

# Overview and Scrutiny Management Board

24<sup>th</sup> April 2020



**Report of:** Tim Borrett, Director: Policy, Strategy and Partnerships  
(COVID-19 Information and Communications Cell Director)

**Title:** Response to coronavirus / COVID-19 pandemic

**Ward:** Citywide

**Officer Presenting Report:** Tim Borrett

## **Recommendation:**

That Members note the council's response to the coronavirus / COVID-19 pandemic and its role within wider partnership response systems.

That Members consider the role of Scrutiny in contributing to the longer term approach to 'recovery'.



## 1. The significant issues in the report are:

- 1) In responding to the pandemic, the council is working to protect life, minimise and mitigate negative impacts on Bristol and its people, and support the long term vision for Bristol to be a city that is fairer, healthier, safer and includes everyone in its success.
- 2) To do this it is following all national guidance as well as making local decisions on services, and is working in concert with a wide range of local, regional and national partners within recognised and official structures, including the Healthier Together partnership and the Avon and Somerset Local Resilience Forum.
- 3) Whilst managing the response to the pandemic remains an immediate priority, there is a need to balance this with the ‘recovery’ process to enable the city, its council and its citizens to thrive in a post-COVID-19 world.
- 4) The council faces potentially high costs in managing the impact of COVID-19, combined with a significant loss of income from normal revenue streams, and is calling for the true costs of the pandemic to be underwritten by HM Government.
- 5) There are many threats posed by the pandemic. The current areas of high risk and high levels of focus in the response include (but are not limited to):
  - The national shortage of Personal Protective Equipment for all appropriate settings
  - The impact on care homes and the wider adult social care sector
  - The potential for unseen and underreported instances of domestic violence and for other forms of abuse, including the abuse of children and vulnerable adults (where normal referral mechanisms are limited by the restrictions imposed by Government, such as school closures.)

## 2. Background

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK has presented an unprecedented challenge requiring an immediate and fast-paced response from the city council and its partners in tackling the one of the most significant challenges faced by society in living memory.

This paper seeks to precis this response and highlight some of the main activities and issues. For the sake of brevity and in recognition that Members receive regular detailed communications, this paper does not reflect the entire breadth of the response or cover every issue raised by the pandemic. In particular Members should note that an update on the council’s response with regards workforce implications is to be presented to HR Committee on 30 April and is not duplicated here.

## 3. Response structure

As COVID-19 is an international emergency touching all facets of life, the response structures in place are wide-reaching and complex. For the purposes of this paper we refer to structures at a regional and local level, which comprise both formal and informal groups:

The **formal regional** structures reside in two key places: i. the wider health and social care system and ii. the emergency management system. These work in complementary ways to manage different aspects of the response – put simply ‘clinical’ and ‘civil contingency’ respectively. The health and social care system includes a South West Gold (a.k.a. Strategic) Command led by Public Health England and NHS England, and a Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire (BNSSG) Silver (a.k.a. Tactical) Command with Clinical Oversight, bringing together several health partners.

The emergency management system comprises the Avon and Somerset Local Resilience Forum (ASLRF) at both a Gold (Strategic) and Silver (Tactical) level, bringing together a broader set of partners from Category 1 and Category 2 responders, including blue-light services and more. It is through the ASLRF that a Major Incident was declared and it is here that Military Aid to Civilian Authorities (MACA) is coordinated. It is also the forum that brings together the three different health and social care system footprints across Avon and Somerset- the BNSSG described above; plus Bath, Swindon and Wiltshire (BSW) and Somerset.

The council is represented widely across this system by Directors and Executive Directors with responsibilities in the relevant areas, including the Director of Public Health.

The **formal local** structure comprises Gold (a.k.a. Strategic) Command through the council's Corporate Leadership Board, chaired by the Head of Paid Service, and Silver (a.k.a. Tactical) Group chaired by the Bristol Resilience Director, a designation established at the outset of the crisis. This is supported by a Bronze Coordination Group comprising a range of 'Cells' and 'Work streams'. Typically a Cell is a formally structured group comprising staff from a range of relevant services to provide dedicated full time support, whereas a Work stream focuses on a specific service area (e.g. housing and homelessness). There are three Cells – an Information and Communications Cell, a Redeployment Cell and a Logistics Cell. There are 15 Work streams led by Directors or Heads of Service covering many council services.

This structure has been enabled and supported by the central Incident Management Team staffed primarily from the council's Civil Protection Unit.

The **informal local** structure comprises the City Office and its One City partners, along with a range of other partnership groups which meet to informally share intelligence and best practice, discuss shared priorities and challenges, and consider longer-term issues outside of the immediate formal response structures.

#### **4. Service Impacts**

The impacts of COVID-19 have been far reaching and the swift implementation of national guidance and the various facets of the Coronavirus Act 2020 (including, where appropriate, local interpretation of guidance or local decision making in the absence of timely guidance) has affected many different services. These impacts are tracked centrally within the council's Silver group, supported by the Information and Communications Cell.

A list of up-to-date 'Changes to Services' is available on our website at [www.bristol.gov.uk/coronavirus](http://www.bristol.gov.uk/coronavirus)

#### **5. Information and Communications**

At the outset of the council's emergency response we identified a need to coordinate communications and ensure a timely flow of accurate, high quality information which took account of decision making and intelligence-sharing in the various response structures listed above.

Key meetings and information flows were mapped, a 24/7 rota for communications established and a formal support Cell structure created, bringing together different teams to cover external communications, internal communications, channel design, public affairs, citizen enquiries, Member enquiries and stakeholder management. A daily rhythm of meetings and subsequent communications was put in place (for a current example see Appendix Ai) with regular review points built in.

Tactics have included daily member and stakeholder newsletters, information-sharing teleconferences, Mayoral news videos, citizen emails, Facebook Live Q&As, virtual media briefings, weekly Member, Party Group Leader, MP, City Leaders and Cabinet briefings, and a range of internal and external communications products – both regularly planned and used reactively when required. Internally they have included staff and managers' bulletins, Director blogs, intranet updates, a dedicated staff email address for COVID related queries and a

weekly 'Extra Mile' bulletin to highlight the efforts of staff. Communications staff have also worked with HR colleagues to support staff redeployment efforts and various HR policy changes.

The communications have sought to protect public health, keep Bristol safe, encourage an excellent community and city-wide response, support the city's recovery and demonstrate civic leadership; objectives that will continue in to the next phase as recovery becomes more prominent alongside the ongoing response.

Communications have been well received, with successful campaigns helping to recruit 24 potential emergency foster care families; nationally challenging the Government's stance of free school meal vouchers; attracting over 3,100 volunteers to our Can Do Bristol platform and more. Alongside the use of mainstream communications channels, particular efforts have been made to communicate directly with specific affected groups, for example to council tenants, existing carers and local businesses.

## **6. Finance**

Bristol City Council has received £13.5m central government funding to help manage the response to COVID-19, committing over £9m to adult social care. An additional £5m in Hardship Funding has been received, and has been used to extend the existing Council Tax Reduction Scheme and bolster the council's ability to provide emergency grants to households through its Local Crisis Prevention Fund. However, initial estimates suggest a response cost of up to £29m to the council over the potential course of the pandemic and a government announcement of an additional national £1.6bn funding has not, at the time of writing, confirmed its allocations. If the council receives another £13.5m, it still faces an estimated £2m pressure in response cost.

It should be stressed that costs are very early indicative estimates and many of the factors that will affect them are outside of the council's control. It is also vital to note that the financial pressure does not include the potential full-year effect of loss of income, a major factor in the council's finances which is used to fund many core services. With this pressure factored in, the full-year potential 'cost' to the council of the pandemic is £109m, creating significant potential financial pressure of approximately £82m. It is urgent for HM Government to engage in conversations with local authorities about lost revenue, because in response to reductions in Government grant over the past decade, revenue has become a vital factor in maintaining local services. The council is continuing to work with other major authorities, industry bodies and partners to call on HM Government to cover any financial impact on the sector.

At the time of writing applications for the Council Tax Reduction Scheme are up +400% on normal levels. Between the period 6 March to 17 April there have been 2,400+ CTR applications, over 200 discretionary housing payment applications and 782 applications to the Local Crisis Prevention Fund, which provides safety-net funding of last resort to those facing the most extreme levels of hardship.

## **7. Areas for Overview and Scrutiny Management Board (OSMB) Focus**

As per the request of OSMB leads, five topics upon which OSMB wished to focus have been addressed below:

### **A. Domestic Abuse**

The current levels of reported domestic abuse since the national lock down have broadly remained static when compared to the same period before lockdown. However, these statistics are difficult to interpret as in almost every other form of crime and incident reporting the police have seen a 20% reduction. There has also only been a short period of time since lock-down to be able to draw any firm conclusions.

Information from other countries reflects that a significant level of increased reporting has occurred after lockdown, and despite lower formal reporting to the police, contact levels with domestic violence support services have seen an increase.

The council has established a Community Safety Cell and one of its primary focuses is domestic violence and abuse.

The council's commissioned specialist provider Next Link has extended the hours of its online live chat service and usage has increased significantly. There is limited capacity in our refuges but additional accommodation is being sought, and the housing service is pursuing all options, including working to move families from refuges into more permanent accommodation to help create more spaces.

We are widely promoting the national campaign #YOUARENOTALONE, as well as local services and how to access them. We will imminently be launching more local communications campaigns to help signpost to support and help people understand warning signs and report concerns.

We have already sent out local communications about risks to children and what to do should you have a child protection concern. We have also ensured school provision for vulnerable families where a child has a social worker, so that they are able to access their school place unless there are specific and agreed reasons not to. More work is ongoing to promote uptake of these spaces.

## **B. Homelessness**

We are continuing to do all we can to house those without a safe place to live and we have secured 320 spaces in hotels to provide space for rough sleepers. This has been closely managed by providing appropriate support such as security and management on-site to ensure those living chaotic lifestyles and/or with complex needs are supported.

We are in regular contact with the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, who have supported our progress so far. We are still actively looking for accommodation options but are starting to focus on identifying more suitable 'move on' accommodation, especially in the private rented sector, but also within council and registered provider owned homes. There is an opportunity for those people we have placed in emergency accommodation not just to return to streets or shelters, and we are developing a joint approach for this with partners.

Van dwellers have been surveyed and visited by outreach officers, and we are doing all we can to locate and help anyone who might need support to meet the public health guidance on social distancing. As part of these efforts we have opened an alternative temporary site for vehicle dwellers. It's vital we support them to find a suitable space off the highway – for their own safety and for other Bristol residents.

The site at Portway Rugby Development Centre on the A4 Portway in Sea Mills, offers 25 different pitches, which are safely distanced from one another. People using the site have been welcomed by council staff and members of the Red Cross, who have provided refreshments and other health support. All the necessary facilities are available which are cleaned and disinfected each day to prevent the potential spread of coronavirus. Bristol Waste provides appropriate waste and recycling facilities on site. A second smaller site has been made available in Hengrove but has not been used by van dwellers because of its location. This is likely to be replaced with a larger site in South Bristol by 24 April.

Van dwellers have also been offered hotel provision. There is no mandate for them to move into hotel rooms so we must support people who want to continue living in vans.

Homelessness outreach continues, but there are approximately 40-60 rough sleepers still to house, comprising people who have recently come on to the streets or have been unwilling to engage with support previously. The Housing Options team is also working with Ministry of Justice to manage the accommodation needs of people with planned and early releases from prison, provided this national programme commences.

### **C. Foster Care**

On 7 April we launched a new recruitment campaign, urgently appealing for more people to become emergency foster carers in anticipation of illness and self-isolation measures creating a shortfall of carers in the city. Applicants will be fast-tracked with the possibility of becoming an emergency foster carer within three to five weeks, subject to assessment, safeguarding checks and approval. The council is asking those wanting to find out more or make an application to call the team on 0117 353 4200 or visit [www.bristol.gov.uk/web/foster-with-bristol-city-council](http://www.bristol.gov.uk/web/foster-with-bristol-city-council).

The campaign had a strong initial response with 24 families coming forward to be assessed as short-term carers within 10 days. As of today, there are 33 families or individuals who have come forward. OSMB will be aware of the national and local need for foster carers and, whilst these families and individuals have stepped forward at a time of greatest need, it is hoped that some may choose to continue to foster beyond the time of COVID-19, thereby offering children the stability and care that they need.

Efforts are continuing to identify potential carers, and to date there are no critical issues to report in terms of foster care capacity.

However if cases of COVID-19 increase, particularly once a managed end to lockdown measures is introduced, there remains potential for capacity issues in this system; so efforts to recruit carers will continue and will take account of any new national guidance on approval of foster carers.

### **D. Care Homes / Adult Social Care**

The Coronavirus Act, which was agreed as an act of Parliament on 30 March, included changes to the Care Act 2014 which allow local authorities to implement easements and help local authorities prioritise care and support during the COVID-19 outbreak. Such easements are very much a 'last resort' measure and the council is not envisaging making use of them in the current circumstances.

We are closely following the guidance which has now been released. We continue to meet all statutory duties under the Care Act and we will only implement any easements at such a time as we meet the criteria for this to be appropriate and unavoidable, and under agreement with the Director of Adult Social Care and our Cabinet lead. Around 6,000 citizens continue to receive local authority funded social care services, around 4,000 of which are supported in their own homes.

We are working closely with all external care providers to monitor the impact on their services and to ensure their business continuity plans are robust. As of 19 April we are working with 20 care providers (care homes, supported living and extra care housing) with confirmed or suspected cases of Covid 19, ensuring that they have access to the appropriate support, PPE and are able to operate safely.

The shortage of PPE is a major national issue and Bristol is affected in a similar way to many areas. At the time of writing this has not resulted in a critical shortage or unavailability in specific settings, but it remains an issue requiring daily management and national escalation. The council is rating each provider in relation to their access to PPE and supporting them with accessing appropriate provision through sharing existing stocks at times when we are awaiting national deliveries. This risk has been escalated locally and nationally and we are trying to ensure all available PPE available in the region. For hospital discharges it is confirmed that providers will be supplied with seven days' worth of PPE.

A new Incident Control Centre (ICC) for hospital discharge went live from 6 April. Under the new COVID-19 hospital discharge requirements, we are moving to a full discharge to assess model (D2A). This means all the co-ordination for people who are leaving hospital will be done from the ICC based at Withywood Health Centre. Sirona, our new community provider, will be managing the referrals for people leaving hospital and working

closely with our re-ablement service, the D2A team and the voluntary sector. Hospital teams are now located in the community and will be supporting the ICC

Funding adult social care: the council has earmarked £9.3m of the council's allocated £13.5m from emergency funding, specifically to support adult social care. This money will:

- Support care providers to help sustain our local care market
- Support people to leave hospital quickly through investment in short term care and support, to help people return to independence at home or access long term support if needed
- Support with the recruitment of additional care staff to support those already working incredibly hard at this time

From 16 April a 'Come Back To Care' campaign invited anyone who has worked in children's or adult social care to consider re-joining social work during the pandemic to support the most vulnerable in Bristol.

- Under emergency government powers given to Social Work England, anyone who has left the Social Worker register since 18 March 2018 will have their registration temporarily renewed automatically so they can return to social care work as quickly as possible during the pandemic.
- Posts are available for a minimum of 18.5 hours per week Monday to Friday with some evening/weekend hours for adult social workers.
- Returning social workers will receive a full package of induction, training and support.
- There are separate application routes for child and adult social care roles, and the closing date is 26 April.

In partnership with WECIL (West of England Centre for Independent Living), People Plus and the Meal Service, as of 21 April the council has delivered PPE to 73 Direct Payment users and have planned deliveries for another 64.

## **E. Can Do Bristol and Volunteering**

Can Do Bristol is the council's online platform for volunteering. This was adapted and promoted quickly as the scale of the outbreak became clear, providing a space for volunteers to convene a secure, safe platform from which to launch volunteering initiatives. To date over 3,100 people have registered on this platform as volunteers.

There have been some challenges running this platform whilst also designing the system for volunteering during the pandemic at the same time. However we successfully established a volunteering system and the service is now set up to reach vulnerable people. Whilst it is early days, we believe that it is very effective. We will need to continue to make adjustments to ensure we reach people who may not hear about via the We Are Bristol hotline or through established channels, but we are working with a very wide network of people.

The Freephone We Are Bristol hotline has been receiving/making (on average) around 250 calls per day. Where people need help shopping for essential supplies, picking up medication, dog walking and/or telephone befriending we match people to a volunteer via 21 virtual hubs. With the support of volunteers we have established a dedicated 48 hr response time to provide immediate support with shopping and medication seven days a week.

The call centre has a dedicated team to contact Bristol residents who are shielding. This list is increasing each week. These are people who have been identified by the NHS as having specific medical conditions which put them at high risk. People on this list will have received a letter from the NHS inviting them to register for ongoing support.

We call them to find out about general welfare and to see if there is anything they need help with. If they need help with food they can register on the national system to receive a weekly food parcel. Where there is a need

for emergency food in advance of the national system starting, Food Union will deliver a food parcel. The cost is being met by Feeding Bristol.

As referred to above, alongside Can Do Bristol and the We Are Bristol hotline we have created virtual Community Hubs for volunteering, a network of people coordinating volunteer activity in localities who work to link up vulnerable people with a volunteer. There are three types of hubs: those led by the voluntary sector, those led by the sector with staffing support from the council and those led by the council. They will have an understanding of the local area and what is going on, and will also have links in to foodbanks and other community support. Volunteers who have registered with Can Do Bristol will be deployed through community hubs, add capacity to community groups where needed and add capacity to council services as required. At present we have many more volunteers than people who need help, but this is anticipated to change over time.

Many Members are keen to get involved in the Community Hubs, and are encouraged to contact the appropriate member of staff whose details have been shared. If Members have information they think would be useful to share about local activity, please share it with the Community Hub managers. Members can also identify volunteers and ask them to sign up to Can Do Bristol. We are particularly keen to increase volunteer numbers in the outer wards of the city. Members are encouraged to continue to refer vulnerable citizens to the We Are Bristol helpline.

We are also writing to 20,000 vulnerable residents who are not digitally connected, to help ensure people are aware of the hotline and support available to them.

Our work is about ensuring there is a safety net for the most vulnerable people. It is looking to compliment all of the work going on to support neighbours and through informal networks, which needs to continue. We have been working with VOSCUR to provide advice and support on issues such as safeguarding. Where efforts are more formalised, for example in the national NHS volunteering programme, we are working closely with partners like the Clinical Commissioning Group to ensure a joined up and thoughtful response.

#### **8. Support services and other key activity**

As noted the response to COVID-19 has been wide-reaching and contributions have been made by many different council services. These include – but are not limited to:

- Working to identify an issues relating to discharging statutory duties and, if any risks exist, any extra mitigations or actions we can take. Similarly scoping the potential impacts on major projects, a topic that will be reported upon further in future.
- Creating a temporary place of rest at Sandy Park depot with capacity for 240 deceased people, opened following a multi-faith and humanist ceremony.
- Enabling additional capacity of 1,200 at South Bristol cemetery as part of the overall death management process. At the time of writing the council has identified sufficient resources, burial land and cremation capacity to meet the predicted demands upon the service.
- More than quadrupling the size of the team responsible for administering business grants and other benefits; with Bristol being the highest performing major English city and West of England leader at the time of writing in terms of % paid. On Friday 17 April we had paid out 60% of the grant, with 68% of applications processed. Around 20% of eligible businesses (around 1,600) have not applied and efforts continue to reach and encourage them to do so.
- The roll-out at pace of home working technology and software to enable large numbers of staff to work effectively.

- Mapped approximately 20,000 vulnerable people from existing systems and databases to enable cross-referencing against national Shielded lists and to inform pro-active safeguarding and support contact with potentially vulnerable groups.
- Building a database system to track contact and issues raised by vulnerable service users.
- Designing and implementing a streamlined Equalities Impact Assessment process for urgent decisions, and establishing a system to help gauge cumulative impacts on equalities groups.
- Considered the needs of ‘Recovery’ for the council and the city / city-region, working with partners to consider the longer term implications of the crisis and beginning to structure work around recovery – taking in a variety of facets including economic, community, cultural and organisational.