. It will be done in a way which reflects customer priorities and take account of advances in technology and service delivery methods so that Services are re-introduced with the aim of improving:-

- access arrangements for customers
- service delivery
- the efficiency and effectiveness of services

7.2.2 It is envisaged that in many cases future working models will include an element of agile working which will be based upon a blend of:-

- working from the section base
- working from other council accommodation
- home working

This blended approach will fully reflect the service/customer needs but will also consider individual employee circumstances.

7.2.3 As restrictions have eased there is now a potential for increasing employee numbers to return to office accommodation although the default remains that those can continue to work from home should do so. The numbers of employees able to attend at any time is dependent upon the accommodation and also the mitigation measures that can be put in place to reduce the risk of virus transmission.

7.2.4 Service Managers have developed Safe Systems of Work (SSOW) for their respective sections to ensure a safe return to the office accommodation and these are forming part of their communication with the employees in their teams.

7.2.5 Service Managers are currently implementing plans for their teams return to the office which initially will be through the use of a rota system. This will continue to be the subject of review and further development as restrictions ease.

7.2.6 An outcome of the introduction of more agile ways of working will be a reduction in the floorspace needed across our portfolio. This will allow for either the disposal of surplus property or alternatively freeing up space that can be offered to other partner organisations with a view to improving partnership working/service delivery arrangements and also reduce the running costs to the council through partner contributions.

7.2.7 The initial plan being taken forward in this regard is the closure of Montrose House, Hamilton with employees primarily being relocated to Headquarters commencing towards the end of 2021 and completing in the early part of 2022 which will reduce the running costs of the property estate and free up this property for disposal.

7.2.8 Advance discussions are also underway with a partner organisation with an interest in utilising the vacant space in Brandongate, Hamilton.

7.3. Fleet

7.3.1 As noted earlier the introduction of more agile service delivery arrangements will lead to a reduction in travel requirements e.g. the continued use of virtual platforms for meetings will reduce travel costs, the carbon footprint and also have a reduced requirement for some of the fleet.

7.3.2 Fleet Services will engage through service delivery teams to review their existing fleet arrangements and consider how these can be altered to meet the new service delivery models in whilst transitioning the full fleet to lower carbon options. This review will primarily focus on those journeys, largely for meeting purposes, that are no longer required as it should be noted that the majority of the fleet is utilised for front line service delivery.

7.4. Telephony

- 7.4.1 As part of the IT enhancements over the course of the past 18 months to support service delivery and revised service delivery models many employees now have multiple ways to make contact and communicating with other employees, partners and service users including the use of pc's/laptops, mobile telephones, and fixed line telephones.
- 7.4.2 There is now an opportunity to rationalise this equipment further and potentially reduce the associated costs by reducing the number of fixed telephone lines and re-considering the need for mobile telephones including the need for smartphones rather than simpler models with call/text functionality only.
- 7.4.3 The IT Service are currently engaging with Service Managers to determine the specific needs of their respective sections with a view to reducing the council's telephony requirements and associated costs going forward.

8. **Next Steps**

- 8.1. Through some public messaging and reporting there is a perception held by a large proportion of the general public that society and the general economy has now returned to normal. However this is not the case for many council services some of which are seeing significant increases in demand e.g. Social Care/Home Care or where service delivery is being impacted by external factors such as a shortage of materials or supplies.
- 8.2. In many cases services are being re-introduced using new delivery models/arrangements, or using innovation, which will help the council meet current and future service demands in efficient and effective ways, Depending, on the scale of the change it can take time to put these new arrangements in place and support them through until they are fully embedded.
- 8.3. All of this is leading in some cases to unrealistic expectations being placed on frontline services and employees and which in turn is leading to frustrations being taken out on them, increasingly through the form of direct abuse.
- 8.4. As noted in section 6 above, Resources will continue to re-introduce services with the aim of a full re-introduction as early as possible. Again, as noted, progress in this regard may be affected by other matters such as those highlighted i.e.
- any rise in COVID-19 infection levels, leading to increased absence or self-isolation across the workforce or affecting service users and thereby preventing service delivery
 - general seasonal absence trends over autumn/winter
 - workforce recruitment to fill vacancies
 - ongoing restrictions e.g. vehicle usage
 - supporting wider community vaccination and testing programmes
 - potential industrial action
 - availability of materials and supplies and price increases

all of which may require some services to be temporarily suspended or scaled back in order to concentrate resources on priority work areas.

- 8.5. Members will continue to be notified of service status through Resource and Service specific updates as attached at appendix 1.

- 8.6. Where services require to be temporarily suspended or scaled back so that resources can be concentrated on priority work areas, Members will be notified of this through the series of Elected Member briefings and any public messaging needed will be co-ordinated through the council's PR section

9. Communication

- 9.1. Council services have engaged productively and proactively with Trades Unions and employees on the changes that were needed to service delivery through the response to the pandemic to ensure the delivery of priority services and will continue to do so through service re-introduction as restrictions ease.

10. General/Other Implications for the council

- 10.1. This is a dynamic situation that council officers will continue to monitor.

11. Employee Implications

- 11.1. The council's workforce will continue to be affected by changing restrictions and potential disruption. In response to this Personnel Services will continue to monitor this situation in partnership with the Trades Unions and develop and issue communications to service managers and employees as appropriate.

- 11.2. As the impact of the pandemic on the workforce continues to unfold, employee health and wellbeing is being supported through a number of initiatives. These include both access to the council's usual range of employee assistance tools, (counselling, physiotherapy, CBT etc.) and also through activities which have been specifically tailored through the course of the pandemic. These include a range of online activities to support resilience and mental health and wellbeing including mindfulness sessions.

- 11.3. Through the employee surveys that have been undertaken, as well as through feedback from service managers and Trades Unions, agile working was identified as challenge for many. In response, as well as providing access to the supports noted above, additional equipment e.g. chairs, keyboards, monitors were also made available where there was an identified need.

- 11.4. There is a recognition that the workforce has been working in a particularly challenging environment over the past 18 months to ensure the continued delivery of priority services and on delivering the additional services that have been needed to support our residents and communities. This will remain challenging as we continue to re-introduce services, in some cases in new ways, whilst also dealing with other matters that will continue to arise as outlined in 8.4 and in dealing with increasing customer expectations/demands. The range of supports available will continue to be reviewed and developed to help support the resilience of the workforce. Further employee wellbeing surveys will also be undertaken twice yearly to inform the range of supports in place

12. Financial Implications

- 12.1. The financial impact will be reviewed as part of the normal budget monitoring process. Details of the financial impact of COVID are included in the regular Revenue Budget Monitoring Reports to Committee.

13. Climate Change, Sustainability and Environmental Implications

13.1. Re-introducing service in more agile/flexible ways will be beneficial in helping to meet the council's targets in respect of climate change, sustainability and the environment.

14. Other Implications

14.1. There are no other implications in terms of risk.

15. Equality Impact Assessment and Consultation Arrangements

15.1. There was no requirement to carry out an Equality Impact Assessment or formal consultation process.

Cleland Sneddon
Chief Executive

8 September 2021

Link(s) to Council Values/Ambitions/Objectives

◆ Accountable, effective, efficient and transparent

Previous References

◆ None

List of Background Papers

- ◆ South Lanarkshire Council Recovery Plan, June 2020
- ◆ South Lanarkshire Council Service Re-Introduction Toolkit, July 2021

Contact for Further Information

If you would like to inspect the background papers or want further information, please contact: -

Daniel Lowe, Executive Director (Housing and Technical Resources)

Ext: 4405 (Tel: 01698 454405)

E-mail: daniel.lowe@southlanarkshire.gov.uk