

Portfolio Holders COVID 19 Briefing July 2020

Environmental Health and Community Safety

Overview

This report outlines the key areas that have been the focus of the team service since the coronavirus restrictions were introduced.

Environmental Health and Community Safety covers a wide range of statutory functions including food safety, health and safety, pollution control, licensing, private sector housing, financial assistance, nuisance, public health, anti-social behaviour and community safety. In addition there are a number of corporate policy areas led by the Director that the team support including corporate health and safety, equalities and diversity, safeguarding and emergency planning.

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020 were enacted on 26 March 2020. Up until the restrictions that this legislation allowed to be brought in by Government the service was operating as normal whilst also finalising the implementation of the 2019 restructure and agreed service improvement plans.

In many ways this service has been on the “front line” of the Council’s COVID 19 response with all staff stepping up to new or increased demands and everyone has performed exceptionally over this period. Senior Officers have been stepping up to support SMB by attending numerous weekly emergency planning sessions and communicating within and across the system on all manner of issues. The whole team has been affected working in a new and rapidly changing regulatory environment and all staff have risen to the challenge of responding to increasing demands and expectations in the face of restrictions and fast moving regulatory frameworks in almost all areas.

1. Overview

In line with other council departments this service responded to Exeter Community Wellbeing: the Council’s COVID-19 community response with staff providing practical help on the hotline and professional advice which included the setting up of the Food Distribution Hub at the Matford Centre; safeguarding and food safety advice for residents and volunteers. At peak demand there were four members of staff providing support to the hub, with two members seconded until Mid-June.

Throughout the lock-down period, for all areas of reactive work there has been added complexity for investigating officers. This is mainly due to the restrictions in place and the fast-changing regulatory environment. This has made investigations across the service more resource intensive in many cases.

Work on the impact of unauthorised traveller encampments was resource intensive until late April when the encampment moved out of the city.

As the pandemic unfolded all departments were required to enact the emergency plan which included updating Business Continuity Plans and, due to the expertise in the team senior managers have assisted SMB in the quality assurance of these Council wider plans. New working arrangements mean that the service is now working with around five officers in the Civic Centre (ad hoc increases subject to specialist or specific needs), with all other officers working from home and available to respond as and when appropriate.

Latterly the team have been pro-active in supporting the Director in developing the new statutory Exeter City Council Covid-19 risk assessments that are being deployed across all service areas. This has been, and continues to be, a significant new area of work for the team as they continue to provide practical advice and support to service leads as they start to adjust to new ways of working as lockdown restrictions change.

The service has been preparing for some time to transfer existing databases (M3 and Lalpac) to the Uniform database as part of the service improvement programme and this work had to continue during the lockdown to ensure critical timescales are met. The transfer is on track for completion by the end of 2020; the final test transfer taking place in mid-August.

Updating of the Enforcement Policy has also taken place, in collaboration with other service leads within the council to expand the revised policy into a 'corporate' enforcement policy. This policy work has to be completed this year and will be finalised shortly and will be considered by members in the autumn.

Recruitment of three Principal Officers has resumed after being put on hold due to the restrictions. Filling these posts will complete the restructure of the service undertaken by the Director.

2. Community Protection

Community protection includes: private sector housing; financial assistance and residential nuisance COVID restrictions saw the introduction of new safe working practices for dealing with complaints and undertaking inspections. Our approach has been continually updated throughout the restrictions to reflect the ever-changing situation and inevitable adjustments to government guidance.

Throughout the period, staff have continued to undertake inspections where appropriate and safe to do so. ***The work rate has increased across this area of the service, with a 163% increase in Private Sector Housing work, 161% increase in Disabled Facilities Grant approvals and 194% increase in neighbourhood nuisance (mainly around noise nuisance).***

Private Sector Housing team have started to undertake proactive work to address the backlog of licenced House in Multiple Occupation (HMO) inspections. In addition, in mid-June we re-introduced the installation of indoor monitoring equipment for noise nuisance.

Preparations continue to ensure that the service continues to adapt to the changed and changing environment, this has included: updating the Financial Assistance Policy; reviewing procedures across all areas of work and creating new procedures to deal with expected rises in work as restrictions are eased.

3. Safety, Health and Licensing

The focus in this area has been on providing information and advice to local businesses in the context of the shifting environment of legislation and guidance. Whilst most businesses were responsible in their approach, implementing new systems to control risk, there has been an element of regulatory and enforcement work required. Business Regulation and Licensing team are now involved with online training for the business community to assist them back to work.

The Licensing Team have continued to issue licence applications and renewals, and following changes in legislation, have been able to hold remote committee hearings. Assisting with small business grants and providing advice to taxi operators to help them continue to operate, the Team continue to look at ways of facilitating businesses and minimising the impact of deregulation in licensing legislation.

The Annual Status Report (air quality) template has now been released from Defra so work has started on this. Work has also been done with the large building sites following the announcement of extended working hours, to minimise potential environmental and nuisance issues.

Whilst work has been impacted by the demands of the reactive Covid-related work, the routine work to deliver the health and safety workplace transport initiative required by the HSE, programme of food inspections and Pollution, Prevention and Control (regulatory processes for crematoria rendering plant, metal finishing and petrol stations) inspections will need to be caught up later in the year. Planning has taken place to ensure that we can continue to meet regulatory requirements..

Lockdown has seen an increase in demand for Pest Control, and staff have provided essential services to residents throughout this period.

4. Corporate Work Areas

Continued support is being provided across the council on a number of areas. The service has been at the forefront of providing advice, guidance and clear direction with respect to covid-19 health and safety throughout the pandemic. This has included responding at very short notice to government guidance to ensure that service operations are able to continue in a safe matter. Covid-19 specific risk assessments have been drawn up for offices, visiting officers, outdoor workers and the materials reclamation facility with an additional risk assessment at an advanced stage regarding customer facing and visitor attractions. A Council track and trace system has also been developed to deal with suspected or confirmed covid-19 cases.

Safeguarding work has also continued with work being conducted to devise an e-learning safeguarding and domestic violence training package, reviewing the council's safeguarding policy which will be presented to Executive and Council later in the year and participating in multi-agency safeguarding meetings. The Equalities and Diversity policy has also been revised with a view to presenting to Executive and Council later in the year. In addition input has been given to a number of Equalities Impact Assessments relating to forthcoming reports including the Greater Exeter Strategic Plan, Financial Assistance Policy and Corporate Enforcement Policy.

It has been important throughout the last 3 months for the service to support a strong Community Safety Partnership and ensure that work of the partnership continues. The service has worked on a multi-agency basis to monitor key community safety data in the city which has included hate crime, domestic and sexual violence and abuse and anti-social behaviour. In response to such trends being identified, work has been conducted with partners on a campaign to provide signposting to domestic violence victims in supermarkets and pharmacies as lockdown means these venues might be the only place victims are able to access and work on accommodation for domestic violence victims.

A large amount of work has gone into preparing for the opening of pubs on 4 July 2020. This has included multi-agency planning around resources, discussions with licensed premises regarding operating models and minimising Anti-Social Behaviour, making arrangements for the deployment of taxi marshals and the opening of the Helpzone and scoping work in preparation to make a bid to the Police and Crime Commissioner for funding to tackle Anti-Social Behaviour at the Quay and in the City Centre.

What's next?

During this period, while reactive workloads have increased in some areas of the service, they have decreased in others. The multidisciplinary nature of Environmental Health Officers and Technicians has meant that officers have been able to focus their resources onto those areas needing it most.

Across the service, the opportunity to update policies, procedures and plans has also been taken. This has involved planning for work in the 'new normal' that will persist for some time as well as preparing for the need to assist Public Health colleagues should outbreaks in Exeter occur.

With this in mind, work has been undertaken and is on-going around managing the easing of restrictions around work and the lockdown; both from an internal Exeter City Council perspective and an external regulatory perspective. This latter point is likely to form a large body of work for the Environmental Health and Community Safety service going forward.