

## Eden District Council

Executive  
20 July 2021**Covid-19 Update Report**

<b>Portfolio:</b>	Leader
<b>Report from:</b>	Interim Director of Resources
<b>Wards:</b>	All Wards
<b>OPEN PUBLIC ITEM</b>	

**1 Purpose**

1.1 The purpose of this report is to:

1.1.1 Provide a summary of achievements of the Officers within Eden DC in dealing with the Covid 19 pandemic over the past year.

**2 Recommendations**

It is recommended that the progress and achievements be noted.

**3 Report**

3.1 This report looks back over the past year on how the Council and in particular its Officers dealt with the pandemic and the changes to the services we offer. All of us have been effected, whether it is working from home; home schooling; being in isolation, or losing someone close.

3.2 This report is not a performance report – those issues are picked up in the regular quarterly performance reviews which are reported to Overview and Scrutiny, and the Executive.

**4. Service Areas**

4.1 On the 16 March 2020 the Prime Minister announced homeworking. IT rolled out laptops to all staff and Members to enable remote working to ensure Council business continued once the doors to Mansion House and Town Hall closed. Microsoft Teams was also utilised so virtual meetings could take place.

4.2 The following highlights the additional activities undertaken by Officers in addition to the day to day service provision, and delivery of our Corporate Policy objectives.

**4.3 IT**

- Upgraded the remote connectivity capacity in time for the first lockdown, to enable the transition to homeworking for 100% of staff. Wi-Fi hot spots were also issued to staff who have very poor internet connections in rural locations.
- Technology permitted all telephone calls to continue, with no change including the contact centre where additional calls were being answered and processed with staff working from home. The Telephone Call Management Solution was modified to enhance capability for Council Tax and Business Rate queries.
- Launch of My Account along with around 70 Digital Transactions for customers to self-serve and also be used by Customer Services staff for customers who phone in to the council.

- Implementation of various Business Grant application forms to facilitate the processing and payment of much needed grants to businesses.
- Implementation of the Revenues and Benefits Digital Portal and integration with My Account where customers can access Council Tax, Business Rates, Benefits and Landlord information and Services
- Whilst developing the integration with My Account, the entire Revenues and Benefits system was rebuilt and required a major upgrade to the database subsystem. This was achieved for both Eden and South Lakeland and ahead of most other councils in the Country who required the deadline to be extended from December 2020 to May 2021
- Implementation of Microsoft Teams for Virtual Meetings and to underpin the operation of Virtual Council meetings and provided the IT support to the Council Meetings
- Continued with various Business as Usual projects to underpin the continued operation of ICT across the council:
  - Upgrade to Laptops to ensure Windows 10 is secure
  - Upgrade to Remote Desktop Services to help people work from home on slow Broadband connections
  - Continued work to improve the data used in Planning, Building Control and Land Charges. To support the implementation of a new system
  - Work to change the way we work to reduce the demand on ICT support
  - Upgraded systems within the council to maintain security and operation such as Elections, Revenues and Benefits.
  - ICT Security Breaches have rocketed throughout the Pandemic, we've maintained ICT Network Security by ensuring all necessary security patches are implemented as required and as announced, most recent example is the issues with Exchange which affected 1000s of organisations worldwide
  - Led on the Cumbria Wide procurement of a new Cumbria Choice Based Letting ICT Solution (The Housing Register). South Lakeland are the lead authority for the partnership hence why ICT led on the procurement. This was in close liaison with the Cumbria Choice Based Letting Board made up of 13 partner organisations. The system is being implemented now and shared ICT resources are assisting with this and are being funded by the partnership
- Survived numerous ICT issues during the past 12 months which have meant ICT staff working additional hours, over weekends and in some cases through the night
- Shared ICT has been working to support 2 Councils not just one. During the pandemic, this has put a great deal of additional strain on an already busy service but team members have worked exceptionally hard to maintain services for all
- For context, the ICT Department;
  - Support 606 users across Eden and South Lakeland District Councils
  - Support two fully operating data centres (one in each Council). Both host 85 virtual servers making 170 virtual servers in total
  - Support all of the different systems operating across both councils (and lead on the development of many), such as;

- EsbAgile Enterprise Digital Platform
- Finance and Payroll
- Elections and Democratic Services
- Revenues and Benefits
- Planning
- Building Control
- Land Charges
- Local Land and Property Gazetteer and Enterprise Geographical System (GIS)
- Telephone System
- Information at work (Document Management)
- Income Management (Cash Receipting)
- Homelessness
- Email
- Plus many other smaller systems

#### 4.4 **Customer Services**

- For the first 5 working days after lockdown the team took 1,741 calls, compared to 762 for the same time the previous year.
- Call statistics (service level and number of abandoned calls) have improved by 9%.
- The team are carrying out more supportive administrative duties for other colleagues working from home such as printing and post
- Supporting IT with the roll out of My Account, testing new objectives prior to going live
- Supporting Council Tax with calls diverting to 817817 and dealing with high volumes of grant enquiries.

#### 4.5 **Communications Team**

- Attendance on a number of new groups and conference calls, such as The Community Resilience Group, Strategic Media Advisory Cell (this group coordinates messages from Cumbria's multi-agency public communication bodies, such as Police, NHS etc.), Business Continuity Group and a number of additional Covid-19 related meetings
- The creation of specific Covid-19 related content for the Herald newspaper, local radio stations. This is in addition to the preparation of numerous Social Media and Eden District Council website communications to help inform internal staff, local businesses and Eden residents. This included all planning, design collaboration, proofing and distribution of the media content
- Dealing with Covid-19 media enquiries
- Preparation of staff and member briefings

#### 4.6 Human Resources

- Introduced virtual interviews and staff inductions that enabled several appointments of new members of staff during the Pandemic. The virtual interviews and inductions resulted in no additional cost to the Council
- Additional health and wellbeing support for staff was made available via a new online Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)
- The Council have been able to continue to develop its staffing team despite Covid-19, making an important contribution to both the Council and the district overall

#### 4.7 Tourism

- Held a successful virtual Eden Tourism summit with excellent levels of attendance and engagement despite the ongoing pandemic.
- Provided a wide range of guidance to help Eden's Tourism industry.
- Continued to actively support the tourism elements of the *Fellfoot Forward* and *Westmorland Dales Landscape Partnership* Schemes.
- Assisted in delivery of pre-start activity for the tourism sector when the country came out of various lockdowns which included the promotion of the Ring of Confidence scheme for Eden businesses.
- Continued to run the Eden Tourism Network to provide help, advice and support to the private sector tourism sector through incredibly difficult times.
- Ensured the TIC and Museum service opened safely when it could and moved provision effectively online and through the telephone when it has had to close

#### 4.8 Economic Development

- Initially chaired and help establish the *Town Centre Reopening Groups* in each of the town centres.
- Managed to keep the apprenticeship scheme going to support a particularly hard hit demographic of the pandemic.
- Developing a project with the DWP to bring about further employment support for young people.
- Continued to manage and support the successful *Eden Business Support Fund*.
- The development of a range of Policies for undertaking discretionary Covid grants was also carried out. This work often led the process for a range of other District Councils in Cumbria.
- Ensured businesses were able to access support and advice (relating to both the pandemic and Brexit issues) by rolling out training delivered by Red Kite and ensuring close communication with a vast number of Eden businesses.
- Supported Eden Arts practically and with finance to put in place a Covid Secure Winter Driving Event in October 2020.
- Arranged for bench marking to take place for each of the Town Centres.
- Continued to support and lead Appleby Heritage Action Zone.
- The policy approach for the Eden Community Covid Hardship Fund was established in partnership with the Executive.
- Contributed to the County Council's County Recovery Strategy.

#### 4.9 Arts & Culture

- *Create to Connect* launched on the 18<sup>th</sup> May. The project focused on being involved with all things creative to help people cope with the Covid19 pandemic.
- In conjunction with EDC's Economic Development Team, supported Eden Arts practically and with finance to put in place a Covid Secure Winter Driving Event in October 2020.
- Supported the development of the *Highlighting Eden Arts Programme* and successfully recruited a new provider *We Are Team* for a 3 year arts programme.

#### 4.10 Development Management

- Moved the entire planning system so it could be utilised remotely
- Ensured the Planning Service continued to run smoothly and provide vital support for the local economy and maintained high levels of service.

#### 4.11 Revenues and Benefits

- The Council's Revenues and Benefits and Economic Development Teams (supported by officers from across all departments) have successfully processed and administered 13,303 Covid Support Grants, totalling £51,982,620.80 (up to w/e 27 June 2021). A full breakdown of the Covid-19 Grants is shown in the following table;

Covid-19 Grants Administered (Cumulative to w/e 27 June 2021)		
Grant	Total number administered to date	Total value paid to date
Small Business Grant (SBG) Scheme- closed 30 September 2020	1,753	£17,530,000.00
Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grant (RHLG) Scheme- closed 30 September 2020	480	£7,260,000.00
Local Discretionary Grant Scheme - closed 30 September 2020	183	£1,240,500.00
Local Restrictions Support Grant (Closed i.e. Businesses required to close) 5 November 2020- 2 December 2020	1,538	£2,196,246.00
Local Restrictions Support Grant (Closed i.e. Businesses required to close) Post 2 December 2020*	29	£23,006.00
Local Restrictions Support Grant (Open i.e. Businesses able to remain open)	1,518	£1,423,106.00
Additional Restrictions Grant	858	£1,538,123.00
Christmas Support Payment	68	£68,000.00
Local Restrictions Support Grant Sectors	4	£2,357.14
Local Restrictions Support Grant (Closed - Addendum Tier 4)	1,495	£381,045.56
Local Restrictions Support Grant (Closed- Addendum Post 5th Jan 2021)	3,059	£6,706,321.00

Grant	Total number administered to date	Total value paid to date
Closed Businesses Lockdown Payment	1,537	£6,580,000.00
Restart Grant: Strand One (Non- essential retail)	147	£412,711.00
Restart Grant: Strand Two (Hospitality, Leisure, Accommodation, Gym & Sports and Personal Care)	924	£8,092,000.00
<b>Total (Sum of the Above)</b>		
Total number of Grants Administered to date:	12,313	£51,770,262.99
<b>Local Council Tax Reduction Hardship Grant</b> (Grants issued fiscal year 2020/2021)		
Local Council Tax Reduction Hardship Grant	990	£212,357.82
<b>Grand Total:</b>	<b>13,303</b>	<b>£51,982,620.80</b>

(Source: EDC Revenue & Benefits)

- High levels of performance in determining applications for Housing Benefit and Council Tax reduction have been maintained even though the working age caseload for Council Tax Reduction increased from 1,468 cases before the pandemic to 1,782 cases currently.
- Test and Trace Support Payments have been successfully introduced and almost 400 applications have been assessed.
- On-line access to Council Tax, Business Rates and Housing Benefit and paperless billing has been successfully introduced.
- Staff have shown exceptional commitment working additional hours throughout the pandemic to ensure services are maintained

#### 4.12 Finance

- Despite being an office which is heavily paper-based, Accountancy and Creditors services have successfully transitioned to a near paperless service, practically overnight
- All Payroll and Creditors runs have continued with no interruption to service
- Provided assistance to ensure all Covid Grant payment runs have been made without delay, with staff providing support into the late evening as and when required

#### 4.13 Community Services

- EDC's Community Services section has and continues to have a direct major role (both local and Countywide) in Covid-19 response. The use of existing staff and their local knowledge and relationships with businesses has been essential and enabled Officers to assist heavily with Test Track and Trace.
- By the Service area working flexibly, Officers learning new systems/processes, the adaption of working practices and Team members working additional periods outside of normal working hours, a highly effective public health response has been possible whilst maintaining core services.

- Key items to note are;
  - In conjunction with Cumbria County Council and the other Cumbrian Local Authorities, Eden's Track and Trace Team are currently in the process of being nominated for an award to recognise the effective joint working between organisations during the pandemic
  - Staff are (and have been) working more hours than contracted, including weekends and evenings to support contact tracing and enforcement work
  - Attendance at a large number of newly created meetings to support Covid work
  - Familiarisation with government legislation and Covid guidance in order to respond to queries from members of the public
  - Successful bids made to the Green Homes Grant fund
  - Effective co-working relationship with Housing Options Service. This has been essential in responding successfully to increased homeless presentations, increase in the requirement for temporary accommodation and increased evictions due to rent arrears as a result of the pandemic

#### 4.14 **Planning Policy**

- Continued support for Communities developing their own Neighbourhood Plans.
- The appointment of Consultants to assist the development of the Strategic Housing Economic Needs Assessment (SHENA).
- Development of a response to Central Government's White Paper on *Planning for the Future* and reworked an appropriate approach to undertaking a partial review of the Local Plan. This is mindful of the implications of the White Paper and the potential of Local Government Reorganisation to ensure the Council does not waste resources and ensures the needs of communities are met.
- Leading negotiations on a working agreement with the County Council and Highways England over the dualling of parts of the A66 which is a nationally significant infrastructure project.

## 5 **Policy Framework**

5.1 The Council has four corporate priorities which are:

- Sustainable;
- Healthy, Safe and Secure;
- Connected; and
- Creative

5.2 This report meets all of the above priorities.

## 6 **Consultation**

6.1 Not required.

## 7 **Implications**

### 7.1 **Financial and Resources**

7.1.1 Any decision to reduce or increase resources or alternatively increase income must be made within the context of the Council's stated priorities, as set out in its Council Plan 2019-2023 as agreed at Council on 7 November 2019.

7.1.2 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

## 7.2 Legal

7.2.1 The provision of functions set out in this report shall be provided in accordance with relevant legal requirements including those that impact on equality and diversity and taking account of the legal duties that the Council has towards staff.

## 7.3 Human Resources

7.3.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

## 7.4 Statutory Considerations

<b>Consideration:</b>	<b>Details of any implications and proposed measures to address:</b>
Equality and Diversity	None arising from this report
Health, Social Environmental and Economic Impact	The Council has an obligation to follow Covid 19 legislation and associated guidance, which has a positive impact on the consideration of and delivery of positive outcomes in terms of Health, Social, Environmental and Economic Impact.
Crime and Disorder	None arising from this report
Children and Safeguarding	None arising from this report

## 7.5 Risk Management

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Consequence</b>	<b>Controls Required</b>
Risks to public, finance or reputation through poor monitoring of Council Performance.	Adverse impacts on the public, the Council's finances or reputation.	The new performance management framework now links risk management with priority actions, programmes and measures.

## 8 Other Options Considered

8.1 The only other option is not to report on positive work carried by council staff.

## 9 Reasons for the Decision/Recommendation

9.1 To advise Members of positive work carried by council staff.

**Background Papers:** None

**Appendices:** Appendix A- Covid Grants- Explanatory Notes

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