

How We Responded to COVID-19

The outbreak of COVID-19 has been an exceptional challenge for everyone, and the Council is no different. Our staff have worked tirelessly to support the city of Plymouth in its response to COVID-19 and maintain services in these difficult times. This report describes some of the activity that has been undertaken to support the city and our partners to manage the impact of the pandemic and support the recovery. It is in addition to our regular report setting out how we deliver against the priorities set out in our Corporate Plan. Not all of the responses will be covered as there will be too many to mention; however, this report aims to provide a high level overview of some of the work that has gone on to help the Council and partners continue to deliver for the people of Plymouth.

In March, our Transformation resources responded with incredible flexibility and determination to ensure that the roll-out of Members' devices, staff devices (laptops and tablets), virtualisation of the Contact Centre and the speedy release of Microsoft Teams was significant in allowing our employees and Members to transition from office based to home based workers.

We continue to support the most vulnerable of Plymouth's residents through the setting up of Caring for Plymouth, a partnership between the Council, Livewell Southwest and a large number of voluntary and community sector organisations, which has provided a vital lifeline for people who are clinically extremely vulnerable to COVID-19. The outbreak of COVID-19 also brought about an amazing citizen response from the people of Plymouth, with more than 800 people registering to be part of the new 'Plymouth Good Neighbour Scheme', which was set up to respond to needs arising in the community to support individuals and businesses.

We have supported businesses via the administering of grant schemes designed to help those businesses impacted by the first and second periods of lockdown, whilst our Licensing and Public Protection Teams have been on hand to support businesses and individuals with advice and guidance on how to respond during the pandemic.

Our schools have been supported throughout and our Education, Participation and Skills department has been on hand to provide essential information for schools on national guidance from the Department for Education, as well as hosting a weekly virtual meeting for head teachers to ask questions of Council officers and fellow heads. These, amongst other support initiatives, have meant that our schools have been best placed to continue to provide the best possible education to the young people of Plymouth.

In the face of more household waste and recycling tonnages to collect and process as a result of people spending more time at home, our refuse collections have continued throughout the pandemic. As has street cleansing, with teams working hard to keep the streets clean and tidy with as little disruption as possible.

This has all been in the face of many challenges faced by the city. Organisations, including the Council, have faced staff shortages due to self-isolation (or staff being removed from front line services if in a vulnerable group). As a Council, we have had to change some of our working practices to ensure the safety of our staff and customers, for example by holding virtual visits instead of face-to-face with some of our most vulnerable children, and COVID-19 secure protocols for our refuse collection staff when sharing a vehicle.



Supporting Our Most Vulnerable Adults

What we have done: We have worked with partners to ensure that people continued to receive high quality care. We have established additional community capacity to support safe and timely hospital discharges, including a hotel being re-purposed as an additional care facility with 30 beds.

Our care homes support some of our most vulnerable residents and unfortunately during the pandemic a number of these had outbreaks. With partners, the Council provided 'wrap around' support in a coordinated way that ensured residents, care home management and staff were assisted during an outbreak. We have provided access to information on best practice, and supported through weekly bulletins and monthly webinars to ensure that our providers have access to the most up to date guidance. In partnership with Livewell Southwest, University Hospitals Plymouth and Devon Clinical Commissioning Group, we have provided dedicated infection control advice and training, supported with staffing and resources, delivered emergency Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and stood up local testing arrangements for residents and staff in advance of national testing programmes being in place.



We set up the Caring for Plymouth Support Hub, which was the city's response to the government's Shielding Programme and was an alliance between the Council, Livewell Southwest and 12 Voluntary and Community Sector organisations. Through the dedicated partnership call centre, the service arranged support to ensure that the shielded cohort was provided with emotional support, shopping, medicine collection, and support with paying bills and accessing money. Over the course of the pandemic in excess of 5,655 people have been supported, 950 food packages were delivered and more than 800 prescriptions were collected.



Demand also increased on our homelessness prevention service, which has maintained an appointment based front door throughout to ensure that the most vulnerable can access the available support. Our Community Connections team, along with partners within the Alliance, identified and brought online 88 bed spaces of additional temporary accommodation, which helped to house 159 rough sleepers during the early stages of the pandemic. We also relaunched the 'Make a Change' campaign in October. In 2019, generous Plymouth residents donated over £1,500 over the three months that the campaign was running.



Looking forward: We will continue to support our clinically extremely vulnerable residents through our Caring for Plymouth approach. By working closely with partners, we will support all providers of care and support services to best meet the needs of our population. This will include remodelling and redesigning services in line with COVID-19 guidance; ongoing advice and information through interactive forums and bulletins; infection control training; and support during episodes of outbreak. We will continue to focus on meeting demand at the front door to prevent and relieve homelessness, in line with COVID-19 guidance in relation to social distancing. We will continue to work with the Plymouth Alliance to deliver new accommodation and services to meet the demand, as well as ensuring progress on the provision of more flexible emergency and temporary accommodation to meet the needs of all.

Supporting Our Most Vulnerable Children

What we have done: In the early stages of the COVID-19 lockdown, our Children's Social Workers completed risk assessments for every child and young person in the service to make decisions about which children needed face-to-face visits. These assessments are updated weekly and during the first period of lockdown no social worker had issues relating to COVID-19, indicating that the safe way of working was effective. Our offices in Midland House were adapted to ensure safety for staff and members of the public; this enabled us to keep our reception open, meaning that we remained available to support the needs of children and families that sit at the heart of everything that Children's Services do.



During the first lockdown, good information sharing and liaison between our Children's Social Workers, Education, Participation and Skills and Virtual School teams helped to identify those children who were most vulnerable whilst schools were closed. This approach ensured that our services were able to respond to the needs of these children in a timely manner. During the lockdown we delivered around 800 laptops funded by the Department for Education to children, which supported us to have regular contact with our vulnerable children and young people but also helped them to manage their school work at times when they have not been able to be in school.



Our fostering service has been working hard to recruit new foster carers to support Plymouth children and we are on track to have recruited at least 16 new fostering households during the pandemic, which supports children who need to be looked after to stay close to family, school and friends.



Our Participation Team maintained impressive levels of contact with young people who they work with throughout lockdown. They supported a continuation of participation in virtual recruitment, training design, collaboration, and feedback, including the production of a *Life in Lockdown* report to inform the corporate parenting group's awareness of what this was like for children who use our services. The Virtual Youth Parliament, which supports youth democracy, was also maintained. The work of our Youth Offending Team ensured that young people were not delayed in completing their orders. The team supported ongoing reparation work that was nationally recognised, leading to other local authorities adopting our approach. This work included clearing graffiti across the city and making items, such as bird boxes and Christmas trees, which could be sold to raise money for local charities.



The Professional Development Team developed guidance to maximise the safety of all new social work colleagues joining the service who are required to complete academic work as part of their progression. This includes newly qualified social workers on the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment, as well as students from undergraduate, postgraduate and trainee social worker schemes. Plymouth was one of the leading authorities in this area, having inspired sufficient confidence for the early restart of programmes led by their academic institutions.

Supporting Our Schools

What we have done: Our services were exceptionally responsive in working together to identify vulnerable children, over and beyond the Department for Education's definition of a vulnerable pupil throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. A weekly 'Vulnerable Children's Group' was established in March 2020 to ensure that each child identified as vulnerable was then monitored to make sure that families were provided with direct support, either through the provision of Educare or through home visits by the Education Welfare Officers.



CaterEd also responded rapidly to the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that free school meal (FSM) eligible pupils (vulnerable pupils and children of key workers) were able to access a school meal. In the first week of the school closure period, 3,793 meals were provided to FSM eligible pupils in Educare. This increased to an average of 10,700 meals per week when pupils began to phase return in June 2020, and throughout July 2020 this increased to an average of 13,835 meals per week. Since September, with the full re-opening of schools, meal numbers have increased to around 47,000 per week. Eligibility for benefit-based FSM in the city has increased significantly during COVID-19 and during October half term, 45% of eligible families applied for the holiday meal scheme.



Our dedicated school transport services (a service for pupils eligible for free school transport) responded efficiently and effectively to government guidelines, altering seating capacities within taxis and providing additional taxis to ensure that our most vulnerable pupils could still attend Educare safely. In addition, we have worked very closely with local bus companies to respond to the needs of pupils who required changes of routes and times, and provided additional buses to enable them to get to and from school safely from September 2020.

From the onset of the closure of schools, our Virtual School team provided a coordinated response to the new learning arrangements for looked after children and those with an Education, Health and Care Plan who were known to Children's Social Care. This included the provision of laptops to eligible vulnerable children. At its peak, and with support in place, 40% of vulnerable children still attended a school setting.

Looking forward: Primary and secondary head teachers have told us that they value our response to monitoring vulnerable pupils and we will therefore continue to operate the 'Vulnerable Children's Group'. We will also continue to share Children's Social Care data with them on a weekly basis. School attendance and absence rates will continue to be closely monitored, while children at risk of missing education are being closely monitored by the Inclusion and Welfare Service. Schools are once again actively reminding parents to complete FSM registration forms as some families do not realise that they are eligible due to universal free school meals for pupils at Key Stage 1. COVID-19 secure measures remain in place for school transport and more taxi firms are working with us to ensure that there is enough transport for our most vulnerable pupils.

Supporting Our Customers

What we have done: We have been working flat out to ensure that the most economically vulnerable get as much help as possible during the COVID-19 crisis. This year has seen the number of applications for Council Tax Support (a means tested scheme for people on low incomes to help them pay their council tax) increase considerably due to the large number of people in the city who have been affected financially by the pandemic. We were allocated £2.5 million from the *Local Hardship Fund* to support those in hardship in Plymouth, which has allowed us to implement discounts of £150 for people of working age who are in receipt of Council Tax Support.

One of our other key forms of financial support is Housing Benefit. Despite the increase in the number of applications, the team has worked hard to ensure that claims are processed in a timely manner to prevent delays in customers receiving their funds. Resources have been focused on the processing of new claims and after peaking at the beginning of the pandemic in April and May, the average turnaround time between applications being submitted and customers receiving payment has since been maintained comfortably below the target of 18 days. More recently, we have been implementing the Test and Trace Support scheme. This scheme will run until 31 January 2021 and works by offering financial support to working households on low incomes who are required to self-isolate in the form of a £500 payment. Through this scheme, we helped over 150 customers in October who would have otherwise struggled to stay at home and isolate.



In our Registration service, emergency changes to legislation meant that we could start to deal with death registrations over the phone. The team sorted this out seamlessly and switched to working from home for the first time in the history of the service, which helped to support bereaved families when they needed us the most. Coroner's inquests have also been carried out remotely using MS Teams and COVID-19 secure processes have been carefully implemented so that we could hold jury inquests safely. Families have welcomed these changes as they prevent further delays and allow them to start to grieve. The jurors also said that they felt very safe and we clearly had everything organised.

All libraries were closed throughout the first lockdown. However, this did not stop the team from continuing to provide the community with the valuable library service. As traditional outreach activities have not been able to take place, the team has taken to social media to deliver online book reviews, Rhymetimes and Storytimes, 'what I'm reading', 'how to' videos, and much more. Between 1 April and 31 October 2020, the libraries team had made 779 posts on social media, engaging with over 22,000 people. We continued to offer digital services and more than double the number of eBooks, audiobooks and digital magazines have been issued than during the same period last year. Two new digital services were also introduced from April – eComics and eNewspapers. In order to facilitate the reopening of libraries, we reintroduced services in a safe way, following the national guidance. This included operating a phased reopening of libraries across the city, starting with a *select and collect* service where people could reserve items online or by using our app and pick them up from the library. We then began to reopen the libraries for browsing and pre-booked PC use, with restrictions and reduced opening hours to ensure the safety of our staff and customers.



Looking forward: In the second period of lockdown, members of the Customer Services team have been calling customers on the NHS Clinically Extremely Vulnerable list to ensure that they have access to food, medicines and any other urgent needs. They have also been taking calls from worried customers and working with colleagues across the city to signpost them to any help that they need. We continue to deliver the Test and Trace Support scheme to support those who are self-isolating. The library service is continuing to provide its free online resources and social media outreach activities. Several libraries have also remained open during the second lockdown for *select and collect* and essential PC use, but no browsing.

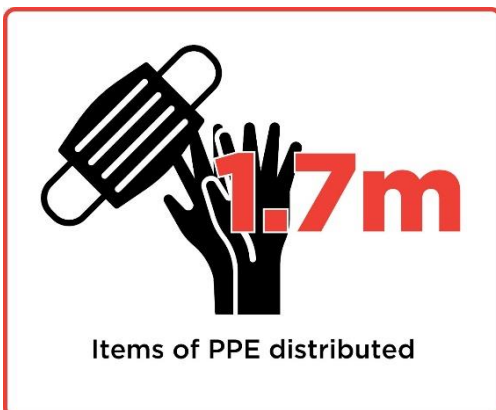
Supporting Our Partners

What we have done: During the COVID-19 pandemic there has been a fantastic local citizen response to needs arising in the community and the experience has demonstrated the importance of having the structure to support it effectively.

Recognising the need to provide some leadership and structure, we established the Plymouth Good Neighbours Scheme (PGNS). The scheme recruited over 800 Plymouth Good Neighbours, supported more than 70 small 'mutual aid' organisations that are rapidly developing in local communities, and provided 215 volunteers to our voluntary sector partners. These volunteers and organisations have helped to keep some of the most vulnerable people in the city safe during the pandemic.



The Council's decisive decision making in creating a Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) Cell at the beginning of the pandemic resulted in our PPE stores never running out and no individual or care provider went without. Plymouth was complimented on its response to the PPE crisis by the Military Advisory Team, which was providing logistical advice to the Local Resilience Forum. We tracked levels each day and applied a *Red, Amber, Green* rating to assess provision against need; action is being taken throughout the pandemic to maintain stores at the same level. Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have overseen the distribution of more than 1.7 million items of PPE, including more than 870,000 gloves, 450,000 aprons and 420,000 masks. Just short of 1.3 million items were provided to Plymouth's care homes and home care providers.



Looking forward: There needs to be ongoing support for the mainstreaming of PGNS and a commitment to continue the closer working with the voluntary and community sector at grassroots level to support mutual aid groups in communities. In September 2020, the national Personal Protective Equipment Strategy was launched, which includes the establishment of a new PPE portal that can be used by all Adult Social Care residential care homes, home care providers, Children's Social Care settings, GPs, pharmacies, dentists and optometrists. We will continue to oversee the provision of PPE to those partners who are ineligible to access PPE via the portal, as well as care providers who require Filtering Face Pieces (FFP3) type face masks.



We have started our planning ahead of the rollout of Lateral Flow Testing, which will eventually see our Public Health teams given approximately 20,000 tests weekly to roll out across the city. This is in addition to the regional PCR testing site at the old Seaton Barracks and the two local testing sites at the University of St. Mark and St. John and the Guildhall.

Supporting Our Local Businesses

What we have done: Our Finance, Place and Corporate Services colleagues stepped up and delivered the small business and retail grant scheme in an amazingly short period of time, making the first payment just five days after confirmation of the scheme. Staff used to collecting business rates and implementing recovery actions for non-payers were transformed overnight into a group setting up a system from scratch to pay grants to businesses and within days an online system was up and running. Processes were put in place to validate legitimacy and entitlement, payment mechanisms were devised, files created and anti-fraud checks established. Over £47 million of grants has been paid to Plymouth's small businesses. This was followed by a second discretionary scheme, and by the end of June a further £2.2 million in grants had been paid out.



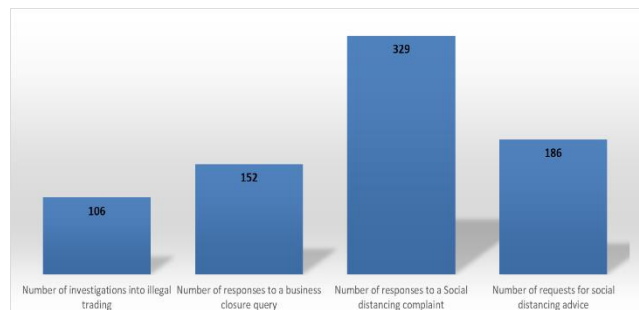
In July, we announced our intention to do all that we can to keep our pounds in Plymouth as part of the [Resurgam COVID-19 Economic Recovery Plan](#). The aim of *Spend 4 Plymouth* is to keep more spend local wherever possible and generate benefits through spending for the city's wider economy, society and environment (social value). Our Procurement Team has strengthened the 'buy local' agenda by reviewing our Contract Standing Order forms, making them more accessible for officers, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), and local suppliers.

The Business Rates Team suspended recovery action for unpaid rates until September and continue to make sensible and realistic payment plans with businesses, giving due consideration to those falling behind in their payments. The team has also continually signposted businesses to other support that is available to them. Meanwhile, the Finance department has arranged a number of meetings with the Devon Business Rate Pool to assist with forecasting the impact of COVID-19 on business rates collection and the Pool's gains/losses, as well as facilitated consultation responses to the government's Business Rate Review.

The Council also has a duty to ensure that businesses and venues are complying with the government guidelines during periods of lockdown. Our Licensing and Public Protection Teams continue to visit premises that are allowed to open to provide information and support on how to do this, as well as performing an enforcement role should any businesses not comply with guidelines.



Since April 2020 our teams have undertaken more than 100 investigations into reports of businesses trading illegally during restrictions; responded to more than 150 queries from businesses requiring advice; received and responded to 329 complaints regarding breaches of social distancing; and provided advice to nearly 200 businesses or individuals on how to facilitate social distancing.



Looking forward: We will be moving forward with the multi-team approach adopted to work on delivering an application process and payment mechanism for business grants to local businesses during the new lockdown. The Procurement Service is currently running monthly roundtable events with the private sector to co-design and consult on procurement; actively working with framework providers to encourage the inclusion of social value; supporting local suppliers to apply; and building a local supplier directory to enable local businesses to source local suppliers.

Supporting Our Streets and Green Spaces

What we have done: The Street Scene and Waste team has been working hard to make sure that we have kept critical services running whilst following government guidance, listening to concerns from residents, and keeping our staff and the public safe. With all of the challenges faced by COVID-19, there has been a huge effort to keep things going, but also opportunities to do things differently.

Out of roughly 30,000 scheduled collections of household waste and recycling bins each day, we have continued to collect more than 99% on their scheduled day. This is a valued service and during the height of the lockdown, crews welcomed the claps, children's drawings and cakes that they were receiving from residents whilst they continued to work in challenging circumstances.



In the summer, we communicated with residents via our Facebook page, Plymouth Newsroom and Plymouth Live to let them know that there may be slight delays to their collections and on the whole customers were very supportive, leaving lots of positive messages for our colleagues. We have taken steps to bring in additional vehicles and staff to improve resilience, as well as provided refuse colleagues with access to additional welfare facilities to support COVID-19 vehicle protocols and reduce travel times, and as a result we have since seen improvements in our collection performance.



The rolling neighbourhood sweep has continued throughout the pandemic, delivering a deep cleanse to the neighbourhoods across the city. Despite staffing levels being low at times, the teams have managed to maintain a high standard of service delivery to keep our streets clean.

Nationally, there have been widely publicised concerns about fly-tipping and littering during lockdown and as lockdown eased. We have continued to proactively monitor hotspots and internal reporting mechanisms, and improved our approach to evidence searching and reporting for the Public Protection Service. During COVID-19, a new tri-service approach emerged that brought Plymouth Highways' rapid deployment CCTV capability to bear on hotspots, which has provided important evidence to investigations and acts as a deterrent to environmental crime. Enforcement activity for fly-tipping offences continued throughout the pandemic, with 55 Fixed Penalty Notices handed out between April and October 2020 for fly-tipping and 60 for litter left in the street.



Chelson Meadow recycling centre initially closed at the start of lockdown at the end of March, reopening on the 13 May with measures in place to keep our staff and customers safe. The refuse transfer station remained open throughout lockdown for commercial waste carriers so that those businesses could continue to operate. We have received a combined increase of garden waste volumes through Chelson Meadow and the commercial refuse station when compared with the same period in 2019. Garden waste collections were initially suspended in order to prioritise critical services, such as general and recycling waste collections, beginning again on the 24 August on a revised frequency of four weekly. This decision took into account the ongoing risks around driver numbers and the potential for increased volumes.

A small trial of an alternative approach to grass cutting regimes, as part of the climate emergency action plan, was 'supercharged' by COVID-19. We prioritised amenity areas in parks, cemeteries and sports pitches, with the approach being celebrated regionally by Devon Wildlife Trust and nationally by the National Trust and Buglife. Many residents continue to be in touch with positive comments and the number of customer reports of problems around grass cutting was one-third of 2019 volumes.

Supporting Our Workforce

What we have done: In March 2020, teams responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with incredible flexibility and determination. Transformation resources ensured that the roll-out of Members' devices, staff devices (laptops and tablets), virtualisation of the Contact Centre and the speedy release of Microsoft Teams to all employees was significant in allowing our employees and Members to transition from office based to home based workers. This was supported by our Facilities Management Teams who managed the distribution of display screen equipment so that staff can work safely from home, as well as managing all of our buildings to ensure that they remain safe for staff who need to come into work by ensuring that compliance is maintained in line with health and safety requirements.



Our Health, Safety and Wellbeing Assurance Team has developed and introduced new corporate measures to ensure, as far as reasonably practicable, that the Council continues to fulfil its duty of care in regards to the relevant regulations. Examples include communicating the government's key messages to employees on a regular basis; COVID-19 specific risk assessments; 'Safe Systems of Work' and 'Tool Box' talks; COVID-19 secure building assessments; and implementation of COVID-19 secure building controls.



Our Human Resources and Organisational Development department established the Workforce Bureau to enable staff to be redeployed to support the Council's COVID-19 response from service areas that closed during lockdown, and provided daily reporting of workforce availability to the Corporate Emergency Management Team.

All of our learning events were moved into virtual delivery, ensuring that staff received the training that they required without needing to go into a training venue. The department quickly commissioned and delivered a training event to managers on managing teams remotely. The department also reformed its support to the workforce through activities such as one-to-one support for staff encountering discomfort due to home working; a parent support group to discuss support and problems around home schooling and balancing work; and increased the communication for additional wellbeing support available, including a printed handbook for staff without *Intranet* access.

Looking forward: Transformation resources have returned to the delivery of its projects and programmes around accommodation, digital and business support. These are combining to enable a change in the way that the Council works and are fundamental in enabling a new normal to exist post COVID-19. In addition, Transformation colleagues continue to support wider teams across the organisation in responding to COVID-19 and are now actively working with Economic Development to deliver the new round of business grants.

Our Organisational Development team will build on the positive feedback from the managers' course and look to commission a course targeted at all staff who are now working remotely. We will also continue to review all of our learning materials and respond to requests from services as we continue to make ever greater use of the online tools that are now available to us.

Our Facilities Management colleagues will continue to ensure that buildings are available at all times, while looking to maximise all efficiency opportunities and support the Council's net zero carbon progress.

Further Information

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