

## COVID-19 – a summary of an unprecedented year

COVID-19 is a devastating global pandemic that has touched every country and community.

Sadly, more than 450 of our Cheshire East residents have died. Countless others have been hospitalised and many are still living with the aftereffects. Every life lost has had a heart-breaking impact on their family, friends and loved ones.

This has been an unprecedented year in terms of circumstances and challenges which have affected every aspect of Cheshire East Council. It is appropriate, therefore, that as the first national anniversary of this pandemic has recently been marked, to look back over some of the key achievements in Council's response.

Since March 2020, Cheshire East Council has continued to work with partners to respond to the Coronavirus pandemic. At the same time the Council has continued to strive to:

- **deliver essential local services**
- **protect our most vulnerable people**
- **support our communities and local businesses.**

We are so proud of our fantastic teams of dedicated, flexible, and resilient staff and elected Members who have gone above and beyond what we could reasonably expect.

### How we responded to the pandemic

- Our multi-agency Cheshire Local Resilience Forum has led the emergency response, with many people working around the clock, 7 days a week. Our Joint Emergency Planning and Co-ordination Team have done a superb job supporting by Cheshire East and Cheshire West and Cheshire Councils in what has been the longest civil emergency in recent history.
- From the very beginning of the pandemic, the Council identified Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) as a priority and recognised the urgency to develop our supply chains and to access a supply of PPE. The Council purchased and delivered a significant amount of PPE to stakeholders including our frontline staff, schools, funeral directors, and care providers etc. This meant that we were able to continue to deliver safe and effective care in Cheshire East.

- We moved quickly to create our People Helping People service which works collaboratively with new and existing Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sector partners and local volunteers to channel community-based support to meet the needs of our residents. Some key statistics:
  - 1,946 volunteers recruited and utilised including the codesign of a volunteer website: <https://cheshireeastvolunteers.co.uk/>
  - Software launched to effectively recruit volunteers and a volunteer recognition scheme created.
  - 4,108 non-shielding vulnerable people supported.
  - 1,440 shielding individuals supported, including delivery of 350 food parcels.
  - 16 community groups (volunteer coordination points) set up to recruit, coordinate, and support volunteers in local neighbourhoods.
  - £450,000 of funding allocated to the VCFSE sector to change their delivery model and meet the changing needs of communities, including £10,000 of winter wellbeing goods provided to those suffering fuel poverty.
- We designed and implemented active travel and other measures to make safer high streets as various tiers were introduced and restrictions were lifted.
- Through the Regulatory Services team the council has been responsible for ensuring local businesses complied with the Covid-19 restrictions. Detailed guidance has been issued to over 3,500 businesses to help them understand and comply with the ever-changing national guidance and regulations to ensure they protect their staff and customers. This has included hospitality premises, takeaways, taxi drivers, supermarkets, and close contact services. In addition, officers have directly engaged with over 4,000 businesses to answer questions and provide specific advice for their premises or, in response to a complaint made by the public.
- On 6 April 2021, England's first dual use testing site was launched in Cheshire East for a national pilot project at the Crewe local testing site. This is a pilot offering both symptomatic and asymptomatic testing in one location for residents.
- The Cheshire East Swab Squad is currently supporting over 100 local businesses in Cheshire East with advice, training, and testing support. This includes six local businesses who have received rapid response urgent testing to prevent Covid-19 outbreaks: This has required the team to undertake 248 lateral flow tests within those organisations. 93% of local contacts are traced.
- We have supported the development of a successful vaccination programme, working with Cheshire CCG, Cheshire and Warrington Health and Care Partnership, and reaching under-served/hard to reach groups.

- We developed a framework to support those who tested positive to self-isolate. In addition, a detailed self-isolation booklet has been created (<https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/pdf/covid-19/covid-19-self-isolation-support-pack.pdf>) which will also be printed and available in libraries and community centres too.
- Communications has been central to our response: for example, the council's communications and media team produced more than 330 general media releases and information bulletins in 2020/21 – an increase of 188% over the previous year. The first quarter of 2020/21 saw a 250% increase in proactive communication over the equivalent period in 2019/20. During the pandemic, the council provided more than 150 COVID briefings to members and MPs, and a similar number to all staff to give them the information they need to continue to deliver services. In January 2021, the council also introduced an e-newsletter for residents to receive COVID information by direct mail.
- The UK has made hundreds of laws in response to the Coronavirus pandemic, with four national lockdown laws covering each of the nations. With the help of our legal team, the Council has digested, interpreted, implemented, and communicated the changes required locally.
- £25m of un-ringfenced Support Grant has been allocated to date for the 2019/20 and 2020/21 financial years; and £3.5m has also been claimed so far under the Income Compensation Scheme. In addition, we have received specific grants of c.£250m.

### **While continuing to deliver essential local services**

- Throughout the pandemic, the council has maintained key neighbourhood services for our residents. Ansa, the environmental services company wholly owned by the council, has maintained all kerbside waste and recycling collections when other local authorities have at times suspended one or more of their collections. The Household Waste and Recycling Centres were closed during the first national lockdown, but once they were able to re-open measures were quickly implemented to cope with the initial high level of demand and ensure staff and customers were kept safe.
- Orbitas Bereavement Services, another company wholly owned by the council, played a key role in delivering the council's excess death management plan, responding to increased demand for cremations during the first wave as well as ensuring services can take place in a Covid-secure environment to keep staff and mourners safe.
- In one of the coldest and wettest winters for many years, our Highways crews worked around the clock to keep routes safe.

- Our teams have worked tirelessly and hand-in-glove with schools and early years settings to ensure secure openings, good attendance, safe travel to and from and rapid testing. This has been done whilst keeping in focus achievement (A-level and GCSE grades). 94.89% in primary schools and 89.59% in secondary schools. This is 3% above the national attendance rate.
- COVID restriction required those staff who were able to work from home to do so. We moved quickly to enable staff and elected members to work and meet remotely. We host over 7,300 users and 4,500 daily connections across the IT Shared Services with Cheshire West and Chester.
- Our Democratic Services and IT Teams quickly put in place arrangements to allow remote formal meetings to take place as the norm, which has had a bonus of increased access for the public.
- The Registration Service has coped with significant challenges as a result of Covid-19 restrictions. In terms of marriages the restrictions relating to venues and numbers of guests changed multiple times. As well as the financial impact of lost income, staff have been dealing with couples who had to rearrange their plans, sometimes several times over. There has been some fantastic feedback about the flexibility of staff hurriedly rearranging ceremonies for couples in line with changing restrictions.
- Libraries and Leisure Centres have been required to close during the three national lockdowns and when they have been able to open their activities have been restricted. This led to the launch of new services to support people with their physical and mental wellbeing while at home during lockdown. For example: a new order and collect service for library books, a new home library service for customers unable to leave their home, online fitness classes, online Rhyme Times and Story Times, online Lego club, and online coffee and craft sessions.
- During periods of lockdown, colleagues from the library service and Everybody Sport and Recreation, the leisure trust who operate the council's leisure centres, have volunteered to help out in other ways including contacting clinically extremely vulnerable residents required to shield, supporting the payment of Covid-19 business grants, participating in the people helping people scheme, supporting mobile testing units for the re-opening of schools, and supporting the establishment of an emergency food distribution centre.

### **And protecting our most vulnerable**

- Infection prevention and control within Care Homes and the weekly testing of care home staff has helped detect people who may not have symptoms and as a result reduces the risk of a serious outbreak. Numbers of care homes in

outbreak have reduced over the last month and as of 12 April, there were no homes with a Covid-19 outbreak.

- We appointed mental health champions to recognise the huge impact COVID can have.
- Over 22,600 vouchers have been distributed to families and young adults in need through the Winter Grant Scheme since the beginning of December. The grant is continuing to be used as intended - to offer practical support in the form of food and utilities payments for vulnerable children, young people, and adults, as agreed by Cabinet on 1 December. This has included provision of food vouchers for families eligible for free school meals over the Christmas period, February half term, and will also include the Easter holiday.
- The Benefits Team have continued to support our most vulnerable customers through the provision of the Council Tax Hardship Scheme for working age customers, development and delivery of the Self Isolation Payment Scheme and the ongoing delivery of the Emergency Assistance Scheme. They have provided expert advice and support to colleagues delivering additional hardship schemes including shielding support and Winter Grant Scheme.

### **Supporting our communities and local business**

- We moved quickly to listen to and work with businesses, through the Business Helping Business initiative.
- To date over 31,000 grant payments have been made; providing more than £142 million to support business.
- Other support for business and economy, including (with partners) Macclesfield Recovery Plan.

COVID-19 continues to be a challenge for our borough and the Council. However, there is cause for optimism, with lower infection rates, good vaccination take-up and the careful re-opening of our services, businesses, towns, and villages. This is thanks to all the efforts and hard work of a huge number of people.

Thank you