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**REPORT TO: MORAY COUNCIL ON 10 MARCH 2021**

**SUBJECT: COVID RELATED PRESSURES AND SERVICE PRIORITISATION**

**BY: CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

**1. REASON FOR REPORT**

- 1.1 To provide the Council with an assessment of the impacts of the latest lockdown as a consequence of the national pandemic, including additional Covid-related provisions that are being delivered by Council services, and the affect this is having on staff capacity and service delivery.

**2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

**2.1 The Council is invited to:**

- i) consider and note the additional COVID related services being delivered; pressures that this puts on service delivery as a consequence; and the effect on the services in a specific number of areas;**
- ii) acknowledge the expectation of a scaled down delivery of the non-statutory services outlined in Section 4 of this report; and**
- iii) agree to review the situation in June 2021.**

**3. BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 The First Minister's announcement on 19 December 2020 moved Moray from tier 1 to tier 4 restrictions from 26 December 2020. Tier 4 restrictions are likely to last until at least 29 April according to the latest announcement on 23 February 2021. The Council has had to review and reset a range of Council activities and services in accordance with updated guidance and directions. This report sets out the pressures as a consequence.
- 3.2 Having dealt with the immediate response to Covid-19 and the first government led lockdown, consideration was then given to how the Council could maintain the resilience of critical services, reintroduce other services (where appropriate or nationally directed) and plan for longer term recovery and renewal. Reports detailing work in planning for longer term recovery were submitted to Recovery and Renewal Working Group (RRWG) on 16

September and 17 November 2020 and to a Special Meeting of Moray Council on 18 February 2021.

- 3.3 This plan, approved by the Emergency Cabinet on 24 June 2020, is formally known as the Recovery and Renewal Strategic Framework (RRSF) and governed initially by the Renewal and Recovery Working Work, now subsumed into Group Leaders. This was a staged programme set out in an Appendix to the RRSF (**Appendix 1**).
- 3.4 In parallel with planning for recovery and renewal, the Council had commenced revitalising the Improvement and Modernisation Programme and agreed a Best Value Action Plan in October and November 2020 respectively.
- 3.5 As Members will recall the immediate response to Covid-9 starting in March 2020 had gone on for many weeks. This followed guidance, support and direction issued at national UK Government, Scottish Government and sectoral level. Reports detailing work done in response were submitted to the Emergency Cabinet on 21 May, 3 June, 17 June, 1 July and 12 August 2020.
- 3.6 As a consequence of being thrown back into lockdown from January 2021, the Council moved into an enhanced response phase for many activities and services and this, combined with ongoing service delivery, renewal and recovery, improvement and transformation agendas, has created significant pressures on an already stretched workforce.

### **ENHANCED COVID RESPONSE SERVICE PROVISION**

#### **Community Asymptomatic Testing**

- 3.7 Asymptomatic testing is being provided to staff in schools and ELC settings and to senior pupils which has required administrative and distribution arrangements to be put in place. Mention is also made on the work to establish and co-ordinate the running of two mobile testing units rotating across Moray for general community testing.

#### **Vaccination Programme**

- 3.8 In support of the vaccination programme, all 32 Councils were requested to identify a single point of contact. Accordingly, the Head of Environmental and Commercial Services has assumed this role which involves regular liaison group meetings locally with NHS and third sector representatives and undertaking a range of tasks including:-

- Arranging additional “Dial A Bus” journeys available for those who cannot access public transport easily to vaccination centres.
- Negotiating a commercial bus service to the mass vaccination centre in Elgin.
- Providing additional gritting where requested.
- ICT support for the vaccination centre at Edgar Road, Elgin.

#### **Return to Education**

- 3.8 In January 2021 during a second phase of lockdown, schools have been open to children of keyworkers and vulnerable children while also providing remote

learning for all pupils. This service will be phased out as normal school attendance resumes. This has required additional planning to enable in person and remote learning, including a further roll out of digital devices. Risk assessments have been reviewed at each stage of change in the provision of and guidance for in-school learning and appropriate measures put in place. Planning for phased recovery starting week beginning 22 February has been completed seeing nursery, P1-3 and small numbers of senior phase pupils returning to settings and schools. All staff and senior phase pupils have been offered the opportunity to opt-in to lateral flow testing and this programme is now underway. The second phase involves nursery partner providers.

### **Humanitarian Assistance**

- 3.9 The Council's contact centre is undertaking the role of Community Assistance Hub and is handling calls to/from those required to self-isolate and who are shielding, offering support as required. Staff have been deployed from the libraries service to add capacity to this service.

### **Business Support Grants**

- 3.10 Alongside other agencies the Council continues to administer and distribute business support grants with over £27 million distributed to date. Significant additional grant funding has been allocated for Local Government distribution since the January 2021 lockdown began.

### **Other**

- 3.11 Free school meals payments continue to be made to those who are eligible on financial grounds while pupils are not able to attend schools.
- 3.12 Covid related financial benefits are administered by the Money Advice Team, including the flexible food fund and covid hardship payments. An additional temporary resource has been added to the team recently to add capacity given the volume of cases.
- 3.13 The Licensing team have been providing advice and assistance to licensed premises to help them continue to operate where possible. They are also administering and distributing Scottish Government grant assistance for licenced taxi and private hire drivers.

### **LIVING WITH COVID**

- 3.14 Services across the Council have had to adapt to operating in a covid safe environment, which can be more resource intensive, take more time and in some cases be less effective.

### **Enforcement of Compliance and Surveillance**

- 3.15 Capacity has been taken up with responding to requests for advice and guidance on compliance and surveillance of intelligence received from NHS Grampian Public Health; Public Health Scotland and other sources of intelligence received by the Council on an ongoing basis. Police Scotland have also been taking an enhanced role in terms of compliance.

### **Education/Educational Support**

- 3.16 To enable the safe return of schools there will be ongoing adjustments such as enhanced cleaning, school transport and school meals provision. Use of buildings has been adapted and social distancing and hygiene measures are

in place as required. Covid measures impact on time available and delivery methods for education.

- 3.17 P1-3 have returned following successful planning and primary schools are preparing to welcome older pupils into school from 15 March. As noted above the covid-19 working environment will continue to present constraints on the delivery of some aspects of the curriculum. However, teaching staff will be assessing progress of learners on their return and adapting and planning accordingly for the rest of the school year.
- 3.18 In secondary schools, planning is underway for a more extended period of delivery of both remote and in person learning as the phased return for secondary pupils will take longer with 5 April currently the earliest anticipated date of return. Physical distancing between pupils as well as staff is currently to be in place in secondary schools and increased numbers will present challenges in respect of school buildings, transport, class sizes and therefore staffing should that be an ongoing requirement.
- 3.19 There are immediate pressures in ensuring that there is robust evidence to support assessments for SQA qualifications by the required date of 25 June. Our secondary teams are well prepared through ongoing assessment and monitoring of learning that has been pursued throughout lockdown and it is planned to supplement this over the coming weeks. Pupil wellbeing will also be a factor when pupils return to school, and there is likely to be an increase in demand for support from central Additional Support Needs (ASN)/Inclusion Teams, youth work etc.

#### **Welfare and Wellbeing**

- 3.20 Community support staff continue to work with communities to provide support to those who need it during the pandemic and to work on developing community resilience. There are significantly increased requests to the Council's Money Advice team and it is anticipated that this high level of demand will continue beyond the period of lockdown as people continue to face the financial impacts of reduced employment.

#### **Temporary Changes to HR Policies and Procedures**

- 3.21 The covid pandemic has been an evolving situation and there has been an ongoing requirement to provide guidance and procedures on employment related matters, including considerable pressure on health and safety and risk assessments. Management of employee relations has been a key feature for the HR service with weekly meetings held with trade union representatives.

#### **ICT**

- 3.22 The ICT service has issued devices across the corporate and education digital estate and has experienced a significant increase in requests for support. There will be an ongoing requirement to develop the Council's ICT infrastructure to effectively manage this new digital environment and respond the need for services to be connected to each other and service users remotely.

## 4 IMPACT ON NON-STATUTORY SERVICE DELIVERY

4.1 Impacts and adjustments on planned work arising from the additional workload and adaptations required to operate in a covid environment are illustrated in the examples below:

### Corporate and Strategic Planning

- Development of Local Outcomes Improvement Plan (LOIP) delivery plans – services and partners have struggled to release resources which has extended the timescales for implementation planning
- Corporate plan review and development – would be due around March 2021 as part of annual report. More limited work will be possible and timing delayed.
- Poverty – it has not been possible to develop this policy area during the pandemic. This is a possible area for investment for consideration by the Council.
- Learning Estate Strategy – lockdown has impacted on planned timescales for options appraisal work. This is a priority area that resources will be focussed on to meet an adjusted timeframe.
- Schools Digital Strategy – delayed as staff leading this area are deployed to response and recovery of schools.
- Climate Change Strategy Action Plan – completion and implementation delayed in some areas
- Community Safety Strategy Review – on hold
- Economic Recovery Plan - some aspects delayed

### Policy

- Homeworking and Flexible Working – policy and guidance requires development and will now be scheduled over coming 6 months

### Improvement and Transformation

- Additional Support Needs review – Priority area but demands on staff are limiting progress. Support has been secured from Education Scotland and plans are being modified to keep as closely as possible to planned timescales. Additional resources are also under consideration to come forward to the Council.
- School Business Support review – lead officer has been required to support covid response and recovery. Project delayed but revised plan in place and agreed by Transforming Learning Board.
- Leisure Services business plan – lockdown impacts on this service area so that it is not possible to progress some aspects until services can resume. Work will continue where possible in the meantime.
- Leadership development – work is continuing at reduced pace, with reduced options and restricted capacity from managers to participate
- Best Value Audit Review Action plan – progress is being made but more slowly than anticipated in a number of areas
- PAMA - delay in progressing while service demand relative to covid adjustments continues to evolve
- Asset Management Change Management Plan - progress delayed

### Performance

- Performance Management Framework – performance team have been providing various data and reported for covid and as a result reviewing the format of performance data has been delayed

### Other

- Customer services change management – review of access point service delivery has been delayed
- Finalising management structures and recruitment in number of services – management capacity was absorbed during response and recovery with progress being made pre-lockdown 2 and stalling again. This area is moving forward at a slower pace than originally planned.
- Employee Engagement – this has been re-prioritised and is being re-activated with a focus on mental health but there will be reduced options for delivery of some aspects
- Workforce data analysis to inform planning – on hold at present and will resume when capacity allows
- Training – priority is being given to maintaining areas such as social work training and to moving material online where possible, however, other aspects will be slowed as a result e.g. project management
- Web development – ICT resources have been and continue to be focussed on response with reduced capacity in this area
- Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Scotland) Act (RIPSA) – annual reporting to Council delayed

## **5 IMPACT ON SERVICE DELIVERY GENERALLY**

5.1 A number of service functions have been impacted by the following Covid-related factors:

- Restrictions in relation to how normal business is conducted – such as limitations on travel, physical distancing, and new regulations on the operation of certain sectors e.g. construction sites; non-emergency access within Council housing; economic recovery plan actions involving non-essential retail
- Restrictions on productivity caused by reliance on virtual working methods
- Ability of service users to engage with services remotely and consequential impact of virtual methods on effectiveness of communications and engagement activity, for example with Council tenants
- The movement of staff to new Covid related activities – such as over 20 staff deployed to the new Covid Emergency Business Support & Grants function leaving elements of normal business which are not urgent on hold to create capacity.

5.2 These relate to operational matters which are being managed as permitted by the covid lockdown rules, maintaining adherence to legal requirements, and keeping under regular review. Adjustments will be made as the restrictions and impacts of the pandemic lessen so that services can return to normal or near normal as soon as possible. The areas currently under pressure include:-

- Non-critical adaptation of houses for people with a disability – occupational health capacity issues
- Food hygiene and health and safety work – Environmental Health Team have no capacity
- Economic Development work (short term general impact for discretionary and additional grants)

## **6 OTHER IMPACTS**

6.1 There may be possible distortion of performance data as a consequence of the pressures on service delivery as follows:

- Statutory Performance Indicators that may be adversely affected given the restrictions covid has placed on service delivery.
- Ability to maintain levels of performance which will be reflected in the next round of performance reports.
- Potential to affect the delivery of major programmes such as the Improvement and Modernisation Programme and Best Value Action Plan.
- Progress on service plan actions
- To date, there has been no material increase in the number of complaints due to reductions in service capacity to deliver business as usual functions.

## **7 ADDITIONAL PRESSURES ON SERVICES**

7.1 As members are also aware, winter gritting has been an additional challenge during this period, and efforts are being made to supplement gritting to ensure that the impact on the NHS is reduced as much as possible.

## **8 SUMMARY OF IMPLICATIONS**

### **(a) Corporate Plan and 10 Year Plan (Local Outcomes Improvement Plan (LOIP))**

The implications are addressed in section 4 of this report.

### **(b) Policy and Legal**

The Council has to operate within the nationally imposed legal restrictions and this has impacted on service delivery across a range of functions.

### **(c) Financial Implications**

Throughout the response to the pandemic and the lockdown etc, financial implications have been the subject of separate reports to Members, either in the form of freestanding reports such as on 17 June and 1 July 2020 or as part of the regular monitoring reports to Members on financial planning.

### **(d) Risk Implications**

The 4 harms of Covid are the direct health impact of the virus, other health impacts, societal impacts, and economic impacts. All pose a significant risk to the Council's overarching strategic objectives; to the delivery of core services; and to the health and wellbeing of our staff and the wider public.

Some of the work that has been delayed or put on hold may have been targeted at managing risks (e.g. learning estate, workforce actions) and it is possible that some of these risks could escalate or new risks could arise as a result of slower progress. Where possible, priority is being given to continuing to progress actions in these areas, as noted above, in order to mitigate the risks.

Finally, there are implications for budget management, both in terms of additional pressures and also lost income making it particularly difficult to predict service budget out-turns. It is not possible for all eventualities to be predicted or mitigated fully.

**(e) Staffing Implications**

The resource implications set out in this report largely relate to staff capacity. However, it should be noted that the national pandemic has impacted on the ability to generate income across a range of areas and this is reflected in more detail in the revenue budget monitoring report which is being considered separately by the Committee. Due to the number of Primary 3/4 or other combinations of composite classes which have P3 in them, additional staffing will be required in order to support in school and remote learning. In addition some schools will require to secure additional staffing to ensure that the hub provision is fully staffed whilst there is a requirement to offer this service.

**(f) Property**

There are no direct implications in this report.

**(g) Equalities/Socio Economic Impact**

Council services have a critical role in supporting businesses and the wider community through the pandemic and this in turn has a positive impact on communities and poverty across Moray. Reduced capacity to deliver a small number of services will not have a differential impact on rural communities or on those with protected characteristics.

**(h) Consultations**

This report has been prepared in consultation with CMT and Heads of Service.

**9 CONCLUSION**

**9.1 The trajectory of the pandemic requires multiple contingencies to be considered and regularly reviewed.**

**9.2 Council services will continue to adopt a flexible and responsive approach and attempt to mitigate risk as much as possible whilst maintaining a reasoned expectation of what can be delivered in the current circumstances as they continue to develop.**

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Background Papers:  
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