

COVID-19 – CHIEF EXECUTIVE UPDATE REPORT

Introduction

It is no understatement to say that we are in the midst of the worst public health crisis this country has faced in generations.

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic is perhaps the UK's single greatest domestic emergency since the Second World War. It is a time of great worry for us all.

Heartbreakingly, it is also a time of tragedy for too many families, locally and nationally. Yet through this darkness the light of countless selfless acts of kindness comes shining through, not least here in Blackpool, showcasing the very best of what we are as a society and giving us hope for the future.

This report is intended to provide an overview of the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic, its immediate impact on Council services and, most importantly, our subsequent response to help and protect people and businesses across Blackpool.

From the outset, it was vital that as a local authority we were able to step up to the mark to provide our community with leadership, guidance and unwavering support. I believe we have done just that.

As the health crisis gathered momentum, resulting in a UK-wide lockdown, our ability to deliver Council services in the usual manner altered virtually overnight as some non-essential services temporarily closed, many staff moved to home-working and essential care services found themselves facing a rapidly-escalating demand.

Our ability to adapt seamlessly to this fast-moving scenario became of paramount importance and we made it very clear that we would do whatever was required to support our residents and businesses even if we did not necessarily know how we would fund it at the time.

Since then, the imagination, dedication and devotion to duty that has been demonstrated by so many has been truly extraordinary, not least by our own staff who have willingly switching from non-essential work to support newly-established services aimed at helping the most vulnerable people in our town.

Tens of thousands of people have already benefited from this support and some of the stories that are emerging from our Corona Kindness community hubs are truly humbling.

This is public service at its finest.

Some of the crisis measures that are in place are likely to last for the foreseeable future and as a "new normal" emerges, we will find new ways of delivering services that will continue to test our strength and resilience. But I am confident we will get there.

At the same time, we have a duty to plan for the future and map out a road to recovery for our local economy. This work has already begun.

I am pleased that throughout this unprecedented period my Leadership Team and myself have had the full support of the Leader of the Council who is in regular contact. Both he and the Deputy Leader (Children) also join our daily Corporate Leadership Team teleconferences.

We have also had the full support of the other three Group Leaders and the two Members of Parliament with whom we have had weekly briefings.

All of this support has made difficult decisions easier to implement.

I trust that the content of this report confirms that the Council, its many partners and the people of Blackpool have what it takes to succeed in the face of this devastating virus, and that we will continue – together - to rise to the many challenges that lie ahead.

1. COVID-19 Public Health Overview

The first human cases of Coronavirus (COVID-19) were reported at the end of December last year in Wuhan, China.

Over the ensuing weeks, the virus spread across the world causing a global pandemic. Cases in the UK started to increase rapidly during the month of March and in the early phases the Government adopted the approach of containment with self-isolation of individuals who had travelled to the affected areas and contact tracing of those that had been in contact with cases.

This, along with the usual infection control advice of washing your hands regularly, initially delayed the spread in the UK, though it soon became clear that a further spread was increasingly likely.

The Government moved from a containment phase to a delay phase, introducing significant measures to socially distance the population, culminating in a lockdown on 23 March.

This lockdown has been necessary to reduce the number of cases and flatten the curve as well as to reduce the mortality in the most vulnerable ie, those over the age of 70, or with underlying medical conditions. At this point, the Council's Public Protection and Enforcement Division became responsible for enforcing the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Business Closure) (England) Regulations 2020.

A multi-tasking team from across Public Protection operated a programme of ensuring businesses were adhering to the new regulations, which required some interventions during the early stages.

In terms of public restrictions the Public Protection, Community Safety and Enforcement Teams have worked closely with the Police in dealing with anti-social behaviour, neighbour-related complaints heightened by and drug/drink-related incidents.

At the time of writing the lockdown appears to be working, with the measures suppressing the number of cases and deaths, and it appears that we are approaching a peak. This is reflected by the number of positive cases being reported by our local hospital trust.

Due to the combined efforts of the local authority and its health partners the healthcare system has been able to respond appropriately to the extra pressure and demand created by COVID-19. That said, we need to stringently continue with the social distancing measures until such time as Government makes a decision on lifting some of the restrictions. Otherwise, all the gains we have made thus far might be lost.

This particular virus is going to be with us for the foreseeable future and there are only two routes out of the current situation: Having an effective vaccine and/or antiviral drugs. Drug and vaccine trials are underway, but the full development of these are many months away. Until these are available some restrictions are likely to be in place for the medium to long term e.g., socially distancing the elderly and the medically vulnerable.

The Government might choose to lift some of the other restrictions, but will only do so when it is satisfied that the cases and transmission has declined substantially from where it is now.

2. Lancashire Local Resilience Forum (LRF): Emergency Response Overview

Blackpool Council is a core partner in the Lancashire Local Resilience Forum (LRF). The LRF is responsible for the coordination of a range of critical activities in emergency situations between the county's public services.

In this instance, the LRF is coordinating activity on crucial issues such as hospital capacity, the procurement of adequate supplies of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and emergency stocks of food to support the vulnerable.

The LRF has also been undertaking peer reviews of each organisation's response arrangements such as business continuity arrangements and establishment of community hubs. It is both pleasing and reassuring that in each assessment to date Blackpool Council is one of only a handful of local authorities considered to have a strong approach in this early stage of the pandemic.

Blackpool Council officers are playing a key role in the work of the LRF, in particular myself as Council Chief Executive; Karen Smith, our Director of Adult Services; and Arif Rajpura, our Director of Public Health.

The LRF is led by a Strategic Coordinating Group that is responsible for bringing together the work of a series of themes, each led by a local leader in public service.

I am chair the group that is leading the work of the "Humanitarian Aspects" work stream, which is responsible for overseeing the set-up of local community hubs and support for vulnerable people across the county.

This is a challenging area of work, involving 15 local authorities and numerous other public and voluntary partners. As mentioned above, Blackpool's own arrangements in this regard are strong, and more detail on this is explained later in the report in terms of our approach to Community Hubs and our unique Corona Kindness campaign.

Adequate supply of PPE to care settings continues to be a very real concern and challenge for the LRF. The national difficulty in securing and supplying PPE to local areas has dominated much media attention over recent weeks.

We are doing everything we can through the LRF, and our own local efforts, to ensure that providers in Blackpool have what they require. Our local efforts in this respect are covered later in this report.

In response to the pandemic, the LRF also set up a group tasked with planning for the very sad, but inevitable, rise in burials and cremations to take place across Lancashire.

Joceline Greenaway, Head of Registration and Bereavement Services at Blackpool Council, has led this group and has allowed for a uniform approach in terms of mortality planning, ensuring bereaved families experience a consistent service across the county at this very difficult time.

In line with Public Health England guidance, restrictions have been put on attendees at funeral services. This has been done as sympathetically as possible working with funeral directors, allowing video footage to be taken for the benefit of those not able to attend. Staff have been deployed from the Council's Community and Environmental Services Directorate to assist our local burial and cremation services, working into the evenings and weekends. Training has been provided for these working in skilled areas such as the crematorium.

We are very grateful to those Council staff members who have come forward from different service areas to undertake such difficult, but essential duties at this terrible time. Their selfless dedication to public service is exceptional.

3. Service Changes and Communications

Service Changes

Due to the rapidly changing nature of the Coronavirus pandemic, a significant number of Council services have been affected or temporarily suspended. Some of these changes are a direct result of Government guidance around social distancing to limit the spread of the virus.

The main changes, which are regularly updated on the www.blackpool.gov.uk website, are:

- Closure of main reception areas at all of our offices, the Town Hall and the Tourist Information Centre. The Wedding Chapel is also closed with any forthcoming ceremonies postponed. Email and telephone contacts are being maintained, and alternative arrangements for registration of births, marriages and deaths in place.

- All family hubs are closed until further notice with the exception of Grange Park and Talbot and Brunswick. Highfield Adult Day Centre is also closed and all adult, community and family learning courses are suspended until further notice.
- Household bin collections have been amended with grey and blue lid bins collected at the same time every fortnight on the normal grey lid bin collection day. Green bin collections, Bulky Matters and the Rover mobile recycling service are all suspended until further notice. The Bristol Avenue Household Waste Recycling Centre is also closed though at the time of writing the Government is reviewing such closures.
- All Blackpool libraries are closed although a vastly-extended range of online reading material and activities for adults and children has been developed including free access to digital newspapers and magazines. The Grundy Art Gallery is also closed.
- Council leisure centres at Blackpool Sports Centre, Palatine Leisure Centre and Moor Park Health Centre all closed along with swimming pools. Memberships have been automatically suspended with no further payments and they can get free access to professional at-home exercise classes. Leisure services staff have been redeployed to critical services including the Corona Kindness hubs.
- Council-owned assets including the Winter Gardens, Sandcastle Waterpark and Houndshell Shopping Centre are closed until further notice. Blackpool Transport is offering a reduced bus timetable with the tramway currently suspended. Blackpool Airport remains operational.
- Disruption of the VisitBlackpool major events programme including cancellation of the annual Pride Festival and Armed Forces Week. Other events including Air Show, Switch-On and World Fireworks are under review pending further Government guidance.
- All of our outdoor parks except Anchorsholme Park remain open, although the gates to the main car park at Stanley Park are closed at the request of police. The Council-owned Stanley Park Golf Club is also closed, although the course is being maintained by the operators.
- Foxhall, Seaside's Way and Talbot Multi-Storey car parks are temporarily closed.

Communications

Since the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic, our communication has been delivered across a wide range of channels and has adopted three central themes:

Reinforcement. Dissemination of Government, Public Health England and Lancashire Resilience Forum advice and guidance such as social distancing and the “Keep Safe, Stay Home” messages, and support for national and regional campaigns such as home learning; fly-tipping; mental health and wellbeing; the weekly “clap for carers” initiative and adult social care recruitment. There has been a particular focus on awareness of domestic abuse

support services and what the public should do if they suspect a child could be at risk of harm.

Awareness. Ensuring the public are aware of changes to Blackpool Council services including closures of schools, car parks, libraries and leisure centres; disruption to transport; and enforced changes to public services such as bin collection.

Reassurance. Creating town-wide awareness of the support that we have put in place including the Corona Kindness community hubs, the Council's dedicated business support helpdesk and the partnership work put in place to support the homeless. These reassurance messages are increasingly being reinforced by positive publicity about the heroic efforts that are taking place across Blackpool to help and protect our most vulnerable residents.

To ensure maximum impact and awareness of our support services, we are utilising multiple communication channels including development of a dedicated area of the website www.blackpool.gov.uk/coronavirus with constant updates.

This is complemented by extensive daily use of our social media channels; public service broadcasts three times a day on Radio Wave; leaflet drops; use of digital screens; outdoor advertising including posters on tram and bus shelters; use of e-editions of Your Blackpool; news releases to local media; and laminated tags on 50,000 household bins to promote the Corona Kindness helpline.

Our internal communication is also of vital importance at this time to ensure our own staff are well-informed, motivated and not feeling isolated by the move to home working. These communications have included regular information bulletins and personal messages from myself which go on the internal Hub and to more than 2,000 individual staff email addresses.

Over the past few weeks, we have seen a huge increase in volumes of people accessing our blackpool.gov website and social media channels – more than double the usual usage. Since the launch of the dedicated Coronavirus section of the website less than a month ago, it has generated more than 300,000 views and our combined social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Linked In) have had a combined reach of almost 400,000. These increases reflect the fact that the Council is clearly seen as the main source of credible public service information during this time of crisis and, more importantly, for vital help and advice.

There has been extensive media coverage (focused mainly on our Corona Kindness support services) in local newspapers, radio and on BBC and ITV regional news channels.

Tourism Marketing

From the early stages of the pandemic, our communication to visitors switched to a "Do Not Visit Blackpool" message to ensure that people respected the Government guidelines on social distancing and non-essential travel.

Our tourism marketing team has continued to utilise digital channels to engage with visitors, creating virtual “package tours” of our key venues and attractions, and continuing to promote the benefits of returning to Blackpool when it is safe to do so.

At the same time, work is continuing on destination marketing activity with key resort partners so this can be quickly rolled out at the appropriate time.

4. Corona Kindness/Community Hubs

The Coronavirus pandemic and emergency restrictions placed on the population necessitated the urgent need for the Council to take a lead role in shaping and delivering vital support services to help residents and protect the most vulnerable people in our community.

The immediate response was the launch of our unique Corona Kindness campaign on 23 March, closely followed by the establishment of 12 community hubs across Blackpool.

The principle of bringing together those who need help with those who can offer help has been the key to the success of this initiative. This was promoted through a dedicated helpline 0808 1963080 and email addresses: helpneeded@blackpool.gov.uk or helpoffered@blackpool.gov.uk.

Co-ordinated by Adult Social Care, the Corporate Chief Executive Team and Public Health, Corona Kindness is being delivered in partnership with a number of community-based organisations, private companies and voluntary services.

An army of staff and volunteers who already work in these groups have been knocking on doors, telephoning residents, co-ordinating support and delivering food parcels, shopping and ready meals to people across Blackpool.

The heavy promotion of a dedicated Freephone helpline and email addresses through numerous channels has enabled us to make as many people as possible aware of the Corona Kindness initiative.

In the first three weeks of operation, the Corona Kindness service received over 3,500 calls and emails requesting help. Calls to the helpline are manned by the Customer First team, many of whom have been able to work remotely taking calls from home.

There are now up to 19 lines available a day to support this work and up to 250 calls a day are being taken by the call handlers. Most enquiries are dealt with the same or next day.

The handlers seek to offer advice, guidance and signposting and, if the household is in need of practical support or more intense advice and guidance, will send details to the help needed inbox so that a coordinator covering their ward area can make contact. At weekends, the calls are routed to Vitaline between 9 and 5pm.

In these first few weeks, a lot of contacts have been from people whose means have dramatically reduced through loss of income or who live in poverty and usually access support from a food bank distribution partner, who are now not available because of the lockdown measures.

The people have been supported through Discretionary Support or a professional referral to access food parcels. The flexibility and support of the Discretionary Support and the Customer First Teams have been integral to the success of the rapid scaling up of this work.

The Corona Kindness team has also played a lead role in proactively contacting those on the Government's "shielded" list.

The latest figures include 4,559 people on Blackpool's shielded list. We have now succeeded in contacting the vast majority of people. Almost 3,000 people have been contacted directly by adult social care, with community hubs in conjunction with Lancashire Fire and Rescue Service leading on door knocking where we have been unable to track people down.

Approximately half of those contacted have said they do not need anything and confirmed they will ring us if things change. Over 800 have requested ongoing contact and have an allocated "shielded worker".

The speed at which contact has been made and support services have been put in place for vulnerable groups has been exemplary.

So too has the development and refinement of the services on offer which initially ranged from provision of food and pharmaceuticals to dog walking and talking to those who feel socially isolated, to now including advice on fuel supplies and household finances, and provision of lists of local suppliers who can deliver food to the doorstep.

A food hub was set up by the Council's Leisure and Catering Services team at Blackpool Sports Centre in the first week to ensure that schools were supported in provision of free school meals and also to create family and single household food parcels.

The hub is working in partnership with the Blackpool Foodbank, which is continuing to provide a service in Blackpool, and also directly coordinating and providing support for homeless people who have been placed in accommodation.

It is important to note that this local network and response sits separately from the national food distribution that has been arranged for people requesting help having received a letter from the Health Minister asking them to shield themselves i.e., take extra measures over and above those taken by the general public, and those in vulnerable groups, such as the over 70s.

For all other groups affected and in need of food, the food parcel packing and distribution is managed by our own food hub, delivering directly to schools and to each of the 12 community hubs in Blackpool. These hubs then deliver the food parcels to the people living in their community and check whether there are any other support needs.

To date, the food hub has delivered more than 200,000 meals to the people of Blackpool, an extraordinary achievement.

Looking forward, we want to ensure there is a clear strategy for delivering the right level of support for our most impacted population for as long as it is needed, including responding to any changes to the national and local restrictions.

5. Adult Social Care, Provider Support and Key Worker Testing

Provider support: Dedicated hub and new funding

A critical part of the Council's response to this crisis has been enhanced levels of support to our providers of adult social care. Social care is at the forefront of this crisis along with the NHS.

The Council recognised this situation early. We built an entirely new Provider Support and Resilience Hub, led by the Head of Care and Support Services, to offer direct support to our providers through this very difficult and challenging period.

This hub brings together the existing Quality Monitoring Officers with provider management expertise, Care Quality Commission advice, Infection Control specialist, Continuing Health Care nurses and other community health professionals.

The hub provides hands-on, practical support to any social care provider (residential care and care at home) requiring assistance. This includes supply and correct use of PPE; infection prevention and control; help with staffing; and supporting people to move where their needs deteriorate suddenly.

Collaboration between the hub, Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and the Acute Trust has resulted in prevention of extremely fragile services failing on a number of occasions. The hub conducts a daily ring-round of all providers to check current position and whether any help is needed. In addition, the hub organises a weekly dial-in led by Karen Smith, Director of Adult Services, for all providers.

In response to the unprecedented pressure facing the sector and the very real risk of failure, we took the decision to increase our financial support to providers. We have taken a baseline level of funding set at pre-COVID levels and implemented a temporary 10% uplift of fees across the board.

We must do everything we can to continue to avoid provider failure at this critical time. As such we continue to operate an "open book" accounting approach with providers struggling financially despite national and local financial help.

Care and Support Services (in-house care services)

The majority of care and support services are fully operational. Those that are not are providing outreach support where appropriate.

All services are supporting a mix of people with and without COVID+ diagnosis, and managing their business continuity issues relating to staffing, PPE and infection control. Vitaline has contacted all of its service users to check on their welfare and have good contingency arrangements in place.

We have repurposed the Assessment and Rehabilitation Centre (ARC) from intermediate care to recovery of people who are COVID+ coming out of hospital or in residential services who are unable to return. This move will assist in reducing the continued risk of recirculation of the virus in care settings.

Externally commissioned provider services

Day services have ceased temporarily and support is being provided on an outreach basis. The provider has also repurposed to provide a shopping and meals preparation and delivery service.

All other services are operational, supporting a mix of people with and without COVID+ diagnosis, and managing their business continuity issues relating to staffing, PPE, finance and infection control.

Care at home providers with spare capacity are supporting residential providers who are short of staff or where individual needs have increased, requiring 1:1 support.

Our adult social care workforce

The adult social care workforce is particularly sensitive to the pressures of COVID-19. As such, we took an early decision to move to remote working and the majority of staff are still in that position. Shielded staff continue to work at home with whatever tasks they can that do not involve leaving the house, e.g., phone calls.

We also led on telephone contact with all the people actively involved with adult social care to check on their welfare, that they had contingency support in place, and knew who to contact if those arrangements broke down.

All, but essential visits involving face-to-face contact have ceased, replaced where possible by phone calls/emails/video calls. All essential statutory work continues. Potential Care Act easements have been shared with all staff; at the moment we have not implemented any. Due to Government guidance on hospital discharges we have moved to working till 8pm, Monday to Friday, and 8am-8pm weekends and bank holidays, reliant on staff agreeing to work those hours, but dependent on those who are not self-isolating or shielded. We are extremely grateful to staff for their flexibility in enabling these changes.

We are acutely aware that many in our social care workforce are on the front line of this crisis. Their dedication and bravery in undertaking so many difficult tasks is commendable. We are totally committed to continuing to do everything we can to safeguard staff as they perform these essential duties.

Key Worker Testing

There have been a number of approaches employed locally with regard to key worker testing:

- Providers can get in touch via our support hub, between 8am-8pm via email (providersupportHUB@blackpool.gov.uk) or phone 01253 478444 for support.
- A short-term interim key worker testing process was relayed to providers over the last Bank Holiday weekend. This tapped into spare capacity in the local health system and a short-term opportunity was taken advantage of by providers.
- We notified providers on 15 April that their key workers could apply for swab testing via fwccg.fcstafftesting.covid@nhs.net and they could apply for their key workers to be tested via a drive-in facility. They simply had to fill in the form and be eligible as a most effective use of the testing resource (ie, would gain benefit from it).
- The Army has attended our Provider Support and Resilience Hub over a number of days and undertaken mobile testing for key workers.

6. Business Support

A critical part of our response to the pandemic has been the immediate establishment of an enhanced business support service to help protect our local economy.

With thousands of Blackpool's businesses and their employees facing huge upheaval after the Government lockdown announcement, it was vital that we were able to deliver a dedicated service that gave credible help and guidance to those who needed it.

As central Government began to roll out £330bn worth of rescue measures including temporary loans, rate relief, cash grants Job Retention and Self-Employment Schemes to support businesses and save employees from hardship, the Blackpool Unlimited team from within our Economic Development service established a COVID-19 helpdesk: www.blackpoolunlimited.com/c19business-support

They formed a close working relationship with colleagues in our finance and business rates departments to provide urgent help to those businesses that were eligible for financial aid to be able to access it.

That partnership has provided a remarkable service to date, certainly second to none in the county. Within the first few weeks, there was a huge surge in usage of the website helpdesk with 12,000 enquiries and almost 900 businesses receiving direct support to date.

The strong, cross-working relationship with finance and business rates was crucial as many of these queries related to the rate support grants being administered by the Local Authority.

As part of its emergency measures, the Government had announced £10,000 Small Business Grants to eligible small businesses and grants of up to £25,000 through the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grant Fund.

On 1 April, Blackpool Council received a total of £59m from Government to start the process of paying the business support grant payments to local businesses.

The challenge was to get the money out of the door as quickly as possible, recognising that many businesses were becoming increasingly desperate for support. Over the next two weeks, messages went out across multiple channels to advise eligible businesses to send us their bank details so payment could be made.

At the same time, the finance and business rates teams were working around the clock and through weekends to check eligibility, make sure there was no fraudulent claim and then process the payments directly into bank accounts.

As of 22 April, the Council had paid nearly £33m to 2,883 businesses. The first publicised league tables showed that we were above average nationally in respect of the speed of getting these payment out to our local businesses – 51.8% v 49.6% national average by amount and 61.2% v 51.0% national average by number.

A reconciliation of business support grants made by the Council compared to the £59m funding received will be made by Central Government. Any underfunding will be made good whilst overfunding will have to be returned.

A number of local businesses have raised objections to not being entitled to these grants; it is important to highlight that the eligibility criteria was determined by the Government, not the Council. We are, however, identifying cases to Government where certain businesses have missed out on support where, if flexibility allowed, they would appear to have a strong case.

It is also important to note that the Council's adult employment services (such as Positive Steps) continue to actively support unemployed residents remotely, at a time when job vacancies in the local labour market have plummeted. These employability measures will be crucial once the economy starts to recover and where many more unemployed will require assistance.

While much of the work has focused on the emerging crisis over the past few weeks, the preparation for economic recovery has already commenced and this detail will be shared with members over the coming weeks and months.

7. Schools and Children

Children's Social Care: Revised Delivery Model

Despite the disruption caused by the current situation, we are determined to do everything we can to protect children and continue our Children's Services improvement journey. Detailed service planning began in the week beginning 9 March in anticipation of lockdown measures and we launched a revised model of service delivery from 23 March.

Initially, Children's Social Care, Early Help and the Youth Justice Service were split into two separate business units: Team A and Team B, taking it in turns to work in the office and from home. This model remained in place until early April.

Since then we have refined our approach to concentrate as much attention as possible on the children we have the greatest concerns over – only these children will now be in receipt of face-to-face visits by social workers.

Other children open to the service now get “virtual visits”, using technology with which the family is familiar, or by phone. All social workers are now working remotely, with the exception of a reduced skeleton duty staff at the front door. It is likely that we will revert back to a Team A and B approach as the basis for workforce planning once the lockdown is eased.

Since the start of the lockdown period, social workers have visited nearly 1,300 children open to the service - two thirds of all those currently open to children’s social care. Since we have shifted to all social workers working at home, 250 virtual visits have been recorded and 630 children have been contacted in the last seven days.

We closely monitor daily activity across the service. We initially witnessed a significant decline in referrals from the general public and other agencies, but this has risen over the past two weeks, giving us confidence our partners are adjusting to the new context where problems may not be so easily visible.

As part of this, Children’s Services have set-up a partnership mailbox for agencies to provide information about contact that they have had with children. This ensures that lower-level concerns are shared and that information is provided about when agencies are having contact with a child, helping all agencies to maintain oversight of children at a time when there is reduced staffing and services available. The mailbox was initially made available to schools who provided information about 273 children in March and 583 so far during April.

Through the past two weeks, court hearings have been conducted virtually, as have initial child protection conferences and limited contact arrangements. We have continued completing looked-after children reviews.

Child protection conferences and reviews have been focused on only the most concerning families. We keep our approach to service delivery under daily review and it is noticeable that issues causing concern are rising in the local community, especially in families that were not open to children’s social care at the start of the lockdown.

Alongside all this disruption it is pleasing that we were still able to successfully launch the Blackpool and Lancashire Regional Adoption Agency on 8 April.

Schools

Blackpool’s schools have made a hugely positive contribution since lockdown with the vast majority remaining open, working hard to provide wraparound care for vulnerable children and children of key workers.

Attendance at schools has been low, but higher than national, with around 2% (compared to 1% nationally) of children attending a Blackpool school. We expect that this number will increase over the next few weeks (but not greatly), as the demand upon the NHS and critical

activity increases and the vulnerability of some of our pupils is highlighted and school once again becomes a place of safety.

Effective social distancing measures and rotas have allowed teachers to spend a significant amount of time at home with their families, whilst setting work remotely. We are particularly grateful to staff who have undertaken large numbers of doorstep visits to vulnerable families. We have had very little, if any, negative feedback on the effort of our schools, which is excellent in the circumstances.

Free school meal provision across the town has been largely consistent. Those schools served by Blackpool Catering have been in receipt of regular, non-perishable food parcels since the beginning of the crisis, so effective was the forward planning. Some schools have now moved on to the Government voucher scheme, but this has been stalled by the ineffectiveness of the computer systems and the distribution and printing of the vouchers.

We have sought to maintain the partnership approach to the Blackpool school improvement journey and are continuing with “remote” Blackpool School Improvement Board and Opportunity Area meetings.

Bespoke support is available to every school and we are currently working on identifying and planning for the issues that schools will face when they eventually return.

A key next step is to engage with the Government scheme to provide computer access to those vulnerable children who need it and we are compiling an initial list for submission when the portal is available.

8. Housing and Homeless

On Thursday, 26 March, central Government directed all local authorities to do whatever they reasonably could to get “everyone in...by the weekend”; in other words, to accommodate anyone rough sleeping, homeless, or at serious risk of becoming homeless. Government guidance also advised that night shelters should close. In Blackpool we had anticipated this move and, with the aid of our partners, had begun placing individuals into a network of Bed and Breakfasts from Monday, 23 March.

The Council is now working to the national model in respect of the placement of homeless people, which is made up of three categories of provision:

- COVID Care: Accommodation for people who have/may have symptoms
- COVID Protect: Accommodation for people with underlying health issues
- COVID non-symptomatic/low risk: Accommodation for people to comply with Government guidelines but are not yet symptomatic.

Accommodation is being used that allows people to self-isolate as necessary and follow Government guidelines. Our Homeless Partnership, Food Partnership and community hubs are supporting all individuals. This support includes three meals a day delivered directly to

accommodation, so individuals can remain safe indoors. We are hugely grateful to everyone who has made this extraordinary effort possible.

For all categories, wraparound support is in place ranging from housing, physical health, mental health, substance misuse services, the Food Partnership and many others, through the co-ordination of Public Health.

In addition, our Housing Options service continues to work with our partners to provide outreach services to identify any new rough sleepers, and provide advice to people who might be at risk of homelessness and supporting them to remain in their own homes as long as it is safe to do so.

Numbers in temporary accommodation (TA) now stand at around 150, with approximately 30 people having moved into a more permanent residence. Normal numbers in temporary accommodation are rarely above 40 in Blackpool, so this is a significant increase.

That said, Blackpool has long had high levels of homelessness, sofa surfing and transience, and the main pressures on accommodation are as a result of having to place anyone at risk of rough sleeping, as opposed to just those in priority need.

The vast majority placed in temporary accommodation are Blackpool people, known to services, and are respecting Government guidelines. However, we are aware that there is a small minority of problematic individuals within this cohort. The Council have provided security services where appropriate and have requested additional support from Police colleagues in managing what are sometimes very challenging situations.

In all of our efforts we have benefited from being able to draw upon the resource and expertise of our two housing companies: Blackpool Coastal Housing (BCH) and My Blackpool Home (MBH).

Both companies have assisted us in creating more temporary accommodation, alongside placing and supporting individuals.

Beyond this, both companies have moved to operating models that respect the guidance on social distancing, and are focusing on core services such as gas/electric compliance and emergency repairs.

Our companies are also focused on supporting their own vulnerable tenants. For example, BCH has telephoned 1,155 customers defined as vulnerable or over 70 to offer support, and over 200 who did not respond have been visited, with those in need being referred to our Corona Kindness community hubs.

9. Workforce and ICT Services

Workforce

As the pandemic gathered momentum, our focus immediately switched to ensuring that staff were following Government guidance on self-isolation either because of specific health

conditions or because they had symptoms of coronavirus, or were living with someone with symptoms.

Following the Government's lockdown announcement on 23 March, all staff capable of working from home were sent home. All employees in the vulnerable groups e.g. those aged 70 or over, pregnant or one of the specified health conditions were also sent home.

At the same time as helping to manage the implications of large numbers of staff home-working, the HR team was developing new methods of recording and analysing staff absence relating to Coronavirus as well as exploring which employees could be redeployed. As of 23 April, the number of employees absent with symptoms numbered 37, those living with someone with symptoms 105 and the number of employees not in work due to Government guidance regarding age, pregnancy or underlying health conditions, amounted to 303.

This total of 445 employees equated to more than 16% of the workforce. However, thanks to the benefits of the Council's home-working IT solutions, over half of these employees were able to work from home, bringing the overall absence total to 212 or 8%.

A suite of new absence codes has now been created so we can report daily on Coronavirus-related absence and immediately identify critical areas where absence is high and further support required.

Employees who were available to support other business areas were identified and redeployed taking into account skill sets, training and risk assessments. A formal redeployment policy is under consultation with Trade Unions at present.

In what is a fast-moving environment, regular Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) briefings are being prepared and shared with managers and staff in relation to changing Government advice and local decision-making. An employee support booklet has been developed with a particular focus on health and wellbeing.

Policies on annual leave and flexi-time have also been reviewed and amended in certain circumstances to provide flexibility to critical services and to support employees.

We are participating in co-ordinated national/regional recruitment campaigns to attract children's social workers back to the profession and to recruit staff for our adult social care workforce.

Based upon revised Government guidance, there is now an opportunity for the Council to access testing for key workers who are absent due to Coronavirus symptoms or self-isolating due to living with someone with symptoms. This process will commence shortly and could enable employees to return to work earlier than would otherwise be the case.

ICT/Digital Services

From 16 March onwards there was an unprecedented increase in use of the Council's remote working ICT infrastructure. Prior to that date, the highest number of concurrent users working remotely was approximately 200.

This peaked at 1,400 concurrent users of the IT systems by 23 March when all employees who could work from home were instructed to do so because of the Coronavirus lockdown.

It quickly became apparent that the existing remote access VPN (Virtual Private Network) service was unable to cope with this unprecedented user demand, thereby hindering the ability of Council staff to work from home.

The ICT service immediately started work with its network infrastructure partner, TNP, to bring forward a project to replace and upgrade the remote working VPN service.

Over the next few days, the ICT team worked day and night to develop, launch and roll-out a new VPN. Software updates were pushed out to approximately 2,500 Council laptops and by the end of the first week of April, most of the Council's workforce had successfully been migrated on to the new network and were able to work seamlessly from home.

A project that would normally have taken months to implement had been delivered within a matter of days.

In parallel with this, the ICT team, TNP and Customer First were working on another scheme to deploy the Council's landline phone system so it could be used and accessed by employees through an App that works on mobile phones.

This meant the employees of Customer First and other customer-facing services could answer the Council's public-facing telephone numbers from their own home.

Work was also done to rapidly set up new hotlines, email addresses and digital systems to support the emergency relief effort across different parts of the Council.

10. Key Finance Issues

In addition to the extensive work undertaken by the finance team in relation to payment of business rate support grants outlined earlier in this report, there are a number of issues arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Support for local authorities

On 20 March central Government announced £1.6bn of funding to help local authorities address the pressures they are facing in relation to:

- Meeting the increased demand for adult social care and enabling councils to provide additional support to social care providers
- Meet the cost of extra demand and higher business-as-usual costs of providing children's social care

- Supporting those at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19
- Meeting income and expenditure pressures across other services.

Blackpool's share of this initial allocation is £6.1m.

An announcement of a further £1.6bn of non-ring-fenced funding for local authorities was subsequently made. On 28 April, we received a letter advising us that our share of this additional funding would be £3.8m.

As this is a significant reduction compared to our original allocation and appears to be unfairly disproportionate compared to amounts allocated to other similar-sized authorities, we are making strong representations to Government for this to be reconsidered.

Hardship Fund

A £500m hardship fund to support "economically vulnerable people and households" affected by COVID-19 has also been established, to be administered by local authorities. Blackpool's share of the fund is £2.8m.

The Government expects that most of this funding will be used to provide more Council Tax relief, either through existing Local Council Tax Support schemes or through complementary reliefs. The guidance around this is as follows:

- It should be used to reduce the liability of those receiving working age Council Tax support by £150 in 2020/21
- Where a local Council Taxpayer had an existing liability of £150 or less, this would reduce the Council Tax liability to nil.
- Where liability is already nil, there would not need to be any change.
- Any remaining grant can be used to assist those in need.

These awards will be made automatically when software becomes available and there is no need to apply for the grant.

Homelessness Funding

On 17 March the Government announced £3.2m of emergency funding to help rough sleepers to self-isolate. The Government indicated that this was initial emergency response funding. Each local authority will be notified as to the provisional maximum amount it is entitled to reclaim.

Based on the number of rough sleepers reported in the autumn 2019 snapshot, Blackpool's provisional maximum amount is £11,252. We have already spent this sum many times over in responding to Government's 26 March instruction to house all those who are a homeless or at risk.

Business Rates Relief

The Government has gradually increased the Retail and Rural Businesses discounts already available to move these to discounts of 100%.

The relief applies to occupied retail, leisure and hospitality properties in the year 2020/2021 with no rateable value or State Aid limit. This has been further expanded to include a nursery (childcare) discount for this financial year.

Blackpool will be fully reimbursed by central Government for our local share of the discretionary relief.

Treasury Management: Cashflow

Due to Coronavirus, it was announced that measures would be taken to ease the immediate cashflow pressures on local government regarding business rates payments due to central Government and Social Care Grant payments.

As a result, councils will be allowed to defer £2.6bn of business rates payments to central Government until later in the year.

In addition, £850m of social care funding is to be paid upfront rather than in the usual instalments.

It is important to note that whilst these changes will support authorities' cashflow, they do not represent additional funding for the sector.

Impact of COVID-19

Blackpool Council's first return to Government regarding COVID-19 financial management information was submitted on 15 April.

It highlighted initial estimates of Coronavirus-related cost pressures of £21.3m for 2020/2021. This was broken down between expenditure pressures of £12.9m and potential loss of income £8.4m.

The main component of the expenditure pressure was on Adult Social Care to provide additional support for care providers, whilst the potential loss of income related to commercial income/fees and charges.

Statutory deadlines

The publication date for final audited accounts will move from 31 July to 30 November 2020 for all local authority bodies.

In order to give local authorities more flexibility, the requirement for the public inspection period to include the first 10 working days of June has been removed.

Instead, local authorities must commence the public inspection period on or before the first working day of September 2020. This means that draft accounts must be approved by 31 August 2020 at the latest. Authorities must publish the dates of their public inspection period.

Given the removal of the common inspection period and extension of the overall deadlines for this year, it is recommended that all authorities provide public notice on their websites

when the public inspection period would usually commence, explaining why they are departing from normal practice for 2019/2020 accounts.