

EAST RENFREWSHIRE COUNCIL**8 September 2021****Report by Chief Executive****COVID-19 RECOVERY - UPDATE****PURPOSE OF REPORT**

1. To provide Elected Members with a further update on response, recovery and renewal work taking place across the Council and the Trust since the previous update in June, and in addition to provide Members with details of some of the backlogs that have developed across services due to a focus on the pandemic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

2. That the Council note:-
- a) the ongoing significant response work to coronavirus;
 - b) that there is a backlog of work caused by the impact of the coronavirus;
 - c) The significant continuing work pressure on staff and the importance of protecting staff wellbeing and
 - d) the risk of concurrent events during this winter of Coronavirus, Brexit, COP26, industrial action and winter weather.

BACKGROUND

3. As Members are aware, as part of the route map for moving through and out of the COVID-19 crisis, the Scottish Government introduced a new protection level system. The system contains 5 levels ranging from the level with least restrictions (level 0) to that with the most stringent restrictions (level 4). Members will recall that initially East Renfrewshire was placed in level 3 but subsequently placed in level 4 in December as a result of increasing cases across the country.

4. In the report to the Council in June, it was explained that since December, the country-wide vaccination programme had started and testing had become much more widely available. Relaxation of restrictions continued with East Renfrewshire being in level 2 at that time.

5. Since June restrictions have been further relaxed and on 9 August the country moved out of the levels system. However, Scottish Government continues to remind everyone to act carefully and remain cautious with certain requirements, such as the continued wearing of face coverings in particular locations, remaining in force.

6. The move out of the levels system has unsurprisingly seen an increase in case numbers across the country. The Scottish Government continue to monitor the figures but to date have not taken any decisions about reintroducing restrictions in any area. In her statement on 24 August the First Minister indicated that re-imposing restrictions could not be ruled out completely.

7. Most emergencies can be divided into response and recovery phases. The Coronavirus response began in February/March 2020 and has not yet moved fully into recovery. Significant parts of the Council's work are still focused on responding to the virus. For example, the Council is still heavily involved in the operation of Test centres, and Vaccination Centres and a significant number of emergency payments require to be made to residents. This is reducing the availability of staff to carry out their core council responsibilities.

8. The long-term nature of the pandemic has led to a considerable backlog of work across departments. For many of the months of lockdown, some work could not be delivered at all due to social distancing and other work was less productive due to restrictions. Whilst some recovery has taken place, it will be many months and even years before the backlog issues can be resolved. The HSCP has been affected particularly badly by backlog issues as has the Housing Service.

9. During 20/21 the Council was in the process of implementing some major systems change. Due to the pandemic, the implementation of the new HR and payroll system had to be delayed until the second half of the year. The new Council Tax and Benefits system was then implemented in the same time frame. Neither implementation could be delayed further. Both were implemented with staff mainly being trained whilst working at home and system suppliers working off-site, a huge achievement given the complexity of both systems. However, it will take time before both systems will become fully productive and, in the meantime, there are some backlogs of work occurring.

10. As we move to recovery, the Scottish Government have asked councils to take on additional responsibilities to help alleviate the impact of the virus on income levels. In addition, there has been an increased demand for some benefits such as free school meals and therefore overall, the volume of work we have to undertake has increased. Addressing the longer-term impact on society of Coronavirus on learning, mental health, social isolation and many other areas will all create pressure on council services.

11. During the summer months, the demand for services from the public usually reduces, allowing departments to manage annual leave requests efficiently. This year staff have been encouraged to use their annual leave, particularly as we have concerns about burnout for those staff who have been under pressure for the last 18 months and had to carry over leave from last year. However, demand from residents is still very high, perhaps reflecting the staycation trend. This situation has been made worse by staff having to self-isolate, the requirement for "bubbles" in some operational areas and a general shortage of agency staff. Service levels are not back at the level we would wish.

12. As we look forward, there are concurrent risks facing the Council and East Renfrewshire area. COP26 will be in Glasgow from 1 to 12 November bringing road closures and increased risk of disruption to services. A national shortage of HGV drivers has already caused some disruption to food supplies and other goods and this will need to be monitored. Winter is approaching with the usual risks of poor weather and increased pressures on the NHS. Threatened industrial action across the public sector could also have an impact on services. Cyber threats are always at a high level.

13. The next 6 months will be a challenging time for Council services made worse by a public expectation that services should be back to normal.

REPORT

14. The purpose of this report is to provide a further update to Members on work being carried out across the Council since the previous report, and should be read in the context of

the previous update reports presented to the [Emergencies Committee in May](#) the [Council in June](#) the [Council in October](#), the [Council in December](#) and most recently the [Council in June 2021](#).

15. Earlier reports to Council contained 3 sections in relation to activity:

- Response – how the Council has responded to the challenge of the pandemic
- Recovery – how far services have recovered and any remaining challenges
- Renewal – some of the ongoing renewal activities across the council

16. For this report, departmental/service responses have not been split across the headings and are presented in their entirety.

17. In addition, where appropriate, information has also been provided on service backlogs that have developed as a result of services being diverted or delayed to deal with the impact of the pandemic as referred to above.

Mass Vaccination Clinics

18. Vaccination clinics at Carmichael Hall (Giffnock) and the Foundry (Barrhead) remain operational. However, the clinic at the Foundry will be moving to the Barrhead Health & Care Centre in late September 2021. The clinic at Carmichael Hall will remain open. Both centres will provide ongoing COVID-19 vaccinations as well as seasonal flu vaccines. NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde are currently working on the appointment schedules to meet the anticipated programme for delivery.

19. Additionally, regular drop-in clinics have been available at the Foundry and Carmichael Hall. These have been well attended, and the take up rate for vaccinations across all age groups has been good in East Renfrewshire.

20. The operation of vaccination centres represents a significant commitment from the Trust. As well as its buildings being available, Trust staff support the non-clinical day-to-day operation of the vaccination centres – to ensure that they work efficiently and safely. Latterly, as more Trust staff return to their substantive posts, Voluntary Action East Renfrewshire has provided additional help to the Trust in support roles.

COVID-19 Testing

21. Testing remains a key aspect of the Scottish Government's response to the pandemic. The Mobile Testing Unit for symptomatic persons has continued to be located at the Greenlaw Works (Business Centre). This site operates on a Monday to Friday basis, with bookings made through the Government portal. Greenlaw remains a well-utilised site, reflected in its consistent usage since September 2020.

22. An Asymptomatic Testing Centre has been operational at the Cowan Park Pavilion (Barrhead) since 22 February 2021. It is open on a drop-in basis, to serve those living and working in the area. The site is staffed by a combination of Council/Trust and NHS officers. Cowan Park will remain operational as a testing facility to the end of September 2021.

23. East Renfrewshire's vehicular testing solution remains in place, having been operational since May 2021. The vehicle conducts asymptomatic testing and allows targeting at communities with rising or concerning COVID rates. The vehicle has been utilised in locations including Newton Mearns Baptist Church and Rouken Glen Park. It was also utilised in support of the Fan-Zone in Glasgow Green, during Euro 2020, following requests by the NHS & Scottish Government.

24. There is also the opportunity to access Scottish Ambulance Service operated mobile testing units to supplement the above testing arrangements. This allows targeting of specific communities where spikes of the virus have occurred. In the past, these mobile units have been deployed at Woodfarm and Muirend.

Environment Department

25. As is the case with other departments and as outlined in previous reports, the Environment Department is certainly not in any way “back to normal”. Urgent COVID related issues take up considerable amounts of staff time. As well as dedicating resources to ongoing Coronavirus response matters, the Department has significant backlog considerations.

26. The Environment Department has dedicated considerable resources into supporting COVID response elements such as mass testing, mass vaccination and mobile testing. This has come through directing resources from other areas of work and as such has created a natural backlog. This will continue to build/exist while resources are so heavily devoted to key public health protective measures.

Neighbourhood Services

27. Despite recent Scottish Government changes removing the requirement on social distancing across a number of settings, Neighbourhood Services cannot revert to pre-pandemic operations. There remains a requirement to retain “work bubbles” to contain any possible spread of COVID-19 amongst essential frontline personnel if positive cases are identified. Recent media coverage of a “pingdemic” affecting staff in other economic sectors highlight the potentially devastating consequences to frontline services from COVID. As such, the service will continue with work bubbles to avoid large numbers of key frontline delivering officers being required to isolate, and protect our staff, as well as essential services.

28. Neighbourhood Services are regularly utilising additional agency staff to fill gaps and deliver priority frontline services. This necessitates a hiring and retention of additional fleet beyond the normal establishment.

29. In addition to self-isolation requirements, Service Managers are supporting employees in using the high levels of annual leave accumulated from 2020. Employees were unable to use allocated leave as they were ensuring continued service delivery when colleagues were shielding.

30. There is a concern that the service may experience a loss of HGV drivers because of more attractive employment opportunities being externally available. A consequence of the widely publicised national shortage of drivers is that external employers are offering improved terms to the available pool of HGV drivers.

31. An additional challenge exists in relation to HGV drivers, in that there are also delays in the DVLA renewal process for those employees who hold a licence. The current delays are approximately 12 weeks. Both factors combined may leave the Council in a position where it does not have the required HGV employee numbers to facilitate essential services, primarily the collection of residential and trade waste.

32. Our contractors have also experienced driver shortages. This has had particular impact on our Household Waste and Recycling Centre at Barrhead, resulting in some build-up of waste. Neighbourhood Services are working in partnership with contractors to resolve this.

33. Refuse and recycling collections are in the main prioritised over other frontline services, which may consequently suffer backlogs. This may include grass cutting, weed spraying, street cleaning and ad-hoc cleansing complaints.

34. While grass cutting has predominantly caught up in terms of its backlogs, the continuation of work bubbles will considerably hamper next season's grass cutting schedules, should current precautions remain in place.

Corporate Health and Safety Unit

35. Corporate Health and Safety Unit officers continue to be heavily involved with the pandemic response, dedicating significant resources to COVID related issues. The removal of many restrictions from 9 August has witnessed an exponential growth in demand for risk assessment reviews for service tasks and buildings, as other council services endeavour to recover. Approximately 10% of the Service is dedicated to recovery and business as usual activity in light of the demand for COVID risk assessments.

36. There is concern that the Council is at risk of not meeting legal compliance requirements, due to Coronavirus issues. The issues are partially that the service is not permitted to address these under remaining restrictions but primarily due to the demand placed on the service for updated risk assessments. The following are of particular concern:

- Fire risk assessments for council buildings, housing property and leased property.
- Health and Safety training – primarily in relation to face-to-face delivery limitations.
- Occupational health screening.
- Risk assessments.
- Face fit testing.
- HAVS measurements have been unable to be conducted.
- Lone worker system.

37. When able to return to normal working, the Corporate Health and Safety Unit will have a backlog of work, which will make new work difficult to fulfil. Additionally, there will be a need to ensure relevant Health & Safety policies and information are updated, particularly those that have not been progressed in light of the pandemic response. It is imperative that the focus of the Corporate Health & Safety Unit (beyond COVID-19 work) is on areas of legal compliance. As such, there is no capacity for other subjects, and there will not be for some time to come.

Trading Standards

38. Trading Standards played a significant and leading role in enforcing and advising business on the Regulations restricting trading activities during COVID-19. This led to a significant shift in resources away from our core service plans for 2019/20 and 2020/21. The service is returning to prioritise the key elements of the service plan to be delivered in the remainder of 2020/21 while continuing to monitor and advise traders related to COVID-19. Creative risk assessments and new ways of working have enabled the service to get back on track to delivering key priorities.

Environmental Health

39. All Environmental Health staff have undertaken additional responsibilities related to COVID. These have been unpredictable in complexity and often unique and very time consuming. The Service will continue to prioritise Coronavirus related enquiries, Test & Protect notifications, clusters, outbreaks, Community Testing forums, internal enquiries from other Services and supporting Asymptomatic Testing and Vaccination Centres. However, this has an impact on the existing work backlog and new responsibilities arising from changes to legislation.

40. Since the start of the pandemic, there has been a significant rise in service requests received by Environmental Health. Compared to pre-pandemic levels, these have increased by approximately 260%. Requests are predominantly Public Health related and are a direct

consequence of people being at home and more aware of environmental issues that they may not have been exposed to when workplace based. This has placed a burden on service delivery, which has compromised the ability to perform the full range of functions in an effective manner.

41. Concurrently, there has been new legislation enacted, which will place additional burdens on the Service. These include new requirements arising from EU exit; changed regulations to interlinked heat, fire & carbon monoxide detectors in residential properties; new requirements from the Drinking Water Quality Regulator (DWQR); and forthcoming changes to the animal welfare licensing regime. However, the biggest challenge from 1 September 2021 will be the proposed re-start of programmed food law interventions, which were paused in March 2020.

42. The Scottish Government permitted this pause in inspections to support COVID enforcement. The Council's Food Recovery Plan seeks to recover the backlog of inspections that has accumulated, but it means that resources previously directed to Coronavirus compliance will be impacted. The time passed since the last visit / inspection to a business may result in more staff resource being dedicated to it, particularly if conditions within the food premises have deteriorated.

43. The workload of Environmental Health has increased in line with the number of other Council Services working through their own backlogs. Areas such as planning applications, which require an Environmental Health input, have begun to increase.

44. The existing staff position within Environmental Health has created a challenge for officers in fully utilising their annual leave. Staff are trying to balance using holiday leave against leaving the service without staff and consequently increasing the backlog.

45. The service has been impacted by recent staffing changes, which have only exacerbated the situation. Two Environmental Health Officers have left from a team that previously had eight, representing a 25% reduction in output. Recruitment has proven challenging due to the lack of qualified Environmental Health Officers nationally, putting East Renfrewshire in direct competition with other Local Authorities for limited staff resources.

Housing

46. The provision of Homeless and Housing Advice services has been mainly by telephone, in light of limited staff access to Council buildings. Housing are bringing back face-to-face meetings, which will include in home meetings and in Council buildings. These changes will be introduced following discussions with colleagues in Health & Safety, to ensure the continued safety of customers and staff. Meetings in offices, for example homeless interviews, are available on request. However, telephone interviews are still offered – where preferred by the customer.

47. Similar to above, Housing Officers are seeking to bring back face-to-face visits to tenants' homes to provide support and assistance. These will be re-introduced with the appropriate measures in place to ensure the safety of customers and staff. The resumption of Housing Officer visits will have a significant impact on the level of support provided for tenancy conditions disputes and anti-social behaviour.

48. While allocations of housing remains relatively unaffected by Coronavirus restrictions, there remains a backlog of homeless households awaiting a permanent offer of accommodation and in temporary accommodation. The total waiting list for allocations is 3,370 applicants. Of these, over 100 are homeless group A and 290 are medical priority. Significant numbers of applicants have other housing needs, such as overcrowding.

49. Rent arrears have continued to rise into 2021/22, because of the negative effects on family incomes felt during the pandemic. However, with the return of home visits, officers will be able to discuss issues in the tenant's home to address arrears. Formal recovery actions, such as notice of proceedings and the courts will resume in September, in accordance with Scottish Government updates. However, these actions will only be taken where all other options to prevent arrears and recovery actions have been exhausted.

50. The backlog of non-essential repairs outlined in the previous report has now been addressed. Normal service response has resumed, but there remains potential for delays if trades staff are required to self-isolate.

51. Planned improvement works such as kitchens are expected to commence in the autumn, commencing with the 2019-20 backlog. Housing Services are currently undertaking the required procurement works to have appropriate contracts in place. However, the construction industry is experiencing a shortage of some materials, as well as changeable pricing. This may cause delays to the planned works.

Property and Technical Services

52. The recovering construction industry is challenged by intermittent materials supply and raw material shortages, which are both driving up prices and causing delays to completion. Additionally, some contractors are facing staff shortages or have not fully recovered services. Both Property and Technical Services continue to work with other services and with Procurement to mitigate both cost and time impacts to projects.

53. Technical Services continue to support services to realise their agreed capital plan aspirations as well as the challenges driven by supply and materials to planned capital works, Technical Services are working with partners in essentially seeking to deliver two years' worth of project ambitions into a compressed period.

54. Ventilation in schools remains a primary focus for the Property Services Team. Ventilation has been identified as a key factor in reducing the risks posed by Coronavirus and will be crucial in protecting our staff, pupils and the public as more of society recovers. Staffing resources are required to be allocated to ensure that vital compliance maintenance works are undertaken particularly as more buildings reopen or increase occupancy, following relaxations in COVID restrictions.

55. As part of the ventilation programme, Property Services are liaising with engineers to assess properties. This will include undertaking any minor works identified to comply with Government Guidance. Technical Services will progress the procurement of works specified by completed designs agreed with the ventilation engineers. Similar to other works, progress in the ventilation programme will be dependent on the availability of contractors, materials and access to buildings.

56. The Scottish Government have additionally announced that Carbon Dioxide monitoring works will be required within classrooms, with £10m funding made available nationally. In relation to the grant, there is a requirement that all teaching areas should have works completed by the October break. Additionally, there is a requirement that a fortnightly return will be provided to the Scottish Government on progress. The timescales and reporting involved in this project will represent a significant undertaking for Property Services and as a result, affect their ability to undertake other tasks.

Development Management and Building Standards

57. While Development Management and Building Standards are able to carry out the majority of their duties, there are still protective measures in place to minimise the risk of

COVID-19. Site visits are kept to a minimum, being either pre-arranged or limited in terms of officer attendance.

58. Additionally, within Building Standards, developers are asked to provide photographs or videos as evidence instead of typical site visits. Reviewing photographs and videos has increased workload with extra communications necessary for most submissions. There has also been an increase in completion certificate refusals where satisfactory evidence of the work undertaken has not been produced resulting in extra work for the officers.

59. Both Services continue with limited public interaction, in light of visits to offices not being possible. While home working for officers is possible, IT and equipment issues have produced some constraints and differences in the ability of officers to offer the same level of service as previously, pre-Coronavirus.

60. One of the unforeseen consequences of COVID-19 and increased home working of people has been a significant increase in the number of householder applications, particularly for extensions and garden rooms. The additional workload has resulted in a backlog in processing planning applications, which the Development Management Service is currently working to clear. This has been exacerbated by staff shortages and additional online demand from members of the public seeking advice, reporting unauthorised work and complaining about service problems/delays.

61. Public and business demand on Development Management continues to be very high, likely because of the requirement for lifestyle / employment changes across society, arising from COVID-19. There remains a substantial backlog caused by new and existing applications to be processed, which has recently seen a gradual reduction through the team focusing resources on the issue.

62. In addition, the Development Management Service relies heavily on other internal and external services that are experiencing COVID-19 related issues and demands (some have been outlined in this report). This has affected their ability to provide consultation responses. Consequently, the determination of some planning applications, particularly large and complex applications have been unavoidably delayed.

Strategy/Local Development Plan

63. The Strategy team have been able to carry out the majority of their duties from home. However, receipt of the Examination Report of the Proposed LDP2 by Scottish Government Reporters was delayed by approximately three months. Timescales for the reporters to undertake site visits and obtain all relevant information were extended due to COVID restrictions. This has resulted in a delay to the adoption of the Plan and progression towards LDP3. Timescales for the preparation of the annual Housing Land audit, Vacant and Derelict land and employment monitoring have also been impacted by COVID restrictions.

Roads & Transportation

64. Roads and Transportation are continuing to recover with road inspections almost back on track. Roads are also continuing with their revenue and capital programme without any significant issues at present, with only one scheme delayed due to the Contractor having difficulty sourcing required materials.

65. There is continuing concern about increased Coronavirus cases /self-isolation and its impact on service delivery as we go into the winter period. The service is currently experiencing absence of staff who have tested positive or isolating waiting test results and this scenario is likely to continue.

66. There is a significant concern that due to the national shortage of HGV drivers and the long waiting time for sitting theory tests that this could result in issues with delivering winter maintenance. This is particularly exacerbated in the event of any outbreak of cases. As the Road Service also relies on Neighbourhood Services to deliver Winter Maintenance, who will face the same issues outlined above, this could adversely affect the delivery of the Winter Maintenance programme.

Education Department

Return to School

67. All schools and nurseries across East Renfrewshire reopened for school session 2021/22 following the summer holidays, with staff and pupils returning on Monday 16 and Wednesday 18 August respectively. As a result of the national changes to guidance and the shift to beyond Level 0 restrictions, a new suite of guidance was provided for schools and nurseries to support the safe reopening and vigilance in continuing to respond to Covid-19.

68. With schools and nurseries reopening, many of the key mitigations against the potential risks of transmission of COVID, such as the use of face coverings for staff and secondary pupils, a focus on hand hygiene and the continued requirement for social distancing between children and adults in certain settings, have remained in place for the time being. The Scottish Government have confirmed that these measures will remain in place for at least 6 weeks from the beginning of the new session and will be reviewed on an ongoing basis.

69. Importantly, there has been a significant change in the approach of contact tracing activity within the classroom or playroom and the requirement for self-isolation, with a reduction in the need for large groups of children and young people to isolate for each positive case. Additionally, responsibility for contact tracing exercises has now been transferred to Test & Protect and away from individual settings and head teachers. As a result of the increasing numbers of Covid-19 cases across the community, there continues to be an impact on schools and nurseries, with significant numbers of pupils and staff being affected, with increased pressure on head teachers. This continues to impact on learning and teaching across settings due to higher rates of absence.

70. All risk assessments and mitigations continue to be reviewed and monitored on an ongoing basis by the department's health and safety staff, in conjunction with the Corporate Health and Safety Unit. The department will also continue to work closely with NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde and neighbouring authorities to consider any further steps to be taken to reduce the potential impacts of COVID across our settings.

Ventilation

71. Ventilation continues to be a key mitigation against the potential transmission of Covid within schools and nurseries and this has been highlighted through the recently published safety guidance from the Scottish Government.

72. Over the last 10 months, following the initial publication of ventilation guidance in October 2020, the Education Department has been working closely with colleagues in Property & Technical Services and specialist contractors on a ventilation strategy for our schools and nurseries. This has involved monitoring and computer modelling to assess levels of ventilation across the estate.

73. Following the publication of further guidance in August 2021, local authorities are now working closely with the Scottish Government on their approaches to ventilation, with additional funding being allocated to provide support for assessment and improvement. The

department will be continuing to work closely with colleagues across Property & Technical Services to build on the work undertaken in recent months to continue to implement ventilation improvement measures across schools and nurseries where required.

Supporting Children & Young People Wellbeing

74. Healthier Minds, the multi-stakeholder recovery team, has continued to deliver mental wellbeing support to children, young people and their families. The service works alongside primary and secondary schools (10-18 years), to facilitate targeted packages of support and the delivery of direct services to children, young people and their families all based on individual needs.

75. The screening hub model in place to consider referrals for support have committed to meeting on a weekly basis and is attended by regular representatives from CAMHS, social work, youth counselling, educational psychology and the Family Wellbeing Service. The hub discuss and agree the best possible support and route for the provision of this based on the needs of the child or young person (e.g. Healthier Minds Team member or youth counselling service). From January to mid-July 2021 the hub received 278 referrals with the main reasons for referrals anxiety and low mood. In addition, the Healthier Minds website has a range of information and support including recovery specific resources for staff and pupils, recognising just how challenging the last year has been for so many people. The website continues to evolve in response to feedback from children, young people and their families and is the hub for those seeking more information on self-help, support, local services or more information.

76. There continues to be an ongoing impact on the wellbeing of children and young people as a result of the pandemic and the disruption to school and learning since March 2020. The department continues to support staff and families through the Healthier Minds service as well as through our ongoing work with other departments and partners. Services continue to face high levels of demand on an ongoing basis which remains a pressure on the department.

77. In addition, throughout the summer holidays, the department working alongside a range of partners delivered the *Get Into Summer* programme with funding provided by the Scottish Government. Initial feedback from the programmes has been extremely positive, with targeted support offered to children and young people across schools. Further evaluation is being undertaken with a report to be considered at a future Education Committee.

SQA

78. As in 2019/20, in light of the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, an Alternative Certification Model for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher National Qualifications was implemented following the cancellation of the 2021 National Qualifications examination diet in May. Pupil awards were to be developed based on teacher and lecturer judgements, supported by assessment resources and quality assurance processes.

79. The Education Department co-ordinated a local authority approach to quality assurance and moderation of assessment across all of its secondary establishments and curricular areas. For 2020/21, attainment was determined by demonstrated assessment evidence, whereas in 2019/20 there remained elements of inferred attainment. Significant efforts have been made by secondary staff worked to ensure all assessment evidence was validated and whilst continuing to provide remote and in person learning.

80. In accordance with the agreed model, SQA sampled evidence from all schools. In addition, Education Scotland reviewed the processes undertaken by the department and schools. Moreover, the Education Department worked with other local authorities via the West Partnership Regional Improvement Collaborative, ensuring that validation and moderation of

assessment instruments was undertaken at a local, regional and national level as recommended.

81. All learners across Scotland received their 2021 results on Tuesday 10 August, having previously been advised of provisional results prior to the school holidays. Whilst further analysis is still to be undertaken by the Education Department, with a full report to be considered by the upcoming Education Committee, it was a successful year for our learners with strong performances at S4, and in many cases, best ever levels of attainment in several measures at the S5 and S6 year stages. This built on previous highest ever performance measures for these year groups in 2019 and 2020.

Building Back Better and Fairer

82. Since March 2020, schools and nurseries across East Renfrewshire have experienced unprecedented challenges in responding to the ongoing impacts of the pandemic. This has included two extended periods of closure, with most children and young people being required to learn remotely. Following both periods of closure, the department has consulted widely with pupils, staff and families on a wide range of issues, including feedback on closure and lessons learned throughout the pandemic.

83. Building on this consultation exercise, in August 2021, the department produced the *Building Back Better and Fairer* framework, latterly approved by Education Committee. This framework establishes key priorities to support schools and services as they recover from the pandemic and is designed to complement the activities set out in the existing Local Improvement Plan. The framework links with the department's existing vision of *Everyone Attaining, Everyone Achieving through Excellent Experiences* and has a clear focus on improving outcomes for all young learners through schools and nurseries.

84. The Education Department is currently finalising the primary school Curriculum for Excellence teacher judgements in reading, writing, talking and listening and numeracy as part of the data collection carried out by the Scottish Government. Whilst a full report will be provided to Education Committee in due course, it is anticipated that there will be an impact on attainment and on the ongoing efforts to close the attainment gap resulting from the pandemic.

85. In addition, as part of the wider national approach to education recovery, additional funding has been provided by the Scottish Government to fund the recruitment of additional teachers and support staff. A total of 24 teachers and 12 additional pupil support assistants will be recruited across the primary and secondary sectors and enable additional resource to support the implementation of *Building Back Better and Fairer* in the months ahead.

86. The framework is set to be implemented within schools in 2021/22 and the department will be continuing to report on progress alongside the existing Local Improvement Plan throughout the year.

87. Schools are currently finalising Curriculum for Excellence teacher judgements for submission to the Scottish Government. Whilst a full report will be presented to Education Committee in due course, it is anticipated that there will be an impact on attainment and on the ongoing efforts to close the attainment gap resulting from the pandemic.

HSCP

88. The HSCP, in common with health and social care services across Scotland is under considerable pressure. A combination of increased demand across all services and staff absence is creating significant problems with capacity. This is particularly acute in care at

home, but is evident in all services. We are experiencing higher rates of referrals and more complex presentations as a result of lock down.

HSCP Vaccination Programme

89. The HSCP COVID-19 vaccination programme commenced in December 2020 with the majority of care home residents vaccinated over a two week period, by staff volunteering from nursing teams across the HSCP. In January, the team vaccinated additional residents and care home staff, as part of a mop up exercise. At the end of each session, any spare vaccine was used to vaccinate HSCP care at home staff outside the care homes. Second doses were administered mid-February and mop up doses at the end of March completing the programme. Overall, the HSCP has vaccinated over 400 care home residents and 400 staff administering 1,663 doses in our local care homes.

90. District nurses supported by other HSCP staff have continued to carry out COVID-19 vaccinations in residents own homes for those unable to attend vaccination centres due to frailty or other health issues. The team have administered 1,059 first doses and 1,248 second doses to people referred by GPs or the vaccination clinics. This is on top of the 3,500 visits they undertake to deliver care to people in their own homes each month. The HSCP is now preparing for the winter flu programme, the HSCP will be responsible for delivering flu vaccinations to the housebound population.

PPE

91. The HSCP continues to run the PPE hub set up and run by HSCP staff. Distribution of essential protective supplies to HSCP staff, partner providers, carers and personal assistants. To date we have issued 916,662 gloves, 81,000 aprons and over 1 million masks.

92. HSCP district nursing and care home liaison nursing staff continue to support COVID testing for those unable to access testing centres, mostly our care home and housebound populations. They supported care home staff to undertake a range of testing including PCR and lateral flow testing. HSCP admin staff have linked with laboratories, pharmacy, and NHS transport to put in place easy access to testing including running out of hours on call arrangements for many months.

Support to Care Homes

93. In addition to testing and vaccination, a multi-disciplinary Care Home Oversight Group continues to meet twice weekly to provide co-ordinated support to care homes. Care homes have been caring for some of our most vulnerable residents over the course of the pandemic. Care home liaison staff have supported homes to manage residents' care, with advice on pressure area care, food, fluids and nutrition and individual nursing issues. Along with NHSGGC colleagues, they have offered infection prevention control advice and supportive visits. Commissioning and contracts staff have supported homes with daily welfare calls, and arranged virtual meetings and workshops for managers, updating them on changes to guidance and providing a forum for peer support. The HSCP adult support and protection team has worked closely with homes advising and investigating to keep the most vulnerable individuals safe from harm. Bespoke support has been offered to care homes particularly affected by the pandemic and the wellbeing of staff and residents continues to be a high HSCP priority.

Supporting people at home

94. Whilst the HSCP had to close our day services our learning disability staff have worked with our provider partners throughout the pandemic period to establish outreach and wraparound support for individuals and their families and our older people's Kirkton service staff were redeployed to support care at home.

95. Care at home has seen additional pressures due to a desire from more people to be supported at home and with more complex discharges. At the start of the pandemic some families wanted to limit the number of people coming into their homes and asked for their services to be suspended but as more people have been vaccinated the majority have reinstated services. In the current phase of the pandemic the service has been experiencing capacity pressures with higher than expected levels of staff absence and increased waiting times to access support. As a result of pressures and resource issues, in the last week of August there were: 21 people in hospital awaiting a package of care to facilitate a safe discharge; 29 people in the community awaiting services or an increase in support; and 7 people who have chosen to accept an intermediate care bed whilst awaiting services. External market provision has played a significant role in East Renfrewshire HSCP's previous track record and timely provision of care and support services. However the volume of referrals accepted by partner providers has reduced by circa 50%.

96. Our Hospital to Home team work to support timely and appropriate discharges from hospital. During the pandemic we have experienced significant issues around supporting 'adults with incapacity' and establishing appropriate guardianship/Power of Attorney arrangements. We are currently seeing an increase in delayed discharges. This is being driven by the pressure on care at home services which is restricting access. A majority of care at home provision in East Renfrewshire is delivered by partner providers and we are seeing limited capacity internally. We continue to work with partner providers to encourage and assist them to take on complex cases as people are discharged from hospital.

97. During the pandemic our rehabilitation teams have experienced increased pressures in the absence of a number of specialist rehabilitation services and earlier discharges from hospital. The average of 40–50 referrals per week in 2019 / early 2020 has risen to 70-80 per week over the past 10 months.

98. For many people recovering from mental health and harmful alcohol or drug use the lockdown periods have been challenging. Despite the significant challenges presented by COVID-19, we have worked with individuals with lived experience and our partner Penumbra to design and develop a peer support service, which works alongside existing mental health and addictions services. Peer support is where people with similar life experiences offer each other support, especially as they move through difficult or challenging experiences. The East Renfrewshire service had its first referrals in early September 2020, initially offering opportunities to meet face-to-face, within the restrictions at that time, and then moving to phone or video call support. Uptake of the service across referring services (Adult mental health team, community addictions service and key third sector partners) was very positive and the service was delivering at capacity, In June 2021, following a successful evaluation, the peer support service was extended for three years, and an additional peer worker recruited in August to increase the number of individuals being supported and firmly embed peer support as part of local service delivery.

99. Our locality social work teams are seeing a growing backlog of overdue community care reviews (currently 226). This has resulted from a combination of additional support being required in the community and from the requirement for teams to focus on our pandemic response and most urgent need. As we progress our recovery and adapt to changing need we need to recognise this additional work pressure on our teams. We are currently looking at options to replicate the model used to undertake outstanding reviews of our residents within care homes, and take on additional staff to undertake these reviews.

Support to Children and Families

100. Over the course of the pandemic HSCP Children's Services have maintained high rates of contact with children. (Childs Plan contacts averaged 72%/week; Child Protection averaged 100%/week; Throughcare/aftercare averaged 90%/week.), and have successfully

managed to support the highest number of looked after children in school (57%). Within Youth intensive services contact levels with young people remained very high, averaging at 81% of young people having contact at least once per fortnight

101. Our teams are seeing increasing complexity particularly for children with diagnosed neurodevelopmental disorders and a higher prevalence of families in crisis leading to more of these children coming under child protection and an associated increase in numbers coming into care. Despite this, 95% of children under child protection are supported in our local communities. Intensive Family Support packages of support and intervention have been designed to prevent breakdown and will be a focus for 2021/22. Our Child and Adolescent Mental Health Team (CAMHS) is under considerable pressure and having to prioritise those young people with the most urgent need. The creation of the multi-agency Healthier Minds Team is helping to support young people with less urgent, but no less distressing, need for support with their mental health.

102. As a result of the pandemic there has been a significant increase in the number of children with complex and additional support needs who have become looked after. Currently 17% of looked after children have a disability evidencing that the pandemic has significantly affected families with children who have additional support needs.

Support to Carers

103. Working with ER Carers, we have been ensuring carers have access to guidance and PPE. Check-in calls to carers were introduced by ER Carers, and carers have been offered support to set up and manage a peer support Facebook Group. The Mental Health Carers group continues to run virtually. The pandemic has impacted on carers, with the lack of resources and stimulation for the cared for person impacting on the health and wellbeing of all individuals. We have worked with the Care Collective to refresh our Carers Strategy. East Renfrewshire's Short Breaks Statement has also been updated to ensure all advice and information is current and includes the development of creative, COVID-19-safe online breaks that meet the outcomes of the Carer and the cared for person.

Corporate and Community Services Department

104. As is the case in other parts of the Council, the Corporate and Community Services department is not back to business as usual in any sense. Covid related requirements combined with major line of business system changes to Council Tax and benefits, HR and Payroll and customer management systems during the last year while staff were working from home has taken considerable amount of staff resource and created backlogs. Priority is being given the working through these whilst continuing to meet the new and increasing demand coming in to services.

HR

105. In May 2021 the number of employees absent as a result of COVID-19 including those employees reporting sick, isolating, and unable to work from home was reported at a low of 6 with a further 16 employees isolating and able to work from home. The number of employees affected continued to rise again to a peak at the end of June, with 64 employees unable to work from home and a further 33 self-isolating however able to work. Reductions had been seen by the end of August however numbers have sharply risen again and we currently have 51 employees reporting sick, isolating, and unable to work from home with a further 25 isolating and able to work from home.

106. A significant resource is required for the administration of COVID recording which is impacting on available resource. However support continues to be provided to managers and

employees through these sickness absence situations and this support is ongoing. All employees continue to be supported and we continue to keep up-to-date with government and Public Health Scotland updates to ensure that the manager and employee guidance reflects the national position and that we communicate these changes to our employees.

107. Recruitment volumes have significantly increased during the pandemic due to additional COVID funding received specifically in Education and HSCP and the team continue to support these requests which is one factor that has contributed to increased job evaluation turnaround times.

108. Although national restrictions have been lifted we continue to take a measured approach with our employees and encourage staff to work from home where possible, as per current guidance, with the appropriate equipment and health and safety guidance provided to support employees in doing so. There are some staff due to personal circumstances who have returned to the office and we continue to ensure that staff numbers in buildings are tightly controlled to ensure all social distancing measures are maintained.

109. We continue to meet regularly with the Trade Unions and concerns raised are discussed and reviewed in a timely manner.

Customer First

110. In Customer First customer contact continues to be very high across all contact channels. As part of the recovery Contact Centre staff returned to the office on 29 April and although this provided improved call management our call handling rate continues to be lower than normal.

111. Staff absence continues to impact with higher annual leave over the school holidays, higher than average sickness and there continues to be a risk if staff need to isolate as they cannot answer calls from home. This has significantly impacted the number of staff available to support our skilled contact centre queue and the overall number of staff available to answer all calls. Call times are also taking longer with customers often contacting about multiple and more complex issues.

- Death registration continues to be carried out remotely, which takes longer compared to face to face and there has been a significant increase in email enquiries from undertakers and families related to death registrations and also follow-up calls compared to pre-covid.
- With restrictions lifting there continues to be a high volume of enquires about arranging and changing wedding dates with the re-issue of certificates for new dates required in some cases.
- MART are seeing a modest increase in demand for traditional MART Services, mostly via the Income Maximisation with calls taking longer and generally more intensive than pre-Covid. The team continue to support the COVID Humanitarian relief effort and Self Isolation Support Grants

Community Safety

112. The Community Wardens have now returned to near normal working practices. Wardens are now able to go into households when required, subject to Covid screening questions and windows being opened. Parking enforcement returned to full enforcement in August and vehicles can now be double crewed in line with mitigating factors within the H&S Risk Assessment. Some of the community warden team are still diverted to support the isolation support calls and assessments for support grants and the wardens will continue to

support the joint Safe East Ren summer plan with Police Scotland over the remainder of the summer period.

ICT

113. The ICT Service continues to operate a blended approach with increasing levels of support calls and service requests. The Service Desk remains under significant pressure. Changes to processes and increased short term staffing have gone some way to alleviating the pressures and reducing call wait times. Targeted communication to users are ongoing to promote the use of the online portal, leaving the call handlers to support those with critical or connectivity issues. The service is still unable to accommodate low priority service requests due to the current working conditions and service pressures.

Democratic Services

114. As restrictions relax, arrangements are now in place for Elected Members to access HQ on a “by appointment” basis. This will be kept under review. Work is also underway to install the necessary equipment in the Council Chamber to enable hybrid meetings to take place. This will make it possible for a limited number of meeting participants to be in the Council Chamber, with others continuing to participate in meetings remotely. Further updates on progress on the installation, and anticipated start dates to hybrid meeting arrangements, will be provided to Elected Members in due course.

Revenues & Benefits

115. The Revenues and Benefits service continues to experience challenges as a result of two main issues – rising caseload and time taken to familiarise staff with a new ICT system, which has replaced a significant legacy system and all business processes. The benefits service in particular has a backlog which is affecting performance and this is likely to have a negative effect on our performance indicators in 2021/22. Scottish Welfare Fund Crisis Grants are up 12%; Community Care Grants 34% and Council Tax Reduction new cases by 119%. Every effort is being made to recover the backlog and improve performance including additional staff and additional hours.

Isolation Support & Self-Isolation Support Grants

116. The Corporate & Community Services Department continues to oversee the Council’s proactive outbound calling to those asked to isolate by Public Health Scotland; administration of the Self-Isolation Support Grants (SISG); answering in-bound queries from the National Assistance Helpline and keeping an overview of any emerging support requirements as a result of the pandemic. There continues to be close liaison with Voluntary Action East Renfrewshire, who continue to operate the Community Hub, including wellbeing calls to those who may be isolated or lonely.

117. It has been a very busy summer for the Isolation Support call handlers, with an increased caseload and increasing volumes of SISGs to be processed. The evidence-gathering for this process can be time-consuming leading to lengthy calls of up to 40 minutes per case. In recent weeks, a backlog of approximately 2 weeks’ SISG applications (c.80 cases) had been growing and putting pressure on the Scottish Welfare Fund team, who were already experiencing pressures as a result of a rising caseload (above). To free up Benefits staff, the Money Advice and Rights Team (MART) are supporting as an interim step to process SISGs, largely working overtime. We will continue to monitor caseload, staffing capacity and processing times closely so that resource can be prioritised within these busy teams. The Scottish Government has now confirmed a small amount of administrative funding to allow processing of SISGs until March 2022 and whilst this is welcomed, the resource does not account for the significant administrative burden that these processes place on stretched teams.

118. There is beginning to be suggestion nationally that the requirements of councils to continue providing the Isolation Support service will continue at least until the turn of the year, but there is lack of clarity into 2022, which makes it difficult to plan services. The Council is relying heavily on two community wardens who have been redeployed to deliver this service since September 2020, supported by staff from other Corporate & Community Service areas where required (e.g. at weekends and during absence/leave). These wardens will stay in place until end of December, at which time staffing resource will be reviewed. Service impacts on Community Safety are minimised through the use of overtime and agency staff, however some increases in response times may be experienced as a result.

Pandemic Payments

119. The Council continues to administer pandemic payments as introduced, often at short notice, by the Scottish Government. Each payment is a time-consuming and detailed piece of work. Each internal process needs to be carefully developed to ensure correct eligibility at the time of payment; gathering of payment details such as bank details; building in checks against fraud; and dealing with pre and post payment queries from residents. This is a significant burden of work for services involved and one which will continue into 2022. Forthcoming payments include:

- Low Income Pandemic Payments - i.e. a 'per household' £130 payment due by end of October to households on low income e.g. with Council Tax Reduction. We expect there to be up to 5200 of these payments due in East Renfrewshire.
- Autumn and Winter Family Pandemic Payments 2021 - i.e. a 'per child' payment to the family of those of school age who receive Free School Meals as a result of low income. The winter payment was due in December, but the Scottish Government has recently asked councils to add a further autumn payment in October. Approximately up to 1800 children in East Renfrewshire will be eligible for these payments. Work is also being undertaken with the Education Department to assess whether the Christmas holiday Free School Meals payment can also be made within the winter payment rather than via voucher as had been the case in the summer holidays. The workload associated with these new payments will fall heavily on the Accounts Payable service, working closely with Revenues/Benefits and the Education Department – there is a chance that this workload may adversely impact invoice payment timeframes and limit the ability to progress improvements in the purchase to pay process.
- 4 x Family Pandemic Payments of £130 in Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter 2022 are also now due, based on same criteria as above.

Humanitarian Support Research & Funding

120. A Cabinet report in June 2021 outlined the Humanitarian Support funding available to the Council in 2021/22. In line with recommendations in that report, the Council has commissioned a community engagement and research exercise, which has now commenced. This work will be complete in November 2021 and will inform the Council's renewal and humanitarian support efforts. In tandem with this research, proposals for a community-bid process are also now in development alongside Voluntary Action East Renfrewshire, with a view to successful bids from the community and third sector being awarded before April 2022.

Participatory Budgeting

121. Given the demands of the last year and the impact on normal business work plans the Council has not made the progress it would have hoped in developing its approach to participatory budgeting and is unlikely to meet the target of 1% of council spend. There have been a number of contributory factors most notably the demands of covid on all council

services and the impact of restrictions on community engagement. We understand that many other councils are also in a similar position.

Chief Executive's

Accountancy Services

122. Accountancy services have largely continued with minimal disruption whilst all of the team are working from home. Workloads have, however, increased due to the demands for COVID related financial information, returns and grant monitoring and staff are struggling to keep up with all demands. This has also affected progress in developing the new financial system, introduced in 2019, with a view to maximising efficiencies and so the anticipated benefits for staff across the Council have not yet been achieved. These factors, together with a lack of forward planning information nationally as a result of the ongoing COVID impact, has resulted in preparatory work on budget savings being slightly behind the normal timetable for 2022/23.

123. In addition, due to the continuation of remote working, the external audit of the Council's 2020/21 accounts may take longer than usual with the statutory deadline for accounts sign off being once again extended to 30 November rather than 30 September.

CONCLUSIONS

124. The amount of coronavirus related work carried out across the Council continues at significant levels. As a consequence of services being diverted to this work, backlogs of what would be considered to be "routine" work have built up. As COVID-related demands continue, addressing these backlogs will take some considerable time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

125. That the Council note:-

- a) the ongoing significant response work to coronavirus;
- b) that there is a backlog of work caused by the impact of the coronavirus;
- c) The significant continuing work pressure on staff and the importance of protecting staff wellbeing and
- d) the risk of concurrent events during this winter of Coronavirus, Brexit, COP26, industrial action and winter weather.

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