

Executive Business Report

Birmingham City Council

City Council

13th July 2021



Subject: Update on Birmingham City Council's continuing response to COVID-19 and proposed approach to recovery

Report of: Cabinet

Report author(s): Deborah Cadman (Gold Commander & Interim Chief Executive)

Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? ☐ Yes ☒ No

If relevant, state which appendix is exempt, and provide exempt information paragraph number or reason if confidential:

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, following previous reports brought to City Council in September 2021 and February 2021.
- 1.2. An report was previously prepared for City Council in June 2021, which is attached as an appendix. The focus of this report is on the Council's proposed approach to recovery planning, including emerging governance for delivery of economic and community recovery strategies.
- 1.3. The Covid-19 situation continues to rapidly develop; where updated figures or service updates are available following the production of the June 2021 report, these are provided.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. That the report be noted.

3. Introduction

- 3.1.** Birmingham is now over a year into the Covid-19 pandemic. While we might once have expected the virus to have faded from the public consciousness by now, the situation continues to be fast moving and dynamic. The Council, alongside other partners across the city, must be equally agile in its response.
- 3.2.** According to the original roadmap out of lockdown, set by national government in February 2021, all legal limits on social contact and business operations were due to be removed on 21st June. The emergence of new variants of the virus, and concerns about a potential third wave of the pandemic in the UK, have delayed this final step out of lockdown. Instead, we are now planning for the lifting of restrictions no earlier than 19th July.
- 3.3.** Many businesses, especially those in hospitality and leisure sectors, continue to experience significant restrictions on operations. Over the course of the pandemic the Council has distributed over £225m in grants to businesses to ensure their survival, through both national and locally designed schemes. Ensuring a successful economic recovery from the pandemic – one in which all businesses and communities are supported to succeed – will require us to go much further, setting a bold vision for the future of the city.
- 3.4.** Since the preparation of the original update report in June 2021, Birmingham has become an area of enhanced support due to increasing case rates across the city. We must all continue to play our part in fighting the virus: by continuing to test twice a week using lateral flow tests; by taking up the opportunity to get vaccinated; and by following social distancing and hygiene guidance.
- 3.5.** Despite these recent developments, there are positive signs of recovery in the city. The vaccination programme continues to go from strength to strength, both in Birmingham and across the United Kingdom. Over 60% of adults in the United Kingdom have now received both doses of the vaccine. Activity towards both the community and economic recovery continues at pace, working hand in hand with partners from across the private, voluntary and public sectors.
- 3.6.** At the time of writing this report, the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games are just over a year away. Birmingham remains a city of opportunity, looking ahead to a transformational decade. We must ensure that we rise to the challenge that lies before us – to make the most of these opportunities, building a city that works for everyone.
- 3.7.** A previous report was prepared for June 2021 City Council, focusing on the Council's proposed approach to recovery planning, including emerging governance for delivery of economic and community recovery strategies. It also provided an update on the Council's continuing response to the Covid-19 pandemic, identifying challenges and opportunities within individual service areas and considerations for the resumption of 'business and usual' services.

- 3.8.** This previous report is attached as an appendix. All information in this appendix was correct at the time of production.
- 3.9.** Where updated figures or service updates are available following the production of the June 2021 report, these are provided here.
- 3.10.** A further report will be brought to City Council in Autumn 2021, providing a full update on all activity related to the Covid-19 response and recovery planning.
- 3.11.** Updates in relation to specific areas of response can be found as follows:
- Education, Skills and Children's Wellbeing; pages 3 - 4
 - Communities (including Housing, Bereavement Services, and Community Safety); pages 4 - 7
 - Street Scene & Parks (including Waste Management); pages 7 – 8
 - Transport; pages 8 - 9
 - Covid-19 Support Grants (including Business Support Grants); pages 9 - 10
 - Council Finances and Resources; pages 10 - 11

4. Education, Skills and Children's Wellbeing

4.1. Schools

- 4.1.1.** To support families with food costs incurred during the Easter and half-term holidays, we have used government funding to continue to provide supermarket vouchers to families eligible for free school meals.
- 4.1.2.** This support will be maintained over the summer with supermarket vouchers being provided to eligible families.

4.2. Careers and Skills

- 4.2.1.** The Employment Taskforce, led by the Acting Assistant Director for Skills and Employability, will be a central part of the proposed wider Birmingham City Council Economic Recovery Strategy. The Taskforce will include two subgroups:
- Young People's Subgroup
 - Pathways for young people to employment, education and/or training
 - Engagement with City Board
 - Adults Subgroup
- 4.2.2.** The terms of reference for the Taskforce will be approved as part of the wider recovery plan process. Work has already begun planning the key actions with

external partners in delivering improved 'jobs/skills convergence' in the short-term, such as collaboration with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to improve the number of Kickstart places secured with employers.

- 4.2.3. The Taskforce is incorporating an integrated BCC approach to skills/jobs recovery that cuts across directorates to maximise expertise, resources and stakeholder engagement in delivering a seamless skills and employment service for citizens and employers.
- 4.2.4. The immediate focus of the Taskforce will be to lead on capitalising the opportunities for short-term recovery, although this will also include actions that need to be taken to overcome underlying long-term barriers. This includes the 'transition' from pre-16 education to post-16 jobs/skills opportunities as part of the growing focus on prevention and early intervention.

5. Communities (including Housing, Bereavement, and Community Safety)

5.1. Housing

Evictions

- 5.1.1. As of 1st June 2021, notice periods for seeking possession notices have been reduced from six months to four months. This will reduce further to two months from 1st August. Notice periods are expected to revert to pre-pandemic timeframes from 1st October.
- 5.1.2. Court interim arrangements are extended until 31st July 2021. In response, the service has had to continue to suspend enforcement action until the end of the national government roadmap out of lockdown, and review priority areas where enforcement action should and could commence. Government guidelines state that evictions can proceed if the tenant has over 6 months of arrears and the case is at the warrant stage.
- 5.1.3. For these exempt cases, the service has implemented another stage to the normal eviction process. This means that following the Eviction Prevention Panel, a further review takes place (including the Assistant Director, Revenues, Benefits and Rents) before the cases are signed off. There are currently 24 evictions identified that all fall under the exempt guidelines; a total of £160k in rent arrears.
- 5.1.4. In May 2021 we carried out three evictions without issue, totalling £31.5k of arrears. A further five evictions were either suspended, cleared or withdrawn.
- 5.1.5. Court restrictions came to an end on 1st June 2021 and their interim arrangements are set to be reviewed in July 2021.
- 5.1.6. The Council continues to strongly urge all its own tenants who have concerns, or have found themselves struggling financially to pay their bills, to

contact the council directly. As a landlord to over 60,000 households, we have found that rent arrears have increased significantly since lockdown first began.

- 5.1.7. In response, since March 2021 the Council has attempted to contact approximately 25,000 tenants in rent arrears, with repeated attempts in the region of 45,000 phone calls and letters.
- 5.1.8. We have successfully engaged with 14,252 tenants to try and understand what further help can be given to prevent them from falling any further into debt. This represents a 70% success rate. Of these tenants, 4,767 state that they have been affected by Covid-19.
- 5.1.9. 5,321 tenants have not responded to contact attempts and have been written to with a further offer of support.

5.2. Register Office and Bereavement Services

Marriage and Civil Partnerships

- 5.2.1. Weddings or civil partnership ceremonies, wedding receptions or civil partnership celebrations may take place in Covid-secure venues. They may also take place in venues other than Covid-secure venues, such as in the garden of a private home. The number of people who can attend is in most cases determined by how many people a venue can safely accommodate with social distancing measures in place, including guests of all ages and anyone working at the event.
- 5.2.2. Regardless of the type of venue, some restrictions for these events will remain in place to enable them to take place safely. This includes table service requirements, face coverings, social distancing, and restrictions on dancing and singing.
- 5.2.3. Inside private homes, and in indoor structures in gardens of private homes, weddings or civil partnership ceremonies, wedding receptions or civil partnership celebrations can only be held in line with broader social contact rules of up to six people or two households.
- 5.2.4. A marquee or other structure in a private garden of a private home must have at least 50% of its walled area open at any time for it not to be classed as indoors.
- 5.2.5. The organiser must complete a Covid-19 risk assessment for events taking place in all venues. For events in gardens of private homes or on private land this is only necessary if you plan on having more than 30 people, when you must use it to determine how many attendees will be able to attend and to identify other practical steps to ensure the event takes place safely. You must follow this risk assessment as well as any relevant guidance to make the event as safe as possible.

Outdoor Civil Marriages and Civil Partnerships

- 5.2.6. With effect from 1st July 2021, there is a new piece of marriage legislation in place covering outdoor marriages and civil partnerships. Full details of the guidance relating to this law can be found on the Ministry of Justice website.
- 5.2.7. These changes are being introduced via amendments to the Marriages and Civil Partnerships (Approved Premises) Regulations 2005 to allow legal outdoor civil weddings and civil partnership registrations to take place within the grounds of Approved Premises.
- 5.2.8. The regulations apply only to Approved Premises - the changes cannot enable outdoor weddings to take place on religious premises. However, those religious premises which are Approved Premises for civil partnership registrations will be allowed to hold civil partnership registrations outdoors, should they wish to do so.
- 5.2.9. The legal requirements for approved premises are set out in regulations. For ceremonies in other types of building, there are complex legal requirements dating back more than a century which are fixed by primary legislation.
- 5.2.10. In order to hold legal outdoor weddings and civil partnership registrations, a venue must be Approved Premises or must become Approved Premises under the Marriages and Civil Partnerships (Approved Premises) Regulations 2005, as amended.
- 5.2.11. Currently, premises which seek approval must comprise a permanent built structure (or permanently moored vessel) with at least one room which is to be approved for civil weddings and civil partnership registration. Under the amended regulations, such premises, if approved, can also use any outdoor areas in the same venue to hold civil weddings and civil partnership registrations.
- 5.2.12. Existing Approved Premises will be permitted to use any outdoor areas in the venue for civil wedding and civil partnership registrations without having to re-apply for approval, subject to certain conditions.
- 5.2.13. Ceremonies are now able to take place fully outdoors or under a partially covered structure if this has at least a 50% open area (the same definition used for the smoking ban and Covid 19 regulations in England and Wales). The location for the ceremony must be assessed to be seemly and dignified. Other requirements for public access and signage must be met.
- 5.2.14. These are time-limited amendments to the regulations coming into force 1 July 2021 until April 2022. A consultation will be undertaken in the Autumn 2021 to consider the practical impacts of this policy in detail and to enable a later amending Statutory Instrument which is not time limited.

- 5.2.15. With the exception of Jewish and Quaker weddings, which for historical reasons can already take place outdoors, legal religious weddings will continue to take place in certified places of worship which are also registered for marriage, or churches and chapels of the Church of England or Church in Wales. The Government will legislate to allow religious marriages to take place outdoors when parliamentary time allows.

Significant Life Events

- 5.2.16. Significant life events such as christenings or Bar/Bat Mitzvahs can be attended by a maximum of 30 people. Anyone working is not counted in these limits.

5.3. Community Centres

- 5.3.1. From early 2021, the service has supported Covid-19 lateral flow testing sites at Mere Green, Sheldon and Oddingley Community Centres. These operations were withdrawn in order that the Centres could re-open fully from 17th May 2021, although the site at Summerfield will remain in situ until the end of July 2021.
- 5.3.2. The service is also providing a base at Burbury Park for the teams distributing home testing kits in areas of the city.
- 5.3.3. The extension of restrictions until 19th July 2021 and the maintenance of social distancing requirements is having an on-going impact on income generation which is expected to create a financial pressure on the service this year.

5.4. Places of Worship

- 5.4.1. Places of worship are open for services. When a service is taking place indoors, attendees must not mingle in groups larger than six, except where everyone present is from no more than two households (including support bubbles). Social distancing must be maintained between groups at all times.
- 5.4.2. Where services are taking place outdoors, attendees must not mingle in groups larger than 30. Everyone should follow the national guidance on the safe use of places of worship.

5.5. Neighbourhood Advice and Information (NAIS)

- 5.5.1. We are now aiming to fully reopen on 19th July 2021, depending on further government announcements.
- 5.5.2. In the meantime, staff have returned to the office in smaller groups and we continue with our closed-door appointment-only service.

6. Street Scene and Parks (including Waste Management)

- 6.1. Following the granting of planning permission planning for the redevelopment of the Perry Barr depot, the Perry Barr Household Recycling Centre (HRC) will

be temporarily closed from 31st July 2021 whilst major improvement works are undertaken. The four other recycling centres across the city will remain open and have extra booking slots available to ease any potential disruption.

6.2. The 60-year-old Perry Barr site, which is run by Veolia, is being closed while redevelopment and improvement work is carried out, including:

- The removal of steps to containers on the site, which will make it easier to use for members of the public
- Dedicated visitor entrances, removing the need for residents to merge with site traffic
- Increased capacity and a wider range of recycling services

6.3. It is scheduled to reopen in spring 2023.

6.4. Residents who would normally use the Perry Barr site are being encouraged to use the Castle Bromwich HRC in the first instance as generally there is more availability at that site; however, they can of course use any of Birmingham's other recycling centres. The number of slots have been significantly increased by 35%, meaning that there is usually availability within two hours.

7. Transport

7.1. Public Transport

7.1.1. The Covid-19 Transport Cell undertook extensive planning for the 17th May milestone, which saw an increase in social contact and the relaxation of restrictions around indoor gatherings.

7.1.2. We anticipated an increase in the use of public transport for longer periods as night-time economy became more active. The reintroduction of large events such as concerts and sporting events were predicted to possibly have a significant impact on the network. Preparations to respond to this were put in place, including an Operational Order covering key events that will be drawing larger crowds than previously seen over the last year.

7.1.3. With the Prime Minister announcing England is 'very likely' to be able to return to 'pretty much life before Covid' on 19th July, measures will continue to be monitored and implemented. This will be in adherence to government guidelines and messaging, and utilising the Transport Cell will ensure a consistent, coordinated and strategic multi-agency approach towards this next step.

7.2. Future Public Transport Infrastructure

7.2.1. Bull Street Metro Works commenced on Monday 7th June 2021, which had a significant impact on bus services. The essential work has displaced approximately 80 buses per hour. Transport For West Midlands (TfWM)

continue to work closely with operators and Midland Metro Alliance on bus mitigation measures, as well as passenger communications and information sharing. Passenger assist staff were on Street to support for a subsequent two weeks.

7.3. Clean Air Zone (CAZ)

- 7.3.1. The Clean Air Zone (CAZ) became operational on 1st June 2021.
- 7.3.2. Ongoing marketing, communications and engagement continues to raise awareness of the CAZ and the support available to affected and eligible groups via exemptions and mitigations funds.
- 7.3.3. April, May and early June 2021 saw a marked increase in the uptake of exemptions which are designed to provide additional time to prepare for the CAZ and/or encourage the upgrade or replacement of vehicles that do not meet the emission standards of the Clean Air Zone.
- 7.3.4. As of 30th June 2021, the project has approved a total of 6,713 exemptions.
- 7.3.5. To date, the Taxi Mitigation Fund has issued grants with a total value of circa £1.9m (as at end of June 2021). The distribution of grants is in line with the number of licensed hackney carriage and private hire drivers i.e. approximately 30% hackney carriage and 70% private hire.
- 7.3.6. Now that the CAZ is operational, the CAZ team are collating data about the volume of vehicles entering the zone and the volume of compliant versus non-compliant vehicles. This data will be published on a monthly basis from the end of June 2021. The CAZ team, as part of the monitoring and evaluation programme, also plan to publish a traffic and air quality baseline report in early July 2021. The baseline data will be used to monitor progress towards the goal of achieving compliance with the legal limit for nitrogen dioxide.

8. Covid-19 Support Grants (including Business Support Grants)

8.1. Restart Grants

- 8.1.1. Birmingham City Council has now paid out over £43 million to around 6,200 businesses as part of the Restart Grants scheme.
- 8.1.2. Applications for this scheme closed on 30th June, with the deadline for final payments on 31st July. Work will continue over July on remaining unassessed high risk applications. This will involve the team making contact with businesses to get more information before making a final decision.

8.2. Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG)

- 8.2.1. A further top-up payment of £896.54 was made on 16th June 2021 to all 3,350 businesses previously in receipt of a grant through the ARG scheme.

- 8.2.2. This means that all funding received through the initial ARG allocation has been spent, allowing the Council to draw down an additional £7m in ARG top-up funding. We expect to receive this funding in late July 2021.

8.3. Social Isolation Payments

- 8.3.1. From 1st July 2021, eligibility criteria for the Discretionary Isolation Payments scheme have been amended to remove the savings criteria and raise the income threshold to £26,000.
- 8.3.2. These changes have been communicated on the BCC website and will make the process of claiming easier for citizens.

9. Council Finances and Resources

9.1. Covid-19 Financial Update

- 9.1.1. On 23rd June 2021, Government announced a further £160m nationally to help struggling families with food supplies and utilities. This means that the Covid Local Support Grant has been extended until the end of September to enable councils to help families in need. Local authority allocations have not yet been confirmed. Historically, Birmingham has received around 3.05% of the national allocation, and therefore if the same methodology is used, the Council can expect to receive a further £4.9m of grant income.
- 9.1.2. In preparation for the extension, the Council is planning to continue the arrangement with Northgate, in addition to changing the eligibility criteria for local discretionary award element to make it more generous. This follows Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) advice to simplify the criteria for the discretionary element of the scheme. The Birmingham scheme will now apply to anyone earning less than £26,000 per annum and to remove the savings threshold. The benefit of this proposal will be to encourage more people to self-isolate when required. This will be the subject of an upcoming Cabinet report.
- 9.1.3. For 2021/22 there is forecast to be an overspend of £6.8m when risks are considered. If risks are excluded, then there is a minor overspend of £1.8m. It should be noted that forecasts will continue to be refined over the coming weeks and months as more information becomes available on the impact of easing restrictions.
- 9.1.4. Services have identified £2.4m of ongoing Covid impact for 2022/23 and beyond. This is a reduction of £0.2m. Any such costs will be dealt with as part of the upcoming budget process.

9.2. CIPFA Review

- 9.2.1. From April to May 2021, CIPFA undertook a review of the Council's Financial Management capability against their five-star model and scored the Council's Financial Management capability as three stars stating:

“It is clear that over the last two years at Birmingham City the core finance function has moved on from the more traditional stewardship aspects of financial management that had evolved through keeping the services ‘safe’ by trying to ensure that the organisation works within its approved financial targets to a much more mature and dynamic supporting and enabling service. Our evidence strongly points to a significant improvement having been achieved over the last two years on Financial Management capability to a position where high levels of effectiveness are now evident. Birmingham City Council should be considered to be an exemplar in the transformation of financial management capability given the extent of improvement achieved over the last two years.”

- 9.2.2. Three stars is a significant improvement on the previous one star score received from CIPFA in July 2019, which indicated the Council was only at the basic ‘securing stewardship’ level.