

**North East Derbyshire District Council**

**Cabinet**

**11<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

**Environmental Health Service Update**

**Report of Councillor C Cupit, Portfolio Holder with Responsibility for Environment**

This report is public

**Purpose of the Report**

- To provide an update on the Environmental Health Service, including service improvement interventions and progress with the ongoing service review.
- To present and report on business continuity experiences and the role of the Joint Environmental Health Service during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.
- To highlight the potential for new ways of working to contribute to future efficiency and service improvement, reflecting on lessons learned during the lockdown period.

**1 Report Details**

- 1.1 Previous reports have outlined the challenges faced within the Joint Environmental Health Service and the actions being taken to bring about service improvement and enhance enforcement activity (Cabinet 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2019, 5<sup>th</sup> December 2019 and 13<sup>th</sup> February 2020).
- 1.2 A significant risk area has been performance with implementation of the Council's statutory food safety inspection programme. This report will provide an update on performance in this area during 2019/20.
- 1.3 During the COVID-19 crisis the Environmental Health Service has witnessed some significant changes in demand, has implemented a range of interventions and adopted new ways of working to meet demand in order to protect public health and to support business.

**2 Food Safety**

- 2.1 Early in 2019 the Service was under scrutiny from the Food Standards Agency due to a backlog of overdue food safety interventions. Addressing that concern has been a service priority over 2019/20 and a range of measures were put in place to improve performance, against a backdrop of vacancies and inability to recruit to essential posts.
- 2.2 In the North East Derbyshire area, 638 food safety interventions were completed in the year, out of 639 that were outstanding (325 of these were overdue from previous years). An additional 510 interventions were undertaken in Bolsover.

- 2.3 Due to the ongoing recruitment difficulties and vacancies in the Service, food safety consultants and an officer seconded from High Peak were used to achieve the targets. Managing commercial relationships, adapting to new ways of delivering the service and altering some processes to be as efficient as possible presented some new and challenging experiences to the Team, but these proved to be positive experiences.
- 2.4 A significant improvement was also made to the processing of newly registered food businesses. At the start of 2019/20 there were 42 premises awaiting inspection and at the end of the year there were 15, many of which had not started operating. Through the year the 'Broadly Compliant KPI' also improved from 89.5% to 95%.

### **3 COVID-19 Response**

- 3.1 On the 16<sup>th</sup> March, as the COVID-19 situation developed nationally, the Joint Environmental Health Service began making arrangements for adjusting service delivery to protect staff, prevent the spread of the virus, and to maintain essential service delivery. Staff were advised to work at home if they could to help reduce the number of people working from Mill Lane, and to reduce the risk of community transmission.
- 3.2 On the 18<sup>th</sup> March a COVID-19 protocol document was published for the Service which detailed the protective measures staff needed to follow and which defined essential visits and activity.
- 3.3 This early business continuity work also identified the existing mobile technology and equipment the Service possessed which could be utilised to ensure as many staff as possible could work at and from home.
- 3.4 On the 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020, the Government announced the partial UK lockdown, which amongst other measures, in part closed all schools for all children, other than those of key workers and instructed people to stay at home unless their work could not be done from home. Subsequently, on the 24<sup>th</sup> March, the Service's protocols were updated and a management instruction given to all staff to work at home where possible.
- 3.5 The vast majority of staff had been issued with laptops over a rolling two-year technical refresh programme. The Technical Support Team had, however, relied on the use of desktop computers. Contingency measures were put in place to provision iPads previously used for Taxi Licensing Tests, to support this staff group working remotely.
- 3.6 The majority of staff already had smartphones and by using the divert function within the MiCollab package, telephony continuity was mostly dealt with. Some call diverts to the Contact Centre also proved necessary.
- 3.7 Arrangements were put in place to enable printing and postage. Staff were able to email Contact Centre staff who would arrange to print and post, negating the need to attend the office. All staff were asked to use email communications wherever possible and Contact Centre staff were asked to attempt to obtain email contact details from

all callers. Despite best efforts in this regard, 581 items of correspondence were printed and posted between 23<sup>rd</sup> March and 4<sup>th</sup> June.

#### **4 Service Requests & Activity**

4.1 The Service has seen a significant increase in service requests and complaints, particularly with regard to nuisances, including neighbour noise complaints and garden bonfires.

4.2 The overall number of service requests received in Environmental Health from 23<sup>rd</sup> March to 3<sup>rd</sup> June was as follows: -

North East Derbyshire District Council = 838

Bolsover District Council = 835

Total = 1,673

4.3 Over the lockdown period the number of domestic bonfire complaints increased by 145 and domestic noise complaints by 69, being a 213% increase overall by comparison with the same period last year (both Councils).

4.4 The Service has responded to these issues by creating new advice notes and website content, in addition to investigating each individual case.

4.5 The Service has also been central to implementing many of the Government's social distancing and business requirements. We have been providing support to the local business community by providing advice leaflets and guidance on the risk assessments and controls necessary to become COVID secure.

4.6 Officers are working alongside colleagues in Economic Development to identify businesses on the high street that need support, so that we can continue to give them the advice they need and contribute to economic recovery.

4.7 In addition, various enforcement actions and initiatives have been delivered including two district wide enforcement campaigns, visiting 308 premises in North East Derbyshire and 314 in Bolsover.

#### **5 New Management and Delivery Approaches**

##### **5.1 Leadership**

5.2 One of the keys to service improvement is considered to be effective and open communication with teams and individuals. During lockdown, this has been particularly important to ensure that new information can be disseminated and to enable effective staff management and leadership.

5.3 The Service had already started to roll out the use of WhatsApp to assist team communication and remove the reliance on formal email for keeping in touch with staff who work predominantly out of the office. This early adoption enabled the Service to ensure that discussion groups and support mechanisms were in place to ensure people could keep in touch with ease and to ensure effective one-to-one support from managers and team leaders was available.

- 5.4 The use of WhatsApp gave early access to video calling services, which enabled the teams to quickly adopt the initial use of Zoom and then the GoToMeeting video conferencing platforms.
- 5.5 Frequent video conference Environmental Health Management team meetings and, in most teams, weekly team meetings, are enabling the Service to maintain effective leadership, team member support and task and team management.
- 5.6 Inspection and Visiting Services
- 5.7 While normal inspection and intervention programmes (food safety, health and safety, pollution control and animal welfare) were suspended formally by Government departments, work to support businesses, their employees and consumers has continued in a different way, through remote interventions, advice and support communications and beginning early preparations for the resumption of work, following the easing of lockdown restrictions.
- 5.8 Across the Housing and Pollution team, although visits to witness incidents, nuisances and housing disrepair issues had initially ceased, those cases where people were in significant danger were prioritised and successful outcomes maintained for the public. Advice and support to tenants and landlords has been key to ensuring housing standards are maintained during the lockdown.
- 5.9 The service has also been able to release a number of staff to support the Council's efforts to support communities in different ways, including delivering food and medicines as part of the community support team.
- 5.10 The changes to work approaches and ensuring effective communication has enabled the Service to continue to deliver services, albeit in different ways and sometimes from different locations. Where visits to deal with serious incidents are required these have continued to be undertaken quickly and effectively to support vulnerable clients.
- 5.11 As many food businesses looked to maintain their income and moved to takeaway services, the Environmental Health Service has provided further support, practical advice and guidance on how to safely operate. Through website updates, a suite of sector specific guidance documents (including for licensed animal activities, such as dog boarding), direct mail and email, along with ad-hoc checks in our communities to ensure social distancing is maintained at these businesses, the Service has successfully engaged with the business community during this crisis.
- 5.12 Licensing
- 5.13 The Licensing Team has seen significant and gradual changes during the lockdown as the practicalities of keeping the nation moving were realised. The pre-lockdown processes for application handling and vehicle licensing became very quickly untenable, due to the amount of physical contact and support the licensing process required.

- 5.14 At the beginning of the lockdown it was identified that new driver licences would not be a priority for the Service, due to the need for detailed checks, knowledge tests and safeguarding courses, which the Council's Licensing Policy requires. Without these, the safeguarding of passengers would be put at significant risk. These were suspended until restrictions allow these to be delivered safely again. This is being kept under review.
- 5.15 National changes reduced vehicle testing requirements but the challenge of dealing with licence applications and maintaining an effective taxi and private hire fleet during the crisis remained. As the Council's MOT and vehicle testing capabilities return to operation over the coming months, vehicle tests can be resumed.
- 5.16 A new method of carrying out Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks was adopted as a temporary measure to enable renewals of driver licences to continue. A temporary engagement with a commercial provider, who is used by a number of other licensing authorities and organisations, enables DBS checks to be carried out over the Internet, with the results being sent to the Council within a week from an application being made. This was also a significant opportunity to evaluate a different way of delivering this aspect of the service. The costs and benefits to this are being evaluated at present, with early indications suggesting the new process has provided significant reductions in the time it takes to process an application and in the amount of physical contact required with applicants.
- 5.17 Lockdown Enforcement
- 5.18 As part of the lockdown, businesses were required to close and the enforcement of those restrictions fell to Environmental Health services at District Council's and Trading Standards at the County Council, with support from the Police where required.
- 5.19 The planning and delivery of this has largely been successful thanks to partnership working through the Derbyshire Chief Regulators Group. Our Environmental Health Service was instrumental in beginning regional coordination efforts following the business closure announcements. This has continued to ensure that intelligence on cross boundary businesses is maintained, that delivery of enforcement and advice is delivered in partnership with the County Council and county wide enforcement methods are consistent.
- 5.20 The Service has also been part of the County wide Community Cohesion and Social Distancing group which is a partnership intelligence and planning group, involving Police, Environmental Health, Trading Standards and Public Health practitioners.
- 5.21 To date, the Council has supported hundreds of businesses to ensure they close or put in place appropriate social distancing measures to comply with the law and protect public health. The Service has taken more formal action regarding one premises to require them to close to comply with the business restrictions. One prosecution case has been submitted to the Magistrates' Court (to consider alongside a previous licensing offence) for an offence of opening during the first weekend of the lockdown in March. A Prohibition Notice has recently been served on a pub for flouting restrictions.

5.22 Over recent weeks the Service has been engaged in regional discussions with Public Health colleagues to contribute to the development of local Outbreak Control Plans and to define the local Trace and Track response to COVID-19.

#### 5.23 Service Development

5.24 Work on service developments and improvements has continued. Officers have been working on a new quality management system and various systems enhancements to support improved delivery during and following the crisis.

5.25 As some programmes of work ceased due to lockdown, this provided a small amount of capacity to work on some of these aspects in a more focussed way. This is helping the Service prepare for work after the lockdown eases and as the Council starts to return to more normal business. Examples include: -

- Enhanced online reporting of incidents to ease pressures on customer services and on the administrative burdens within the Service;
- Detailed and more customer focussed work instructions within the Environmental Protection and Commercial Teams;
- IT system enhancements to make use of service request systems more efficient, and;
- Performance reporting enhancements to ensure staff and service management is effective in the face of new remote working normalities.

### **6 Staff Safety and Welfare**

6.1 From the beginning of the outbreak, the focus of the Environmental Health Management Team has been on ensuring public safety in addition to staff safety and welfare. The latter is critical to ensuring the former, in any business continuity situation.

6.2 Ensuring staff have the right equipment, such as hand sanitiser and protective gloves, along with risk assessments and procedures to follow, ensures the physical safety of our teams as far as possible.

6.3 In addition to equipment and materials, regard has to be given to the mental health impacts of a rapidly changing work situation. We have recognised the personal challenges faced by some of our staff who have needed to home-school children during the lockdown, the emotional challenges this presents and the potential isolation which some have inevitably felt. Social interactions at work are really important, on many levels, and home and remote working can disrupt this significantly.

6.4 To support staff to be as productive as possible a number of changes have been made to ways of working, including: -

- Flexibility of work times to enable work/life/home schooling balance;
- Rotating duties to provide variety;
- Providing opportunities for working on community support work;
- Giving dedicated projects to staff members to help them focus on a positive outcome;

- Use of WhatsApp communication tools for one to one support with managers and through regular team discussions;
- Social interaction time through group chats and lunchtime quizzes, to improve or maintain morale, and;
- Regular communication and increased use of video conferencing to ensure meetings are more personal and effective (initially via Zoom and latterly by Go To Meeting).

## **7 Recovery Planning**

7.1 In considering the recovery and return to normal service delivery (as far as possible with social distancing requirements) the following factors are being considered: -

- The performance measures required to demonstrate effective and efficient work activity – with more focus on quantity and quality outcome measures, over the more traditional reliance on time at work measures;
- The ability of teams to return to normal service delivery with remote working and maintaining social distance at office locations;
- Moving away from the use of traditional post to reduce the number of people needing to print documents and attend offices together and to deliver more timely responses to service requests and to business queries;
- Enhancing the use of digital tools for site visits, online reporting, service requests, licence applications and better use of email for customer interactions;
- Improving staff welfare and support opportunities and exploring how we can better meet needs of staff who may have been more challenged with new ways of working, and;
- Making a business case for additional remote working and collaboration tools (such as Microsoft Office 365).

7.2 Moving to ‘digital first’ service delivery will be key to reducing those physical contact points with customers, but also enabling easier remote working which enhances service delivery and efficiency. With this in mind, further integration of the Council’s website systems and the Uniform case management system will enable seamless online licensing applications, in addition to the service request handling the integration can achieve at present.

7.3 During the crisis, emergency solutions put in place have proven that a ‘digital first’ approach really does work, with support where needed. Even without full integration to back office systems, encouraging the use of online applications has worked, has generally been well received and if maintained in the future would without doubt save significant officer time from unnecessary face to face contact and paper-based exchanges.

7.4 Before the crisis, the Service was mapping out plans to implement an Agile Working Project, as a pilot to feed into the Council’s digital transformation theme. Licences had been procured for a mobile forms software package, which had been trialled in a few areas. The current crisis has resulted in working arrangements overtaking planned pilot activity and have clearly demonstrated that new ways of working offer significant opportunities to increase efficiency and service quality. Further evaluation of learning is required but the Environmental Health Service has gained significant

confidence in the value of new ways of working, which will feed into the 2020-23 Improvement Programme.

## **8 Service Review**

- 8.1 During the lockdown other work on the Environmental Health Service Review has progressed, although inevitably this has been impeded by managing the emergency response and the rapid implementation of new ways of working to maintain service delivery.
- 8.2 A full suite of new and revised job descriptions have been developed, in line with the draft service structure previously tabled. Job evaluation and staff and union consultation processes are shortly to be progressed.

## **9 Implications**

### **9.1 Finance and Risk Implications**

- 9.1.1 There are no immediate financial implications. Service improvements and costs will be presented in more detail in the Environmental Health Service Review final report and 2020-23 Improvement Programme.

### **9.2 Legal Implications including Data Protection**

- 9.2.1 There are no legal implications for this recommendation.

### **9.3 Human Resources Implications**

- 9.3.1 There are no human resource implications for this recommendation. Human resource considerations arising from the ongoing Service Review and 2020-23 Improvement Programme will be presented in a future report.

### **9.4 Recommendations**

- 9.4.1 That the achievements of the Joint Environmental Health Service be noted by Cabinet Members.
- 9.4.2 That a final Service Review report, including a detailed 2020-23 Environmental Health Improvement Programme, be presented to Cabinet, pending conclusion of job evaluation and staff consultation.
- 9.4.3 That a further report on new ways of working and lessons learned for the Council be presented to Cabinet by October 2020.
- 9.4.4 That a business case be developed, in collaboration with IT, with regard to tools and solutions required to support new ways of working e.g. early adoption of Microsoft 365, within the Joint Environmental Health Service.

**10 Decision Information**

<p><b>Is the decision a Key Decision?</b>  A Key Decision is an executive decision which has a significant impact on two or more District wards or which results in income or expenditure to the Council above the following thresholds:  BDC: Revenue - £75,000 <input type="checkbox"/>  Capital - £150,000 <input type="checkbox"/>  NEDDC: Revenue - £100,000 <input type="checkbox"/>  Capital - £250,000 <input type="checkbox"/>  <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Please indicate which threshold applies</p>	No
<p><b>Is the decision subject to Call-In?</b>  (Only Key Decisions are subject to Call-In)</p>	No
<p><b>Has the relevant Portfolio Holder been informed</b></p>	Yes
<p><b>District Wards Affected</b></p>	All
<p><b>Links to Corporate Plan priorities or Policy Framework</b></p>	

**11 Document Information**

Appendix No	Title
<p><b>Background Papers</b> (These are unpublished works which have been relied on to a material extent when preparing the report. They must be listed in the section below. If the report is going to Cabinet (NEDDC) or Executive (BDC) you must provide copies of the background papers)</p>	
Report Author	Contact Number
<p>Ken Eastwood, Joint Head of Service  Matt Finn, Environmental Health Manager</p>	<p>01246 217851  01246 217848</p>