

Cabinet

30 June 2020

COVID-19: How well has Dorset Council responded to meeting the needs of vulnerable groups during 'lockdown'?

For Decision

Portfolio Holder: Cllr P Wharf, Corporate Development and Change

Local Councillor(s): All

Executive Director: Aidan Dunn, Executive Director, Corporate Development

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Report Status: Public

Recommendation: That Cabinet:

- Note the initial impact of the 'lockdown' phase of COVID-19 on vulnerable groups in Dorset (attached at appendix 1);
- Note the findings of a series of round-table discussions with Councillors (summarised at Appendix 2);
- Agree that the council needs an ongoing assessment of the impact on vulnerable groups through subsequent phases of the pandemic;
- Agree the action plan outlined at section 5 appendix 1; and
- Note that this initial assessment has been undertaken largely by staff 'released' from core roles to assist with the covid-19 response; the actions set out in section 5 will require appropriate resourcing and oversight.

Reason for Recommendation: To ensure that Cabinet is aware of the impact of COVID-19 on Dorset's vulnerable communities and responds accordingly.

1. Executive Summary

On 5 May 2020, Cabinet received a report on the Council's response to COVID-19, which referred to an equality impact assessment (EqIA) of the pandemic on Dorset's most vulnerable communities. Since that meeting, officers have undertaken an initial assessment of the 'lockdown phase' in Dorset, which has included local and national research, discussions with partners and round-table meetings with Councillors. The assessment is attached at appendix 1.

This initial review is very much a qualitative exercise, based on a constantly evolving situation. New evidence is emerging on a regular basis about the nature and extent of the pandemic, and feedback from Councillors on the situation in their wards as they develop have been hugely helpful. As such, this EqIA should be viewed as very much a 'live' document that is designed to inform decision-making during the coming phases of COVID-19.

Recent national research shows that the pandemic is having particularly adverse impacts on people with certain characteristics. Older people are at greater risk than younger people for example, and men are at greater risk than women. The risk of dying from COVID-19 is higher amongst those living in deprived areas than those living in more affluent areas, and higher in Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups than in White ethnic groups¹.

Given this evidence, it is more important than ever that we look to understand the impacts of the pandemic on potentially vulnerable communities, and seek to mitigate those impacts where possible. An action plan is being developed and is summarised in the assessment at appendix 1, section 5.

2. Financial Implications

There are no financial implications as a result of this report. As reported at the Cabinet meeting in May, the full financial impact of the pandemic on Dorset Council is still being assessed. There will be a significant impact from the suspension of income generating services, additional expenditure and incurred, and planned transformation savings not achieved. These will require mitigation during 2020/21 (and beyond) once the full compensation package from central government is known.

3. Climate implications

¹ Public Health England; Disparities in the risk and outcomes of Covid-19 (June 2020)

There are no climate implications as a result of this report.

4. Other Implications

The public health implications of COVID-19 are ongoing, and Public Health Dorset has been central to the development of this assessment. The assessment has identified implications for all aspects of the Council's business, and its relationships with partners across the health and social care system, and within the voluntary and community sector.

5. Risk Assessment

Having considered the risks associated with this decision, the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: HIGH

Residual Risk: MEDIUM

6. Equalities Impact Assessment

The assessment will be reviewed by the council's Equality and Diversity Action Group on 25 June.

7. Appendices

- i. Initial Equality Impact Assessment and Action Plan
- ii. Feedback from the Councillor Round-Table Meetings

8. Background Papers

- i. COVID-19 Response (Cabinet, 5 May 2020, item 7)

9. Introduction

- 9.1 As part of Dorset Council's response to COVID-19 several action groups (known as 'cells') have been established to manage the council's response. One of these is the Community Shield Cell, which is a multi-agency group responsible for ensuring vulnerable people in Dorset are cared for and supported during the pandemic.

- 9.2 The group is made up of several sub-groups, one of which is the Mental Health & Safeguarding Sub-Group. This Sub-Group initiated developing an Equality Impact Assessment. The assessment has two aims:
- To highlight groups of people in the Dorset Council area who are, or could be, vulnerable during the 'lockdown' period; and
 - To record how these people are being supported, identify any gaps in that support and identify possible actions for mitigation.
- 9.3 The Member Champion for Equalities and Diversity convened a meeting of Councillors on 28 April to discuss an initial draft of the assessment, and this conversation proved so useful it was proposed a series of round-table meetings be organised so that all Councillors could provide insights into the impact of COVID in their wards.
- 9.4 The meetings were an opportunity to:
- Share work that has been done on the Equality Impact Assessment; and
 - For officers to hear from Councillors about their experiences of the impact on their wards. A summary of the discussions is attached at appendix 2.
- 9.5 The key themes to emerge from the Councillor discussions were:
- The voluntary and community response:** How communities and organisations have responded to support vulnerable people is seen as overwhelmingly positive, and Members would like to explore how they and others can maintain some of the positive features of lockdown.
 - Mental health:** There is widespread concern about the impact of lockdown on mental health and wellbeing of vulnerable people and people who have or will be affected financially.
 - Young people:** Lockdown was viewed as having had a significant negative impact on young people, in particular on their mental health.
 - Hard to reach:** Many vulnerable people have been supported, but there is concern that some people who could benefit from help are reluctant to ask for help or 'admit' that they are in need.
 - Economic vulnerability:** There has been significant emergent impact on individuals and families who are economically vulnerable and have been affected by loss or reduction in their income e.g. furlough, redundancy. It is anticipated that this impact will grow. One councillor said *'I tour my patch regularly on foot ...and some young people I've spoken to are in a real mess. I'm seeing real evidence [of hardship]'*

- vi. **Digital exclusion:** Many services and organisations have been effective in engaging and supporting people online, but there is concern that a significant number of people are excluded from accessing digital services.
 - vii. **'Hidden abuse':** There is concern about 'hidden' domestic abuse where victims have been at risk during long periods when they have been unable to leave their homes.
- 9.6 The meetings were also an opportunity to highlight some of the incredible support being delivered by a wide range of system partners. Numerous mentions were made of parish and town councils, local food banks, community pubs and shops, town-based organisations, and voluntary and community organisations operating at both local and county levels. Some of the comments made at the meetings were:

'Everybody has gone above and beyond ...there's been a real resurgence in community spirit. We need to look for a way to continue that. I hope that as Councillors we can encourage our residents to keep that spirit. People seem to have started liking each other again!'

'Big thanks to the community!'

'[Our response has] put a human face on the council'

'We need to get a bit more canny about how we encourage volunteers, particularly those that might not have been volunteers before'

'The lived experience is that there's been a real upsurge in community spirit and kindness. Long may that continue'

'As a community, we've really come together well'

'Could you call it a wartime spirit?! Whatever it is, it's been amazing'

10. Next steps

- 10.1 The impact assessment attached covers the lockdown phase of the pandemic. It will need updating as the phases change, and the findings influence how the council and its partners plan their recovery, and respond to any further outbreaks. It will be discussed by the People Overview Committee at its meeting in July, and an update will come back to Cabinet later this year.

Footnote:

Issues relating to financial, legal, environmental, economic and equalities implications have been considered and any information relevant to the decision is included within the report.