

People and Health Scrutiny

28 Jan 2021

Community Response

For Decision

Portfolio Holder: Cllr A Parry, Children, Education, Skills and Early Help
Cllr L Miller, Adult Social Care and Health
Cllr J Haynes, Customer and Community Services

Local Councillor(s): Cllr

Executive Director: [T Leavy, Executive Director of People - Children](#)

Report Author: Claire Shiels

Title: Corporate Director – Commissioning, Quality and Partnerships

Tel: 01305 22 4682

Email: claire.shiels@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk

Report Status: [Public](#)

Recommendation:

1. That the committee:

- (a) Receive and comment on the contents of the report.
- (b) Endorse the strategic approach described in section 10 and the co-ordination of partnership community responses through 'Dorset Together'
- (c) Consider in particular the lessons learned and next steps in section 16.

2. That every opportunity should be taken to recognise and thank Dorset's communities and the voluntary sector for their critical part in the ongoing response to the pandemic.

Reason for Recommendation:

This report provides an overview of the partnership work to respond to the pandemic and an opportunity to learn lessons from the response so far. It also

serves as an opportunity to highlight and recognise the critical part played by Dorset's communities and the voluntary sector.

1. Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the whole of the country and Dorset as a county – the impact on our residents, communities and businesses has been immense. However, at a time of great challenge the council and the communities and economy it serves have together risen to the challenge, seeking to support the best outcomes for all through the delivery of national initiatives at a local level.

This report focuses on the partnership response of the council and the community response to the pandemic.

2. Financial Implications

The full financial impact of the pandemic on Dorset Council continues to change as the emergency response continues. There has been an impact on income generating activity, additional expenditure incurred, and new duties have been passed to the council. There have been a number of one-off grants to help support these activities, however these do not always cover the full costs of the activity and are often ringfenced for specific activities.

3. Well-being and Health Implications

The community response to the pandemic has focused on directly meeting essential food, wellbeing and financial needs of vulnerable people as well as seeking to minimise the impact of the pandemic on wellbeing through connecting people with sustainable support from their community.

4. Climate implications

The community response has continued to move towards localisation of responses, reducing the need for travel and associated carbon footprint of the provision of help.

5. Other Implications

The community response to the pandemic has been driven by a desire to 'not get in the way' of existing community groups and activities, but instead to enhance and facilitate growth where required.

The community response has been essential to the public health effort to reduce transmission of COVID-19 and seasonal flu through providing essential support to enable clinically extremely vulnerable people to shield; in enabling those without access to support to self-isolate and through the provision of volunteers to support flu clinics.

6. Risk Assessment

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

Current Risk: Medium

Residual Risk: Medium

7. Equalities Impact Assessment

During the COVID-19 response, impact screening tools and assessments have been undertaken where a permanent change in service delivery has been made. An EqlA for the COVID-19 pandemic was produced which covers all the protected characteristics and the additional characteristics that Dorset Council consider important. This was presented to Cabinet on 30th June 2020.

8. Appendices

N/A

9. Background Papers

[Update on Dorset' Council's Response to Covid-19 – Updated Report.](#)

Cabinet 30 June 2020

[Covid-19: How well has Dorset Council responded to meeting the needs of vulnerable groups during 'lockdown'? Cabinet 30 June 2020](#)

[Covid- 19 Response](#) Cabinet 5th May

[Financial Provision to the voluntary and community sector](#) 6th October 2020

10. Introduction

- 10.1. The strategic approach to the COVID-19 crisis was developed and shared informally with the Cabinet and communicated to all elected members via the first all member webinar. The approach set out: 'During the COVID-19 crisis, Dorset Council will work to maintain critical services, sustain care, support the vulnerable and support our community'. To coordinate activity for the council, ten cells were stood up to lead pieces of work, one of which was the 'Community Shield' cell.
- 10.2. As the pandemic has progressed and the response required has changed, this cell has continued stood up to coordinate a range of partnership

community responses and is now named 'Dorset Together'. As this piece of work involves responses from the whole council, there are multiple cabinet portfolio holders involved in leading the work.

- 10.3. The role that the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector has taken has been critical to the Dorset response to COVID-19 as has the response of local people in stepping forward to formally volunteer for a range of different initiatives and importantly in neighbourliness and informal volunteering such as setting up local mutual aid groups. The people of Dorset have been generous in their donations and many local businesses have been generous in their support and donations to local communities and charities.

11. Shielding Programme

- 11.1. The Community Shield cell was set up initially to coordinate the provision of food, medicine and basic care to individuals and families identified as clinically extremely vulnerable to COVID-19 and therefore required to 'shield'. In addition to Dorset Council employees from all directorates, membership of this group included: representatives from the voluntary and community sector; faith groups; NHS Dorset Clinical Commissioning Group; Public Health Dorset; Dorset & Wiltshire Fire & Rescue; Military Planners. A series of sub-groups were set up to manage this work which focused on logistics and supply of food and medicine; contact centre - support helpline and email hub; data production and management, mental health support and safeguarding and volunteer network.
- 11.2. The Shielding Programme commenced on 21st March and was paused on 31st July 2020. At the end of the programme, there were almost 16,000 in Dorset on the Shielding List. Residents were asked to register on a national shielding website and the council was asked to make contact with residents who stated they needed support in anyway. In total, the council and proactively contacted over 6,000 residents and responded to 2,500 requests for information, advice and support.
- 11.3. The local support offer included provision of information, advice and guidance; urgent deliveries of food and medicine; support from volunteers to pick up shopping, or medicine; peer support or befriending; and access to social care or mental health services. It was supported by a range of church, community and neighbourhood support groups as well as by Age UK, Volunteer Centre Dorset, Citizen's Advice and Help and Kindness, who have been mapping and publishing local places to get help and support. Our colleague town and parish councils have also been providing local support.
- 11.4. Age UK operated a helpline and befriending service for all ages during the period of shielding, receiving 8,500 calls, 650 emails and made over

15,000 outward calls to residents during this period. They supported 1,750 residents through this period.

- 11.5. Volunteer Centre Dorset set up a volunteer matching service for vulnerable people, with over 1800 registered volunteer during this time period. There received almost 2,000 calls and over 200 email requests and supported almost 1300 people (50% shielding and 50% not shielding) with food shopping, prescription collection, befriending, dog walking, gardening and a range of other activity.
- 11.6. Following the national pause to the shielding programme and the ending of the nationally coordinated food delivery, we worked with Volunteer Centre Dorset to take over the coordination and delivery of any future emergency food delivery requests. This was of great benefit to the council, when a further national lockdown was announced in November 2020. Although a full 'shielding' programme was not reintroduced, councils were again required to contact and provide support to 'clinically extremely vulnerable' (CEV) residents that needed it for a four-week period with a very short lead in time. The council was well served by its relationship with Volunteer Centre Dorset who were able to quickly stand-up four county wide distribution points to make deliveries to those who were not able to access alternative sources of support. These arrangements were successful and remain ready to stand up should they be required again in the future. This network has also been used to support those that have been asked to isolate by 'Test and Trace'.

12. Mutual Aid/Community Support Groups

- 12.1. Mutual Aid and Community Support Groups are groups of local people who organise informally to support one another and meet the needs of their local community; independent from any organisation or official body they are led by local people who volunteer their time – often organising through Facebook or WhatsApp. The effectiveness of these highly localised approaches to supporting communities is based on their ability to be flexible and respond to specific issues of concerns in their communities.
- 12.2. It is estimated that there are over 4,000 mutual aid groups in the UK, according to the national organisation, Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK. As these are not required to formally register it is not possible to accurately quantify the number of these group in Dorset, however the council has been encouraging groups to register on the Help and Kindness website. There were 140 Covid Community Support groups registered in total during lockdown.

- 12.3. There is no doubt that the support of these groups, many of which involve local elected members, have been a critical element of the COVID-19 response in Dorset. The national evidence suggests that the autonomy and informal nature of these groups is important but that councils and the formal voluntary and community sector can play a role in support without seeking to control the activity.
- 12.4. The council has worked with the formal voluntary and community sector to offer advice and support to these groups where it was required through the publication of guidance and tips for volunteers on staying safe, handling money and supporting dog walking; downloadable posters and flyers and through the provision of small grants.

13. Food security

- 13.1. Prior to the pandemic, Public Health Dorset and local councils in Dorset and BCP had identified food insecurity as an issue affecting many residents of Dorset, with an estimated 5,500 living in food poverty, without enough food and 95,800 unable to afford to spend enough money on food to have a healthy diet. The Equality Impact Assessment identified that as a result of financial hardship associated with the pandemic this may increase over time and this has been experienced throughout Dorset as household incomes have fallen and referrals for food support have increased.
- 13.2. The community response to ensuring people do not go hungry in Dorset has been excellent. The role of local food banks and local elected members in coordinating access to food for vulnerable residents has been immense and the generosity of local people making donations, supermarkets and local businesses has been immense. Communities have developed a huge range of responses, including the delivery of hot meals, ready prepared meals, food parcels and the creation of new food banks, community fridges and social supermarkets.
- 13.3. Dorset Council has been in receipt of grant funding from the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for the provision of food and emergency supplies through the pandemic and this has been used to provide immediate food relief, but also to support efforts to build more sustainable approaches to food security. This has included:
- an embedded food link worker in Citizen's Advice Dorset, based on evidence of effectiveness nationally to help support individuals to address the underlying causes of food insecurity and to support local food supply groups to identify and address support needs
 - coordination of emergency food delivery
 - support to homeless prevention charities

- support for the creation of social supermarkets and community fridges
 - financial support to food banks
 - food supply mapping
 - grant distribution through Dorset Community Foundation or a range of food supply related projects and activities
- 13.4 The council and partners were able to use existing food supply networks to offer food support to families eligible for Free School meals over October half-term.
- 13.5 We will continue to encourage individuals, local business, community groups and formal food banks to register on the Help and Kindness website so that we can keep an up to date understanding of the wide and differing offers in local communities.

14. Minimising the impact of the pandemic

- 14.1. Dorset Council and voluntary and community sector partners identified through the Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) that the pandemic may have an increased impact on some groups more than others.
- 14.2. The council has worked with partners through our 'Reaching Out' campaign to target support and advice to those who need it most, either because they are struggling financially or feeling stressed and worried and worked together to put in place support for those experiencing financial hardship; loneliness and isolation and grief and bereavement, which will be described in more detail below.

15. The Voluntary and Community Sector network

- 15.1. The council and the voluntary and community sector network has met weekly since the beginning of the pandemic to coordinate responses, address arising issues, share good practice and avoid duplication.
- 15.2. Dorset Community Action have been supporting charities, community groups and social enterprises through a series of weekly online webinars and a dedicated helpline to answer questions about Coronavirus and the impact on organisations. Funding support for this has been provided by the council.
- 15.3. Volunteer Centre Dorset has been accepting registrations of new volunteers and providing support and advice to voluntary sector organisations that wanted to get involved in providing support or who

needed help maintaining their volunteer base. Between 16th March –31st December they have made and received 2600 calls; and actioned 1,217 individual requests for support with things like shopping and prescription collection.

- 15.4. Age UK North, South and West Dorset have continued to support vulnerable and isolated older people with befriending calls and delivery of pharmacy and shopping where the individual cannot do this for themselves. Between 16th March –31st December they have made 30,000 outgoing calls; received 18,000 incoming calls and actioned 6,000 support with things like shopping and prescription collection.
- 15.5. Faith organisations have played a large part in the community response, coming together to offer support for those who have been bereaved through the operation of a helpline as well as through the provision of food banks and places and spaces for reflection. In many cases people have been supported to attend services digitally, which has greatly reduced social isolation for people that have traditionally been socially isolated.
- 15.6. The four Citizen's Advice offices have helped 11,111 vulnerable clients with 36,462 issues between 16th March –31st December. They have helped clients to gain £5.3million in additional income, primarily through claiming welfare benefits including Universal Credit (38%) followed by Debt (9%) and Employment (9%). Compared to the same period in 2019, they experienced a 42% increase in the number of clients requiring Employment related issues.
- 15.7. The council has received a further grant from the Department of Work and Pensions, primarily to support families with children food and utilities bills during winter. A significant proportion of this funding has been distributed directly to families through food vouchers, but we are also working with Citizen's Advice Dorset to build on the existing support with fuel and utilities.
- 15.8. Dorset Race Equality Council (DREC) have supported many of Dorset's ethnic minority communities who may have been disadvantaged during the pandemic including Gypsy Roma Traveller; Eastern European and Muslim, many of which were not only dealing with the pandemic but also other critical issues such as the response to the Black Lives Matter movement and also the requirement for all EU nationals to register for settled or pre-settled status under the European Union Settlement Scheme (EUSS).
- 15.9. Dorset Community Foundation have worked with the council and others to raise funding, maximise funding opportunities and distribute grant funding

across the sector through lockdown and repeated the successful Surviving Winter appeal to support with fuel poverty.

16. Lessons learned and next steps

- 16.1. Personalisation and localisation of responses is essential. Feedback from our residents has been that this has been a very important element of supporting them through the pandemic, but also in enabling them to support themselves. Local communities understand the needs of the local area and are better placed to understand and provide sustainable solutions that work.
- 16.2. Many people have been supported to get online and have become more digitally included and are therefore able to access support and online classes through a range of support networks including Age UK and other support networks, supported by digital champions and members of their community. However, we know that check in phone calls were extremely popular and so we are working closely with partners to expand peer support networks and support people to be able to give back where they wanted to well.
- 16.3. This type of response can be difficult to coordinate centrally and at a county level and we know that we have not always got the coordination and communication right, particularly with newly formed or smaller community support groups. We are working together on ways to improve information sharing and supporting the creation of networks to come together and share good practice. We have learned that it is really important not to get in the way of things that are already happening, and existing community offers but to seek to find opportunities to facilitate and connect people. We will continue to work to develop these relationships and will seek to expand and strengthen relationships with local parish and town councils.
- 16.4. It is helpful to have a single place for registration and communication of community offers and support. Not only has this helped us to signpost residents to local sources of support and help connect organisations together, but it has helped to identify potential gaps or geographical areas where community capacity is not as strong and work together to help provide additional support in this area. It will be important for us going forward to understand how we can work with communities and partners to continue to support the development of community capacity.
- 16.5. The people of Dorset are extremely generous both with their time and with their resources. The number of informal and volunteers and offers of support have been incredible and volunteer numbers are holding up well. It will be important as we continue through the pandemic to continue to support and nourish this and to consider how the legacy of this can

continue, noting that this work requires funding and infrastructure support. We will continue to build on the successful increase in local volunteers alongside Volunteer Centre Dorset and have been working with Public Health Dorset to consider how to provide wellbeing support to existing volunteers.

- 16.6. Some organisations will not be able to operate as they did before and may close, others are adapting their operational models to respond to the crisis. External funding, in many cases has been directed to the Covid-19 response to the detriment of other charitable aims. The council is working with Dorset Community Action to understand the impact on individual organisation and provide support where it can. The mechanism for providing financial support was agreed at Cabinet on 6th Oct 2020.
- 16.7. The Wellbeing subgroup of Dorset Together has responsibility for overseeing delivery of the EQIA Action Plan and ensuring that we improve communications with hard-to-reach and digitally excluded groups, and ensure advice and guidance is appropriate and accessible for all. The Wellbeing group is also overseeing a piece of work that links Dorset Council data team with Dorset Intelligence and Insights Service to try to understand where secondary impacts of Covid-19 pandemic might be felt, and to draw this together into formats that can be shared with community and mutual aid groups. The aim of this work is to share our system knowledge with our communities, allowing them to decide how best to focus their support in future.
- 16.8. The success of this partnership between the council, other statutory agencies and the community and voluntary sector has been dependent upon having a clear sense of purpose and a genuine sharing of power and resources, recognising which part of the partnership was best placed to lead particular elements of work and ensuring that resources and support were made available to make that happen.

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.