

## Corporate Policy Committee

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**Date of Meeting:** 10 February 2022

**Report Title:** Covid-19 Update

**Report of:** Jane Burns, Executive Director of Corporate Services

**Report Reference No.** CP/61/21-22

**Ward(s) Affected** All

<b>Corporate Plan Priorities</b>			
	<b>Open</b>	An open and enabling organisation	X
	<b>Fair</b>	A council which empowers and cares about people	X
	<b>Green</b>	A thriving and sustainable place	X

### 1. Purpose of the Report

To provide the Committee with an update on recent Covid developments, including the move to Plan B for the purposes of oversight and review.

### 2. Executive Summary

**1.1** COVID-19 is an enduring national and international public health emergency. Members have been kept informed through regular reports and briefings on how the Council, working with its partners, continues to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and plan for the recovery from it. This report summarises recent developments on an exception basis.

**1.2** England moved to Plan B in response to the risk of the Omicron variant on 8 December. The Council and its partners have continued to work

together to support and inform residents, businesses, and staff in managing the implications. The implications for council activities are summarised in section 5.

- 1.3** The response to and recovery from the pandemic contributes to the strategic aims and objectives in the Council's Corporate Plan 2021-25

## **2.0 Recommendation**

- 2.1** To note the ongoing implications of Covid-19 and Cheshire East Council's response.

## **3. Reason for Recommendation**

- 3.1** This report is part of the Council's commitment to being open and transparent.

## **4. Other Options Considered**

- 4.1** Not appropriate.

## **5. Background**

### **Update and by exception reporting on Council actions**

- 5.1** Cheshire East Council continues 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.

- 5.2** A summary of the key changes since December 2021 is provided below.

- 5.3 COVID infection rates** – COVID infection rates rose rapidly from the end of November and over the first three weeks of December 2021. By the end of December, there was a massive shift of variant from Delta to Omicron. The Omicron variant came close to 100% of infections at the end of December.

In Cheshire East, the infection rate almost tripled between the end of November and third week of December. In the last two months, Cheshire East has consistently been experiencing between the third and fifth highest rates across the Cheshire and Merseyside sub region. Cheshire East infection rates have been consistently higher than England rates and lower than North West rates. In areas with particularly high case rates and low vaccination uptake rates, surge testing and targeted vaccination programmes have been introduced. After the first week of January 2022,

the rates have started to decline. Cheshire East has seen a reduction in infection rates from 2,175 cases per 100,000 population (as of 4 January 2022) down to 1,068 cases per 100,000 (4,131 cases as of 13 January 2022) demonstrating a 50% decrease over this 10 day period.

**Hospital admissions** - There are fewer COVID-related admissions in our local hospitals compared this time last year. However, the number of patients in hospitals increased from 30 to 200 between November 2021 and January 2022. Compared to last year, the rate of increase has been slower and the number of patients occupying ITU beds is very low. As the case rates have started to decrease, hospital admissions are expected to decline soon. Nevertheless, it remains a priority to emphasise the need for the local population to follow COVID safety guidance and get fully vaccinated and boosted.

**Vaccination** - As of 17 January 2022, there were 319,414 eligible registered patients over the age of 12 with Cheshire GP Practices who have received their first dose (87.2%), 299,571 (81.8%) received their second dose, and 246,723 (67.3%) received their third or booster vaccination dose. The rate of full vaccination and booster vaccination within electoral wards ranges from 74% to 92%, and individuals yet to be vaccinated range between 13% and 44%. One explanation for this variation is that some wards have a significantly younger age profile and therefore only became eligible for vaccination later in the schedule. Targeted efforts are in place to ensure everyone in our communities has access to vaccination, with additional support to those with greater need, where possible.

- 5.4 Test Trace Contain Enable/Swab squad** - As expected, the TTCE Programme has experienced a significant surge in activity as case rates have increased dramatically in autumn/winter. The programme planned for this in autumn and increased the capacity of the both the 'test' and 'trace' workstreams to manage this workload, with 30 people operating on the Swab Squad and 20 people operating on the Contact Tracing team. The Swab Squad have been actively mitigating the national issue of lateral flow testing (LFT) kit shortages, and the team has ensured enough local stock is available to deal with demand, so this has not been a major issue in Cheshire East compared to other areas. However, the team has had to provide support to many teams struggling to access PCR testing kits and as Cheshire East do not have access to this stock; it is more challenging to provide this support to frontline and key workers teams and organisations such as care workers, care homes and schools. Overall, testing demand remains high with the team undertaking over 7,000 tests in December alone. Cheshire East is now operating a 50% local contact tracing service once again and aims to have this fully mobilised in February. In order to

deal with demand, the team have reduced the national contact tracing questionnaire, which has significantly increased performance. The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) are now considering a similar approach nationally.

## **5.5 Developments since December 2021**

**5.5.1** England moved to Plan B in response to the rapid spread of the Omicron variant in the UK on 8 December 2021. Plan B was set out by the Government in September 2021. Plan B aimed to slow the spread of the variant and reduce the chances of the NHS coming under unsustainable pressure, while buying time to deliver booster vaccinations to the population.

**5.5.2** From 10 December, face coverings became compulsory in most public indoor venues, except hospitality. From 13 December, those who could were advised to work from home. From 15 December, the COVID Pass became mandatory for entry into nightclubs and settings where large crowds gathered. New guidance was also introduced, for example, on self-isolation periods, enabling people to test on day 5 and 6 and if negative on both occasions they could end isolation.

**5.5.3** On 19 January the Government announced its intention to reduce the measures introduced as part of Plan B from the 26 January. Full details are available via this link:  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/england-to-return-to-plan-a-following-the-success-of-the-booster-programme>

Council services directly affected by changes include:

**5.5.3 Education** – Pupils who are contacts of positive cases in their households are now no longer required to stay at home for 5 days, but must carry out daily lateral flow tests. Letters have been shared with schools to update parents and carers, along with updated guidance on testing and the reduced isolation period.

Early in the new year, the government announced a series of changes to restrictions and measures in schools, these included secondary age pupils wearing masks in classrooms as well as communal areas. This advice was in place until 20 January 2022, following the review of Plan B regulations. Following a discussion with Public Health and education ministers, the council advised schools to take a planned and paced approach to the removal of face coverings in classrooms.

The DfE have provided a workforce fund which schools and colleges can access to help with the financial pressures of significant staff absence. Advice on how to manage high levels of staff absence has been shared with schools. Schools have been asked to contact the Cheshire East COVID helpline if they feel restricting attendance is necessary due to staff absence or high case numbers to support a consistent approach across Cheshire East.

The DfE has made a marketplace available to provide all state funded schools, colleges and early years settings with a route to purchase air cleaning units directly from suppliers at a competitive price. Schools, colleges and early years settings that meet strict eligibility criteria for poorly ventilated teaching spaces can apply to the DfE for a funded air cleaning unit.

There have been some local challenges in terms of the availability of LfT testing kits for schools, some of which have required direct escalation up to DfE officials to ensure adequate supplies are available to support in school as well as school community testing.

The vaccination programme for 12-15 year olds, led by the school nursing service, continues to support schools. So far 61% of 12-15 year olds in Cheshire East have received their first vaccine. Delivery of second doses commenced on 10 January 2022. Vaccination should help to reduce the need for pupils to have time off school and reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19 within schools. It is important to note that as well as 12-15 year olds being able to receive vaccinations via their school, there is the ability for families to book direct and this process is also being promoted to families.

Significant work continues to be planned and delivered for curriculum recovery and supporting all learners to ensure our school subject leaders are fully confident to plan workschemes that address gaps in knowledge but maintain the focus on progression of learning through the year groups.

All of the activity above continues to be shaped and influenced through the Education Recovery Group (ERG) which includes representatives from schools and settings. The latest information, advice, training opportunities, and best practice continues to be shared with schools, colleges and settings through the COVID education bulletins and learning bulletins.

**5.5.4 Children's Social Care** – There continue to be significant pressures nationally on the number of placements available for cared for children and young people as a result of the pandemic. The implications of the National Transfer Scheme for unaccompanied asylum seeking children, locally and nationally is creating additional pressures on placement sufficiency and also frontline capacity. As a result we are continuing to experience significant challenges in finding the right homes for a small number of our cared for children and young people, and this is also impacting on the cost of placements.

The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 lapsed on 30 September 2021 which meant that all statutory social work was required to return to face to face delivery. This continues to pose challenges in the context of the rise in positive cases at the frontline. Business continuity planning has taken place to mitigate the impact on children and families should absences increase.

The findings of the Ofsted inspection of Child in Need and Child Protection Services conducted in November 2021 have been published. Ofsted summarised that since their last inspection in November 2019 the quality of social work with children and their families has improved and senior leaders are successfully embedding a child-centred culture. The recommendations from the inspection are being carefully considered and incorporated into a development plan.

**5.5.5 Early Help and Prevention – Household Support Fund** - Cheshire East Council with the help of a wide range of local partners, is distributing vouchers worth £2.2 million on behalf of the Department of Work and Pensions to support the most vulnerable households across the borough with food, utilities, housing costs, and other essentials over the winter period. The money is our share of the government's £500 million Household Support Fund which will run from 6 October 2021 until 31 March 2022. The fund is available to support both adults (without dependent children) and families with children and is available to vulnerable households who need additional financial support. As at 20 January 2022, approximately £32,000 of food vouchers had been provided to over 10,000 individuals.

**Holiday Activities and Food Programme** - The government's Holiday Activities and Food Programme has been extended to

cover the winter holidays. The scheme provides enjoyable activities and nutritious meals for primary and secondary school aged children who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals during the school holidays. It is also an important source of support for children and families during the holiday period. As at 20 January 2021, over 13,000 hours of support had been provided and over 2,500 meals.

**5.5.6 Adult social care** – On 3 November 2021, the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) published guidance on a new funding stream to support the adult social care workforce. The primary purpose of the Workforce Recruitment and Retention Fund (WRRF) is to support local authorities to address capacity pressures within the adult social care workforce in their geographical area through recruitment and retention activities during the winter months. On 16 December, DHSC published information relating to round two, a £300 million extension to the Workforce Recruitment and Retention Fund. Round two funding can be used to support the same objectives for round one, however, unlike round one, the round two funding can be used to enable local authorities and providers to bring forward planned uplifts relating to pay for the adult social care workforce in advance of the new financial year. Both rounds of WRRF total £2.8m of funding for Cheshire East Council in total, but the funding has to be used on services delivered by 31 March 2022.

Recruitment and retention pressures on the care market continue due to competition from the retail and hospitality industries and this is impacting on the ability to discharge medically fit patients from hospital. An incentive fund has been introduced which aims to encourage commissioned Care at Home providers to pick up council commissioned packages of care where they have capacity to do so.

The Omicron variant has led to a significant increase in the number of care homes closed due to a COVID-19 outbreak (59 at the time of writing – 18 January 2022). A Standard Operating Procedure has been developed which adopts a risk-based approach to enable care homes to admit new residents safely where the Director of Public Health deems that there is low risk. Recruitment challenges are also being experienced in care homes and some providers are having to use a high proportion of agency staff.



On 29 December 2021, the DHSC published guidance on a new funding stream linked to the pressures arising linked to the Omicron variant. In recognition of these pressures the government allocated £60m of funding to support councils. The allocation for Cheshire East Council is £363k. This funding is intended to support infection control measures including limiting staff movement, providing transport and accommodation, managing staff absences and self-isolation, ventilation, and further use of Direct Payments if required to meet care needs. This funding has to be spent by the 31 March 2022.

Work is ongoing with care providers to encourage their staff to have the full suite of vaccinations. Over half (52%) of care home staff have had the booster vaccination. From 1 April 2022, all frontline NHS and care staff working in the community must have had both vaccinations as a condition of their employment. Feedback received from externally commissioned community providers shows that around 95% of staff have had at least the first dose of the vaccination.

Mental Health Services remain under pressure, the number of Mental Health Act Assessments continues to increase with the average per week now at 14; pre-pandemic the average was 11. Week commencing 10 January saw the week's assessments total 23 - the highest number ever recorded in one week. Additional staff have been commissioned to support the Emergency Duty Team.

#### **5.5.7 Registration services**

Since March 2020 all death registrations nationally have been undertaken by telephone rather than face to face. Whilst introduced at very short notice the system has worked well, making things easier for those needing to register deaths. The indications are that the temporary legislation that allowed for telephone registrations will not be extended. The Registration Service has started planning for the reintroduction of face to face registrations, a system that is more time consuming and takes up more staff resource than telephone registrations.

#### **5.5.8 Tatton Park** – All facilities are open. Visit the website for information: [www.tattonpark.org.uk/home.aspx](http://www.tattonpark.org.uk/home.aspx)



### **5.5.9 Support for businesses**

The council's economic development and regulatory services teams are continuing to provide advice and guidance to hospitality, events and tourism businesses to support the many changes in those sectors following the release of restrictions on 19 July:

The 'Say Hi to the High Street' campaign continues to be positively received. The pre-Christmas winter phase of the campaign focused on promoting town centre Christmas events and encouraging people to support local town centre businesses in the run up to Christmas, will full page press adverts and social media videos. Feedback and analysis of the pre-Christmas winter phase suggests the videos in particular had a positive impact; the Twitter campaign alone achieving a reach of over a million from 33 posts. In the last month CEC has also procured gazebos and deckchairs for town councils to enable them to support community events to increase town centre footfall. As we move towards Spring further procurements are being pursued with the intention of claiming funding back from the Welcome Back Fund. Another phase of the 'Say Hi to the High Street' campaign is planned with local and digital promotional elements, and there are several additional procurements ongoing to deliver planters and planting, bunting, chairs and tables etc. all designed to enhance the attractiveness of town centres and boost town centre footfall.

The Regulatory Services team have continued to provide advice and guidance to businesses requesting advice on positive cases in the workplace. The team also contacted businesses to help them prepare for the changes introduced in December for compulsory face coverings in most public indoor venues and the introduction of COVID Passes for entry into nightclubs and other late night dance venues. Ten venues in the borough were identified that were required to introduce COVID passes. However, the requirement to wear a face covering in indoor public spaces and show COVID Passes at nightclubs ended on 27 January.

### **5.5.10 Waste and recycling collections**

There continues to be pressure on the waste collections system. There has been an increase in the tonnage of waste collected since the first lockdown when more people started to work from home, and this has not yet reduced to pre-lockdown levels, although recycling levels remain encouragingly high. Throughout the pandemic, ANSA

Environmental Services, the Council's wholly owned company, have continued to empty all three waste streams whilst many local authorities have ceased one or more of their collections. However, there continues to be disruption to individual rounds on a daily basis due to staff absences due to sickness or self-isolation and the shortage of agency staff to provide cover, particularly qualified HGV drivers, has added to this pressure. ANSA have introduced a number of measures to help manage these challenges, including suitably qualified managers and supervisors joining collection crews when necessary. When rounds are missed ANSA will try to return to missed collections within 5 working days.

#### **5.5.11 Planning**

There are also pressures within the Planning service at present with a significant increase in caseload due to a combination of increased volumes of applications, particularly smaller householder applications, and reduced officer capacity. This has resulted in lengthy delays in determining applications and a significant increase in the number of live applications to 2,876 at the end of September, more than double the normal level. A number of measures to help manage officer caseload and manage customer expectations have been introduced and an external provider has been procured to provide additional resources to help address the backlog of applications over the next 9-12 months. We continue to recruit to fill staff vacancies on a permanent basis. To help develop greater resilience and improve service standards in the longer term, a deep dive review of the service is being undertaken. A Members Advisory Panel has been established to support and advise the review.

### **5.6 Business Grants Update**

- 5.6.1** On 21 December 2021, Government announced the introduction of grant support for hospitality and leisure businesses in England. This support will take the form of a one-off grant funding scheme. The Scheme is called the Omicron Hospitality and Leisure Grant and is administered by business rate billing authorities in England. Cheshire East Council has been allocated £3.8m to distribute to local businesses who can be awarded up to £6k. Our scheme opened for applications on 5 January and has so far received 478 applications and paid out £1.065m. Eligible businesses have been contacted by email supplemented by a range of communications to the business community. The closing date for applications is 18 March with final payments to be made by 31 March.

- 5.6.2** Cheshire East Council were allocated a total of £14,500,835 over the first three ARG payment rounds. This is comprised of £7,683,040 for the initial allocation in October 2020, £3,412,442 for the first Top-Up in January 2021 and £3,405,353 for the second Top-Up in July 2021.
- 5.6.3** On 11 January 2022, we received a Grant Offer Letter from the Department of Business Energy and Industry Strategy confirming the amount of grant we had been allocated through the third Top Up to the ARG for the period 30 December 2021 to 31 March 2022. The amount allocated to Cheshire East Council is £827,109. This means the total amount of ARG funding allocated to Cheshire East is £15,327,944
- 5.6.4** To date, we have spent a total of £13,176,388. This means there is £2,151,586 left to be distributed before 31 March 2022.
- 5.6.5** The remaining ARG funds are being distributed through two grant schemes, both of which are still open for applications: The Business Interruption Fund and The Recovery & Growth Grant.

**5.6.6 Business Interruption Fund – Open until 28 February 2022**

The Business Interruption Fund is available to support all businesses based in the Borough that are able to demonstrate they have been impacted by the pandemic, including the latest Omicron variant. On 16 December 2021, Cheshire East Council announced that we had increased the amount of support available through this fund to a maximum of £10,000 per business. It means that those who previously applied for funding and received the maximum amount available at that time (of £5,000), are able to submit a further application for support. To be eligible, a business must demonstrate that they are either: operating at reduced capacity due to staff shortages as a result of Covid-19 or; have had to close for operational reasons due to Covid-19 or; that cashflow has been disrupted due to reduced customer demand or supply-side issues as a result of Covid-19. Business is operating at a reduced capacity due to staff shortages as a result of isolation requirements.

- **No. Applications Received: 477**
- **Claims Approved: 147 totalling £624,020.00**
- **Claims Pending: 215**
- **Claims Denied: 114**

### **5.6.7 Recovery and Growth Grant – Open until 28 February 2022**

This Recovery and Growth Grant Programme is to support economic recovery and assist businesses that are seeking to grow, adapt, diversify, and expand their current operation to support long-term sustainability. The grant will be made available for businesses seeking to invest in their premises, facilities or equipment that will enable them to re-open quickly, bring staff and customers safely back to work or to capitalise on new opportunities. The grant is paid retrospectively.

Only the following expenditure will be eligible for a grant:

- furniture, fittings and equipment to create outside business spaces or to adapt internal workspaces
- improved building ventilation/ air exchange or low carbon heating and green energy solutions
- specialist electric vehicles and associated charging points for business uses
- digital hardware and software to enable the adoption of new digital business practices including setting up a new e-commerce or e-POS systems, payment systems or to enable flexible/ remote working etc
- purchase of equipment or machinery to capitalise on new and emerging business opportunities
- access improvements / amendments (i.e. motion sensor doors, queueing adaptations, one-way set-ups, improvised waiting areas etc)
- internal adaptations (i.e. relocation of existing fixtures / fittings / services etc. potentially to support revised utilisation of space to ensure social distancing or diversified uses of premises).
  - **No. Applications Received: 159**
  - **Claims Approved: 90 totalling £1,216,889.52**
  - **Claims Pending: 61**
  - **Claims Denied: 8**

## **5.7 Future Workplace and engagement**

**5.7.1** Throughout the pandemic, we have provided frequent briefings to staff through a variety of methods. This includes written briefings, Conversation With/Question and Answer sessions, team meetings, TLC calls and wellbeing support. There have been two Pulse

Surveys of staff which reported positive feedback on how informed staff have felt. We are continuing to prioritise communication and engagement over the coming months.

**5.7.2** Member decision-making meetings have been held face-to-face since the remote meeting regulations expired. Appropriate health and safety and risk assessments have been undertaken to protect participants. The Government are conducting a consultation on future arrangements. More information will be provided in due course. Since Plan B has been invoked, arrangements for meetings have been reviewed, moving to larger venues and limiting attendance where possible.

**5.7.3** Covid-19 and new ways of working have been a catalyst for a refresh of the Workplace Strategy which was approved at the Corporate Policy Committee In November 2021. We are taking a phased and pragmatic approach, engaging with and listening to staff about new ways of working which meet customer, service and individual needs. The revised Agile and Flexible Working Policy has been approved. All staff are being actively encouraged to discuss future ways of working and how this best meets future requirements. These discussions will also inform future workplace design.

## **5.8 Recovery planning**

**5.8.1** At the sub-regional level, the strategic command for the response to the pandemic has been stepped back up. This is a multi-agency group that brings together key partners including local government, health, police, the local enterprise partnership enables feedback and escalation to central government.

**5.8.2** This Sub-regional Recovery Group, which is chaired by the Chief Executive of Cheshire East Council, has now been stepped down until the response phase concludes.

**5.8.3** As a reminder, the council developed a recovery plan to support this sub-regional approach as well as ensuring the Borough continues to manage the pandemic effectively as well as recovery arrangements.

**5.8.4** In particular the recovery plan anticipated and prepared the Council to manage the longer-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Borough and on our council services. For example, it is anticipated that there will be significant long-term impacts on communities and business in Cheshire East.

**5.8.5** The key issues, risks and plans that have been developed at this stage cover:

- The ongoing management of COVID-19 including test, trace, contain and enable
- Supporting children and young people including ensuring an effective education recovery, managing increased demand on social care and supporting mental health
- Meeting the increased demands on adult social care, health and community services
- Putting effective arrangements in place to provide guidance and support to local businesses to ensure they operate safely and in line with the regulations
- Leading an effective economic recovery
- Winter planning and table top exercise on adult social care.

**6. Consultation and Engagement**

**6.1** Consultations have resumed, although they are predominantly through digital or remote means.

**7. Implications**

**7.1 Legal Implications**

**7.1.1** The UK has made hundreds of laws in response to the Coronavirus pandemic. Following the Prime Minister's announcement in Parliament on 19 January 2022, the measures put in place under Plan B in England were lifted. In particular:

- The government is no longer asking people to work from home if they can;
- From 20 January, face coverings will no longer be advised for staff and pupils in secondary schools and college classrooms;
- From 27 January, face coverings will no longer be advised for staff and pupils in communal areas of secondary schools, nor staff in communal areas of primaries;
- From 27 January, there will no longer be a legal requirement to wear a face covering. However, government guidance suggests that people continue to wear a face covering in crowded and enclosed spaces.
- From 27 January, venues and events will no longer be required by law to check visitors' NHS Covid Pass, although this can still be operated on a voluntary basis.

- 7.1.2** From 11 February 2022, eligible fully vaccinated passengers arriving in the UK will no longer have to take a post-arrival lateral flow test.
- 7.1.3** Mandatory vaccinations for staff working in care home settings applies from the 11 November 2021 to all staff undertaking personal or nursing care in a regulated care home setting in England. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2021/891/contents/made>. The regulations do not apply to the NHS and are subject to a review in one year.
- 7.1.4** The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 have expired. The High Court determined that primary legislation would be necessary to allow remote meetings to continue. There was no reference to such legislation in the Queen's Speech on 12 May. Essential meetings including planning and licensing committees, are taking place in person with appropriate COVID-19 measures such as ensuring adequate ventilation, separation distances and the requirement for attendees to wear face masks unless sat during the meeting.

## **7.2 Financial Implications**

- 7.2.1** The financial implications of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Council relate to the need to incur additional expenditure to meet the needs of our community and to continue to provide services; losses in income from sales, fees and charges; and reductions in council tax and business rates income. The effect on the Council's budget and its Medium Term Financial Strategy are influenced by the Government's approach to funding. Government policies and strategies in this regard have evolved over time, since March 2020; but essentially financial support to the Council and for our Borough has been provided in the following forms:

- Unringfenced grant
- Sales, fees and charges compensation scheme
- Tax income guarantee
- Specific grants
- Deferment of financial impacts on Capital Programme and Collection Fund

- 7.2.2** With regard to unringfenced grant received from Government for Covid-19 purposes, as at 31 March 2021 the balance held in an earmarked reserve for future use was £5.153m. For the 2021/22 financial year, the Council was allocated £8.508m in unringfenced



grant; and the sales, fees and charges scheme was also extended to provide some compensation for losses in income compared to budget, for the April to June 2021 period.

### 7.2.3 2021/22

The position for the current financial year reported as part of the in-year Finance Review to Finance Sub Committee on 1 December 2021 showed Covid-related net spending/ income loss pressures of £10m. The Committee may wish to note that latest forecasts indicate a reduction in pressures on Service budgets, being a total of some £9m, which may be covered by Covid-related unringfenced grants, the compensation receivable for income losses, and capitalisation of some expenditure where appropriate:

#### Service expenditure and income losses

	<b>Expenditure</b>	<b>Income</b>	<b>Net</b>
	<b>£000</b>	<b>£000</b>	<b>£000</b>
<b>Service costs/ losses above Budget</b>	4,989	4,064	<b>9,053</b>
<b>Financed by:</b>			
<b>Use of unringfenced grant – 2021/22</b>			(8,173)
<b>Sales, fees &amp; charges compensation – 2021/22</b>			(800)
<b>Capitalisation of expenditure</b>			(80)
<b>Total – Financing</b>			<b>(9,053)</b>
<b>Potential Surplus/ Deficit in 2021/22</b>			<b>-</b>

**7.2.4** Included in the above forecast is a provision of £390,000, being the latest estimate of the potential support required by Everybody Sport & Recreation to help cover the shortfall in their budgets as a consequence of income losses in the year. As per the precedent set in 2020/21, the Council will continue to provide further support in this regard; and any relating payment this year will be made in accordance with the Constitution and covered by use of the unringfenced Covid grant, as shown above.

**7.2.5** Implications for council tax and business rates will continue to be managed within the Collection Fund, over the medium term, and are not expected to have an immediate effect on the Council's revenue budget in 2021/22. Latest estimates for this year show losses in receipts of £3.7m on council tax, and £8.4m on business rates.

**7.2.6** The Council has also been allocated some £86m for 2021/22 in specific grants, to date, to continue to support outbreak management, infection control in care homes, and to provide businesses with support and restart grants, along with other grants to support residents. Further specific grants may become payable and require local administration in response to the emerging status of the pandemic.

### **7.2.7 Reporting to Government**

Reporting of the Council's position continues to be submitted frequently to DLUHC as required, in the specified format; and those returns are published on the Cheshire East website:

[Open data and transparency \(cheshireeast.gov.uk\)](https://cheshireeast.gov.uk)

[Search for 'covid' | Insight Cheshire East \(arcgis.com\)](https://arcgis.com)

The Council will continue to support lobbying by the LGA and CCN in their aim to ensure fair settlement of the financial pressures facing local authorities.

## **7.3 Policy Implications**

**7.3.1** COVID-19 is having a wide-ranging impact on many policies. Any significant implications for the Council's policies are outlined in this report.

## **7.4 Equality Implications**

**7.4.1** Work has continued to improve accessibility of the vaccine, particularly for those who are vaccine hesitant or less able to travel to vaccination centres. Targeted efforts are in place to ensure everyone in our communities has access to vaccination, with additional support to those with greater need, where possible. A recent example is the provision of multiple vaccination sites in Crewe.

**7.4.2** We carried out individual risk assessments for staff with protected characteristics, particularly in relation to BAME colleagues and staff with a disability and have issued regular reminders to keep these under review as circumstances may change. Further work is being done to support staff who may be vaccine hesitant, including BAME staff.

## **7.5 Human Resources Implications**

**7.5.1** Sickness absence reporting has been stepped up to twice weekly, given the rapid spread of Omicron. There has been some volatility

but overall levels have not been high. The latest data on staff absences on 24 January 2022 are 31 (7 in December) staff self-isolating and working from home, 1 (4 in December) member of staff self-isolating and not working from home (role does not allow), 45 (39 in December) Covid-related sickness absences, and 129 (128 in December) non-Covid-related sickness absences.

**7.5.2** Staff vaccinations: as at 24 January 2022, 1900 staff are eligible for vaccinations due to their role. Of these, 95.3% have had a first vaccination and 94.1% have had their second vaccination. Data on boosters not yet collected.

**7.5.3** The pandemic has exposed capacity pressures and skills shortages, for example, public health professionals, enforcement officers, care workers and school support staff. In addition, the challenging financial context and re-prioritisation of work has meant that vacant posts in some service areas have not been automatically filled. Work continues to provide short and longer term resourcing solutions in a challenging recruitment market.

**7.5.4** There continues to be regular communication with staff and good co-operation with the Trade Unions.

**7.5.5** Although Covid is still with us, we can now continue with our plans to move forward safely, including how we will use our buildings. Our approach has always been and will be informed by colleagues in public health and local Covid case data. We will continue to put the customer at the heart of our service delivery while meeting the varying needs of all our different services. As we move forward, we will be combining this information to define in more detail what hybrid working means for Cheshire East. We anticipate colleagues will be able to come to the office or workplace more regularly than during the pandemic, but less often than before it.

## **7.6 Risk Management Implications**

**7.6.1** The risk environment around COVID-19 remains dynamic. Risk registers have been maintained as part of the Council's response to date and the plans for recovery. Business Continuity Plans have been invoked over December/January period in a number of services are being kept under review and have been invoked following the Omicron surge.

## **7.7 Rural Communities Implications**

- 7.7.1** COVID-19 is having an impact across all communities, including rural communities. The support for small businesses will support rural business.

## **7.8 Implications for Children & Young People/Cared for Children**

- 7.8.1** There are implications for children and young people. There are implications for schools, early help and prevention and children's social care which are summarised in the report.

## **7.9 Public Health Implications**

- 7.9.1** COVID-19 is a global pandemic and public health emergency. There are implications for Cheshire East which are summarised in the report.

## **7.10 Climate Change Implications**

- 7.10.1** There have been positive benefits of fewer cars on the road during the first 12 months of the pandemic, although traffic levels are now exceeding pre-pandemic levels. Those staff who have been able to work from home have done so and business mileage has also reduced. There has also been lower demand for heating/lighting offices. The emerging Future Workplace Strategy will carefully consider how to embed carbon reduction.

## **8 Ward Members Affected**

- 8.1** All members.

### **Access to Information**

HM Government website contains comprehensive information.

Roadmap

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/963491/COVID-19\\_Response\\_-\\_Spring\\_2021.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/963491/COVID-19_Response_-_Spring_2021.pdf)

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Appendices:	None
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Background Papers:	Government Guidance COVID-19 Response – Spring 2021(Roadmap) an Autumn and Winter Plan 2021 (Plan B)
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