



Corporate Overview Group

Tuesday, 1 February 2022

The Impact of Covid-19 on Rushcliffe Borough Council - Internal Focus

Report of the Director - Neighbourhoods

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1. Scrutiny has requested to review the impact of Covid-19 on the Council. At the time of writing, 22 months have elapsed since the start of the pandemic in March 2020. To enable meaningful scrutiny to take place, this massive topic area has been split into the impact of the pandemic on the Council internally (this report) and the impact of the pandemic on the Council externally including contracted services, voluntary and community groups with the Borough as well as sports clubs in the Borough. This second report will be brought forward to the Corporate Overview Group in May 2022.
- 1.2. For convenience, a list of reports already considered by Councillors about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Council (mainly from a budgetary point of view) has been included at Appendix A.
- 1.3. Therefore, this report provides an overview of the Council's response to Covid-19 and Dave Banks, Director – Neighbourhoods, will be present at the scrutiny meeting to help the Group navigate this complex topic and understand the impact of Covid-19 on the Council internally.
- 1.4. The report will seek to increase the Group's understanding of the impact of Covid-19 in the following areas as well as providing links to reports already written by Council Officers and a timeline of key events effecting the Council:
 - The Council's initial response to the March 2020 Lockdown
 - The Impact of Covid-19 on the Council's staff
 - The Impact of Covid-19 on the Council's services
 - The Impact of Covid-19 on the Council's significant projects
 - Consideration of what the Council believes were its Critical Success Factors
 - Reflection on any Lessons Learnt.
- 1.5. The Council's Emergency Planning arrangements are mentioned throughout the report; in particular, the Council's internal preparedness for a pandemic, the timely decisions taken in response to unfolding events, and how the Council worked with multiagency partners within the Local Resilience Forum to respond to a fast-paced but also long-running incident.

2. Recommendation

It is RECOMMENDED that the Corporate Overview Group:

- a) Considers the information provided by officers, both in the report and verbally at the meeting in response to the Group's questions
- b) Considers whether there are any additional critical success factors or lessons to be learnt from the Council's response to the pandemic
- c) Considers whether any actions are necessary at this stage in light of the increased knowledge and understanding the Group now has about the Council's response to the pandemic.

3. Reasons for Recommendation

- 3.1. It is important that the Council takes a step back from responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, reflects upon what it has done over the 22 months of the pandemic to date, and assesses whether any improvements can be made in the future. Scrutiny is an important part of this process.

4. Supporting Information

Rushcliffe Borough Council's emergency planning arrangements

- 4.1. The emergency planning capability of Rushcliffe Borough Council is delivered via an annual Service Level Agreement with Nottinghamshire County Council for the provision of a 0.5fte Emergency Planning Officer. The Council is also part of the Local Resilience Forum (LRF).
- 4.2. The LRF is a partnership of all local agencies that have a part to play in planning for, and responding to, major emergencies. Partners include 'blue-light' emergency services, local authorities, health services and others as appropriate and dependent on the emergency. The purpose of the LRF is to ensure effective multi-agency collaboration in the delivery of duties under the Civil Contingencies Act (2004). Alongside this, the aim of the LRF is to establish and maintain effective multiagency arrangements to respond to major incidents and emergencies, and to minimise the impact of those incidents on the public, property and environment of Nottingham and Nottinghamshire.
- 4.3. It was these pre-defined and well-tested coordination structures and multiagency plans that would be activated to respond to Covid-19 in March 2020. A sample LRF response structure is included at Appendix B for information and to aid understanding.
- 4.4. In December 2019, as information was released about Wuhan Novel Coronavirus circulating, national and local emergency planning teams started to receive situational reports. Updated national guidance was issued around pandemic flu planning and, as early as the end of January 2020, the chairmen of LRFs were receiving daily situational reports from the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

- 4.5. The Rushcliffe Pandemic Flu Plan was reviewed in light of the updated national guidance in early February 2020 and the LRF 'stood-up' a Strategic Coordinating Group (SCG) on 13 February 2020.

Actions and Events Immediately Prior to March 2020

- 4.6. The emerging pandemic wasn't the only emergency that needed attention in early 2020. Council officers were already dealing with the aftermath of serious flooding in November 2019 which affected seven communities and 40 homes in the Borough. The Director for Finance and Corporate services attended the multi-agency recovery finance and legal group. The nationally released flood recovery framework grants had been disseminated to eligible residents and businesses. A panel, including elected members, was being created to release countywide appeal fund monies to those most in need. Letters were being sent to notify residents of a new DEFRA property flood resilience grant of £5,000 per household for those affected by the November internal flooding.
- 4.7. Unfortunately, on Sunday 16 February 2020, Storm Dennis hit the UK. Eleven Rushcliffe communities were flooded with over 100 homes internally damaged by flood waters, sadly some for the second time in as many months. The floods were once again declared a national emergency. The LRF stood up a response structure for the flooding incident and one day later the strategic level recovery coordinating group and subgroups. The Council was represented by senior staff on all groups and support was provided by the Emergency Planning Officer (occasionally it was possible for her to represent both the County Council and Borough Council streamlining the resources required to respond to the flooding and enabling other officers to assist on the ground). Alongside the emerging pandemic, officers were once again engaged in emergency support to households, and grant distribution to financially assist those most in need.
- 4.8. As part of the ongoing emergency planning preparedness, plans were being reviewed, and training and exercising was taking place. This included a scheduled review of the corporate business continuity plan and departmental critical service plans, and Directors undertaking LRF major incident response coordination training.
- 4.9. The newly appointed Director for Transformation was attending LRF training on multi-agency operational response and their role on Tactical Coordinating Groups (TCGs). This meant that all Rushcliffe Directors were now trained on working within TCGs providing resilience to the Council in the event of a major incident or even multiple incidents taking place at the same time.
- 4.10. A briefing session was held for Councillors to outline their role in emergencies. The session was attended by fifteen Councillors and covered:
- Understanding emergency planning and response
 - Overview of community support and leadership in an emergency
 - Overview of local risks and threats (pandemic flu was the highest risk on the local and national risk registers)

- Knowledge of emergency management structures
 - Understanding your role before, during, and after an emergency.
- 4.11. A training session was also held for the new internal rapid response team drawn from officers across the Council (environmental health, planning and facilities for example) to aid in an emergency such as the flooding recently experienced. This team would work directly with flooded communities assisting residents and being able to provide information on the impact and scale of the flooding. This new team were created as a direct response to lessons identified in the response and recovery to the November floods and would go on to be deployed in the Strom Dennis floods in February 2020. Their direct engagement with residents enabled hardship grants and flood recovery grants to rapidly be paid to those affected by their homes being internally flooded.

A Timeline of Events Affecting the Council

- 4.12. A timeline of key national announcements, emergency planning/ multiagency actions and key actions taken by Rushcliffe Borough Council is included at Appendix C for information.

How the Council Responded to the Initial Lockdown

- 4.13. On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared a pandemic, and the LRF stood-up further multi-agency coordination structures in support of the SCG. A TCG with requests for multi-agency subgroups took place on Thursday 12 March 2020. The Director for Neighbourhoods, supported by the Emergency Planning Officer, attended the TCG and agreed to stand-up and chair the Covid-19 local authority cell (bringing together representatives from all local authorities in the County). This cell would have its first meeting two working days later on Monday 16 March.
- 4.14. As the multi-agency coordination structure started to develop and respond to the needs of the unfolding incident, it became necessary for Rushcliffe to allocate responsibilities internally so that the Council was represented at all coordinating groups and subgroups. As well as chairing the Covid-19 local authority cell, Rushcliffe would also take a lead in representing the districts on the humanitarian assistance cell, and act as the deputy chairman of the finance cell (it should be noted that this group had now been meeting continuously since it was stood-up in the recovery structure of the November floods – the group simply expanded its membership to all local authorities and switched back to a response group).
- 4.15. Once the LRF structure and cells became embedded, it enabled excellent partnership working across pre-existing working relationships and contacts providing a consistent and coordinated response across the county. In addition, the structure facilitated the delivery of complex work and solutions at considerable pace.

- 4.16. Within the Council, the Executive Management Team (EMT) met on 17 March – the morning after the national announcement to cease all non-essential contact and travel – to decide upon its internal response structure and nominate representatives that would link into the multi-agency structure. This meeting also triggered the creation of the internal Covid-19 Tactical Management Team (CTMT). Throughout the first few weeks of the pandemic both the CTMT and EMT met daily (virtually) to enable prompt decision making and maintain clear oversight of the Council's operations and the effect of the pandemic on staff. Appendix D provides insight into the many groups officers from the Council participated in during the early response phase of the pandemic.
- 4.17. The internal CTMT was chaired by the Service Manager – Corporate Services and met daily to consider up-to-the-minute situational reports from department leads across the Council and feed into the daily EMT briefings where internal issues were discussed alongside feedback from all external groups senior managers were attending at this time. The aim of the CTMT was to manage internal business continuity and support to critical services to maintain the delivery of essential and statutory services to the residents of Rushcliffe. They monitored sickness absence, reviewed PPE and health and safety issues, and organised the redeployment of staff from noncritical services to support the work of the predefined critical services. They also became the key conduit between the organisation and its staff, who were now mainly working remotely from homes, sheds and garages, ensuring their safety, well-being and the continued delivery of services to residents.
- 4.18. Following the Government's announcement on the evening of 16 March 2020 to only travel and attend a place of work if there were no alternatives, most of Rushcliffe's officers immediately transitioned to home / remote working. This transition was accelerated by the previous forward strategic thinking in terms of remote and flexible working – many officers were already working remotely from other Council locations or from home once a week. The majority of staff already had laptops following the organisation's move to Rushcliffe Arena in December 2016; those that did not were immediately issued laptops to ensure work could continue. It was not just the hardware that made the seamless move to remote working possible. The Council had invested time and money in moving key processes and systems online prior to the move to Rushcliffe Arena. Existing electronic document management systems and the swift deployment of Microsoft Teams (which was scheduled for later in 2020) were key to maintaining continuity of service delivery and contact with staff. A small number of officers did not have broadband connections at home or lived in areas of poor connectivity. To ensure they could work from home they were provided with devices with 4G connectivity. Officers were also able to borrow screens, keyboards and other small items of furniture from the Arena to enable them to work safely and comfortably from home.
- 4.19. The Arena offices did not, and have not ever, closed to staff who need to or wish to come into work. However, between March 2020 and September 2020 only a handful of staff populated the office.

- 4.20. To keep officers connected to the organisation and each other, daily Staff Matters updates were circulated to all staff (ordinarily this is a weekly electronic publication). As well as vital public health messages, and news from around the Borough, it shared stories about people’s pets, what they were doing for fun during lockdown and saw pictures of home office set ups or views from the ‘office’ window that were all unique. Between March and December 2020, 85 editions of Staff Matters were written and circulated to staff (there would normally have been 42 in this period) – it was a vital lifeline for maintaining relationships despite the current working arrangements.
- 4.21. Correspondingly, Councillors Connections was also published daily from 18 March until the summer to keep Councillors informed. In line with advice at the time, some Council meetings were postponed during the initial phases of the pandemic before legislation was brought in to allow virtual meetings to take place. Where permitted under the Council’s constitution decisions were made under delegated authority. Following the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020, arrangements were made to conduct Council business virtually. Between 4 April 2020 and 7 May 2021, the Council held 65 meetings virtually. The new arrangements enabled the Council to continue conducting proper business in line with the Constitution and Standing Orders throughout the pandemic. As the pandemic progressed, Councillors were able to monitor the impact of the pandemic on the Council in real-time as strategic tasks, performance indicators and risks that were directly impacted by the pandemic were highlighted in standard monitoring reports by the Corporate Overview Group and Governance Scrutiny Group alongside regular budget updates to Cabinet (see Appendix A).

The Impact of Covid-19 on the Council’s Staff

- 4.22. One of the most obvious impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Council’s staff is on reported sickness. The Council routinely captures and reports data about staff sickness levels. The below table shows the sickness data for 2020/21 and 2021/22 (to date) in comparison with the previous three years:

2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
7.44 days	7.70 days	8.99 days	7.19 days	3.29 days (to end of Q2)

- 4.23. To date, the Council has lost 143.5 productive days (to date) to Covid related illness within the workforce (2020/21-84days; 2021/22-59.5days). Overall sickness has declined over the last 22 months since the start of the pandemic (there is a national target of fewer than 8 working days per employee). Working from home and the Council’s flexible approach to work over the period of the pandemic have also impacted positively on the health of Council staff – there were far fewer days lost to normal coughs and colds in the last two winter periods than normal because of reduced transmission within the office environment and staff are more likely to continue working through mild illness if they are not required to attend the office.

- 4.24. In some teams it has been necessary to employ temporary staff to manage an increase in workload or to continue to deliver vital services to residents of the Borough despite a shortage of normal staff due to shielding or sickness. As a consequence, the number of days on which we have employed agency staff has increased overall (but has not been required continuously) and this is obviously reflected in the expenditure of the Council in this area (which has been reported separately). A number of these staff have demonstrated aptitude and commitment in their temporary roles and been successful in gaining permanent positions as these have become available due to the natural turnover of staff.
- 4.25. Another method for dealing with an increase in workload caused by new job requirements or a reduction in team resources due to sickness is the payment of overtime to existing staff. In some teams, the payment of overtime has been essential (again, in line with demand and not on a permanent basis) to meeting the requirements of the job during this time. Council expenditure on overtime has been reported separately. It would be wrong not to acknowledge that many staff have gone over and above the normal requirements of their roles to assist over the pandemic without financial reward. This is a result of the personal commitment Rushcliffe staff feel towards their roles and the residents of the Borough that depend upon them. Flexibility, internal recognition and thanks are the primary ways in which these efforts are acknowledged but senior managers are aware that due to the longevity of the pandemic these softer (non-financial) forms of recognition may not be enough moving forward.
- 4.26. Home working, like many aspects of the pandemic has resulted in both positive and negative impacts for staff. As well as greater flexibility, less travel time (including wear and tear on vehicles as well as the decreased environmental impact of commuting), financial savings (fewer shop bought sandwiches, new 'office' clothes and travel costs), and greater autonomy have all had a positive benefit for staff. The Council has not been blind, however, to the negative impacts felt by some including social isolation (especially for those living alone), increased conflict between fulfilling work and home responsibilities (imagine balancing full-time work and home-school during the early pandemic), and the dangers of blurring boundaries between work and home life on the resilience of staff. Is it for this reason that the Arena offices have remained open for staff to work in throughout the pandemic and some staff have welcomed this opportunity.
- 4.27. The Council has been very mindful of the impact of the pandemic on staff as well as the changes in working arrangements the pandemic has brought. It has always aimed to maximise the advantages whilst minimising the disadvantages, continually providing support to staff where needed. Between April 2020 and April 2021, eight mental health support sessions were held for staff and provided by Red Umbrella. The virtual sessions were well attended by staff and covered topics such as mindfulness, leading in a crisis, and returning to the workplace. In addition, staff could call on the support of the Council's fourteen trained mental health first aiders as well as colleagues and line managers.

- 4.28. During a staff consultation exercise in May 2020 as the Council prepared to bring staff back to the office in line with changing national guidance, 81% of staff reported the benefits of not wasting time commuting, 75% of staff were enjoying the financial savings of lockdown, 46% of staff reported having a better home/work life balance, and 37% were enjoying greater flexibility as a result of more home working.
- 4.29. Of the 256 members of Rushcliffe staff, six were classified as Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) or Clinically Vulnerable (CV) and were asked to 'shield' during the initial lockdown period. Where these staff were unable to work from home they were moved onto other duties (where their skills matched the requirements of the role) or furloughed (see below) under the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. Managers and colleagues kept in touch with these staff throughout this period to ensure staff did not feel isolated or separated from the organisation.
- 4.30. In addition, staff were asked about their caring responsibilities and whether these responsibilities would impact on their ability to work. This included providing support for elderly relatives who were now shielding (such as food shopping and the collection of medical supplies), caring for a shielding relative within the home, and support for children who were home schooling. Approximately 50% of Rushcliffe staff reported having caring responsibilities; about 25% of these reported expecting to struggle to deliver what was required of them at work should those individuals become ill. This information helped managers to be flexible with individual members of staff, understand their concerns, and plan work accordingly.
- 4.31. Between January and March 2021, children were sent home from school for a second period. During this time, the Council provided support for parents following feedback from the previous period of home-school and the impact this had on parents. This support came in the form of increased flexibility to work outside of normal office hours to allow support to be given to children during the school day, the loan of electronic devices to enable virtual class attendance, a parents' support group that met virtually for coffee once a week, and a weekly email full of good ideas, hits and tips for coping, as well as things to do with the children while they were at home.
- 4.32. During the pandemic, employers could put some or all of their staff on temporary leave ('furlough') using the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme to claim a percentage of employee's usual wages. Rushcliffe used this scheme sparingly preferring to redeploy staff to areas of greater need (see below). Between March and May 2020, the Council furloughed 24 members of staff. All had fully returned by October 2020, with the majority (18) returning by the beginning June. In November 2020, a further six part time staff and one full time employee had a further four weeks off through the furlough scheme. Rushcliffe furloughed members of staff from the facilities team (community

facilities and sports pitches were not allowed to open), cleaning staff and other front-facing service delivery teams such as waste, environmental health, strategic housing and planning where staff were shielding and unable to carry out their normal roles. These teams were strengthened by staff from less critical areas under our internal redeployment scheme.

- 4.33. At its very first Coronavirus meeting, EMT designated each of the Council's service areas 'critical' or 'non-critical' to allow resources to be focused in areas of statutory need and where services delivered direct to residents would be the highest priority. This exercise was based upon the lists already present in the Corporate Business Continuity Plan but adjusted due to the nature of the emerging emergency and local circumstances at the time. Whilst this list has altered many times during the last 22 months, its importance has remained. It enabled managers of areas designated as non-critical to identify what their minimum operating numbers were (to maintain essential work only) and, therefore, where staff could be offered to more critical areas of the business to maintain services such as waste collection, home alarms installations, inspections of business premises and the issuing of grant funding to support businesses. Staff from non-critical areas of the authority were also used to assist with administering flood grants (following the November and February floods immediately prior to the pandemic), make weekly befriending calls to vulnerable residents identified through the County Council Community Hub, and deliver food or care packages to isolated residents where needed. It was the willingness of Rushcliffe's staff, the flexibility shown by managers and the speed at which critical services were identified and supported that enabled Rushcliffe to continue delivering vital services during the early stages of the pandemic.
- 4.34. One final area in which Rushcliffe staff have been impacted by the pandemic has been in terms of workload. Clearly a global pandemic of (currently) 22 months in duration will have an impact on the volume of work some staff (those directly managing the impact of the pandemic on the organisation and dovetailing with county-wide and national response structures) but we did not anticipate just how many staff would be affected or how the pandemic would increase demand in other areas too. Increases have been seen in normal workloads such as greater amounts of household waste to collect due to residents working from home or more street litter caused by discarded face masks and gloves. Further increases have been created as a result of new areas of work brought about by the pandemic such as compliance inspections to ensure food premises reopened and operated in line with Government guidelines and restrictions. There have been millions of pounds of relief and grant funding to administer to local businesses and individuals affected by the numerous lockdowns. Each of these has required application processes, fraud checks and payment processes to be developed necessitating involvement from multiple support teams across the Council. The Government has naturally wanted to keep tabs on the impact of the pandemic on local authorities so in some areas of the business reporting of statistics to central Government has increased substantially. We have even seen an increase in planning applications driven by residents' desire to improve their homes as they spent more time living in them and importantly working in them. More

intensive and more frequently cleaning of office premises and community venues has increased the workload of our facilities staff; remote working puts more pressure on the IT network and makes stability of systems and software even more business critical; new technology brings new challenges and new opportunities as can be seen with the hybrid meetings functionality installed in the Council Chamber capitalising on this undoubtedly creates workload in the short to medium term. What is perhaps clear at this stage is that the increased workload for many staff isn't going to reduce anytime soon and the Council is mindful of this whilst moving into the planning of priority tasks for the coming year.

- 4.35. At the time of writing, Rushcliffe's office-based staff are once again mainly working from home under the Government's Plan B to tackle the rise in Covid-19 cases linked to the Omicron variant (those who cannot work from home remain out in the community delivering vital services). When staff return to the Arena once again, they will continue to work under the Council's Smarter Ways of Working policy introduced last summer in line with the lifting of the original work from home directive. This policy strikes a balance between office and remote working to enable staff to continue to benefit from the greater flexibility the pandemic has brought whilst giving people the opportunity to get together for collaborative working, socialising and being part of the team that has responded so well to all that has been thrown at it since March 2020.

The Impact of Covid-19 on the Council's Services

- 4.36. The impact of Covid-19 on the Council's services has been considerable. However, it is important to remember that the Council continued to deliver all statutory services throughout the pandemic, has absorbed significant additional work across many services as a result of the pandemic, has worked in partnership across health, police and other local authority boundaries, and has continued to meet resident needs and expectations (evidenced by the large number of Covid-19 related compliments they Council receives).
- 4.37. The Council mitigated much of the potentially negative impact of the pandemic by being flexible, acting swiftly and trusting senior staff. Critical services were identified within the first 12 hours (based on the standard lists in the Council's Business Continuity Plan) and every effort was made to keep these operational. The CTMT planned for 20% staff absence due to sickness (the highest this figure reached at any one point in time was 7%) and a further 30% of reduced ability to work due to caring responsibilities (much of which was avoided with increased flexibility for staff). Over 50 members of staff from teams delivering work classified as non-critical in the early days of the pandemic were available to be redeployed to support critical areas. Notable successes included:
- Staff from the elections and facilities teams working with the bin crews to maintain adequate numbers on bin rounds
 - Staff from Environmental Health supporting increased hospital discharges by ensuring ex-patients were safe and cared for within their own homes

- Staff from Customer Services and Community Development phoning (and, in some cases, visiting) vulnerable residents as part of the Council's efforts to look after those being asked to shield
 - Staff from Elections, Democratic Services, Economic Growth, the Business Support Unit, Communications and Community Development making initial calls to businesses to increase awareness about grant provisions and assist in the completion of applications
 - Staff from the Facilities team, Country Park, Business Support Unit and Community Development printing and sending thousands of letters to vulnerable residents in the Borough to inform them about help they could access.
- 4.38. The Council's Emergency Planning Officer works across both Rushcliffe and the County Council. This arrangement had both advantages and disadvantages for the Council. Information flow and representation on working groups was very much increased as a result of this arrangement but it was also a lot of work for one individual in the circumstances. The Emergency Planning Officer led on a number of critical projects for the LRF relying on staff at Rushcliffe to implement business continuity arrangements and deliver what was required in relation to the pandemic. The Council's Emergency Planning arrangement, whilst sufficient to meet the needs of the authority under normal circumstances, was not designed to deliver on such an increase in demand or over such a long period of time.
- 4.39. What follows is an attempt to summarise the impact of Covid-19 on each of the Council's teams (or business units). In some areas these impacts have been significant and changed many times over the 22 months since the start of the pandemic. The intention is to provide an understanding of impact rather than documenting each individual impact in detail. The Group is more than welcome to raise concerns or ask questions about specific details at the meeting if required.
- 4.40. The Waste team continued to deliver both statutory and discretionary services throughout the pandemic. Additional staff have been brought in (through redeployment and temporary recruitment) to assist with the collection of waste. Waste tonnages and access issues (getting down streets past parked cars) have increased as a result of home working by residents across the Borough (both kerbside collections and at the Council's glass recycling bring sites). As a result of staff changes, there has been an increase in missed bin collections (usually those classified as assisted collections so not left visibly in the street for collection); these have been collected as soon as possible after notification that they have been missed. Significant changes to working practices for the waste collection crews were needed to reduce the risk of infection transmission during the early stages of the pandemic. These included staff making their own way to the start of a collection round rather than travelling collectively in the waste vehicle, mask wearing, social distancing and increased hand hygiene at the Depot. Increased cleaning of vehicles required support from staff outside the waste team and new methods of communication were required for this largely manual workforce. More recently, the team have seen a number of staff having to isolate due to

positive tests, or being a close contact, due to the increase in case this winter. To protect staff from the Omicron variant, previous changes to working practices have been re-introduced. The waste team received much praise and many colourful 'thank you' cards during the initial lockdown period from grateful residents.

- 4.41. Initially, from a leisure contracts point of view, the Council's Contracts team were quiet with all leisure centres closed under early Government guidelines to reduce transmission and Borough car park usage very low due to low footfall on the Borough's high streets. However, from mid-2020 onwards, workloads have increased in line with the reopening of leisure centres (albeit with stringent mitigations in place which have been agreed upon and monitored by the Council and leisure provider) and the team have been a key part in encouraging residents back to food and drink establishments as well as local shops by providing free parking at all times initially, followed by free parking after 3pm as part of our 'Free after 3' initiative to encourage people to shop locally. Income from pay and display has for the last three months been back to pre-pandemic levels although this is regularly monitored. The team have also been involved in setting up the comprehensive NHS testing centre in the Arena car park during 2020 and early 2021, the Vaccination Centre at Gamston Community Hall during 2021, and most recently were involved in the planning for a pop-up Vaccination Centre at Rushcliffe Arena to help minimise the impact of the omicron variant this Christmas, although this request was subsequently withdrawn by NHS/CCG partners due to high take up in existing venues.
- 4.42. Our Community Development team covers a broad remit including Rushcliffe Country Park (which stayed open and had significant increases in attendance throughout the pandemic), parks, playing fields and open spaces. Some community events were cancelled during the initial lockdown but then brought back during the second half of the pandemic to date but adapted to be Covid compliant. Sports and Health Development both played an important part during the pandemic in supporting groups and individuals, particularly the vulnerable. The facilities team provided estate support in maintaining our built estate including the maintenance and care of the Arena offices as well as all of our community facilities and sports pitches. Some members of this team were furloughed during the early part of the pandemic, some were redeployed to assist other teams such as waste and recycling and bulky waste collection, and some were key to liaising with the County Council's Community Support Hub and providing safe and well checks to vulnerable residents in the Borough. The team provided friendly contact to combat social isolation, delivery of medicines and food packages where these could not be provided elsewhere, signposted residents to local volunteer groups within their community that could offer support, and even played scrabble through a living room window on a summer's day. Normal work may have taken a backseat for a period as support was reprioritised but the skills of this team were put to excellent use.
- 4.43. Involvement for the Environmental Health team in the pandemic started off slow with much normal work being suspended as the Government closed

businesses and residents reduced social contact. Several members of the team were redeployed (mainly to assist with the installation and repair of home alarms for vulnerable residents or those recently discharged from hospital to complete their recovery at home); some members of the team were temporarily furloughed. However, once the initial lockdown was lifted and businesses started to reopen the workload of this team increased dramatically. The need to inspect, and where necessary enforce the relevant and frequently changing Covid legislation has been hugely demanding. Often this has included interpreting legislation that has, understandably, been developed more swiftly than is normal and often without the necessary guidance. It has also meant responding swiftly to changes in that legislation and providing advice and guidance to businesses who are unsure of what they can and cannot do. Between March 23 2020 and June 21 2021, the Council received 914 service requests from business requesting such advice. Unfortunately, the Council also had to respond to intelligence of businesses failing to comply with legal requirements designed to keep people safe and served 23 fixed penalties and on one occasion had reason to seek the closure of a business In West Bridgford guilty of repeated breaches. In total, more than 800 additional Covid related advisory/enforcement visits were undertaken by this team none of which would have been necessary pre-pandemic. The Environmental Health team have also supported public health teams in local outbreak control investigations and complete additional public health data returns to central Government reporting on the impact of the pandemic locally.

- 4.44. In March 2020, the Government announced the 'Everyone In' campaign to ensure that those without a home to isolate in had a safe place to go whilst the country was in lockdown. Our Strategic Housing team worked with colleagues across the county to increase the number of suitable places to house rough sleepers and those without their own homes. During 2020-21, the team accommodated 39 homeless individuals in temporary housing with support as part of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) emergency Covid response. During 2021-22, the team have accommodated a further nine homeless people with a history of rough sleeping due to their vulnerability to Covid given the higher prevalence of underlying health conditions in this group. As part of a wider Housing and Health partnership approach, the Council has committed to the provision of temporary accommodation for any homeless person who is Covid positive or symptomatic, and who is required to self-isolate. The period of isolation will also give the Council an opportunity to prevent individuals returning to the streets. The Council has also been successful in securing DLUHC additional funding through the Rough Sleeping Delivery Programmes to support councils during the Covid 19 pandemic. This has provided six units of permanent accommodation for rough sleepers during 2021- 22 and a further seven units to be delivered during 2022-23 as part of a South Nottinghamshire response. There was also a considerable amount of work early in the pandemic for those staff within Strategic Housing that provide our Home Alarms system as hospitals were encouraged to discharge patients without Coronavirus to the safety of their own homes with appropriate levels of support in place. Our

home alarms provided a vital lifeline between vulnerable residents and their families and support workers.

- 4.45. The Planning and Growth team have not been unduly impacted by the pandemic outside of the need to adapt to more agile ways of working. They have, however, seen an unprecedented increase in workload over the same period of the pandemic – a 40% increase in applications. Possibly entirely unconnected to the pandemic (an increase that we would have experienced anyway), this increase may have been influenced by changing working practices nationally (more people wanting to change a spare bedroom or garage into a home office), may reflect that people are more likely to develop their existing home than want to move house during a pandemic, or perhaps that people simply have more time on their hands to make plans for their homes. Regardless of the reasons, the Planning and Growth team have not been short of work during the pandemic. One impact directly connectable to the pandemic is the length of time it currently takes for consultees (such as the County Council or Environment Agency) to respond to consultations which has an impact on how quickly applications can be processed.
- 4.46. The Council's Planning Policy team have been relatively unaffected by the pandemic being able to continue with work on the Council's Local Plan. Members of this team were redeployed early in the pandemic but soon returned to normal work. Neighbourhood Plans which should have come forward during this time have been delayed (partly due to the suspension of elections in 2020 but also due to the inadvisability of getting communities together and the focus within those communities being on the pandemic rather than neighbourhood planning).
- 4.47. The Council has a small Economic Development team who have been very busy during the pandemic. Following redeployment in the early stages of the pandemic, members of this team have been very involved in initiatives to encourage shoppers back to local high streets, into food and drink establishments and to support local businesses in their recovery generally. Using the Government's Welcome Back Funding and the Council's own resources and funding, the team organised a number of webinars for businesses and one to one business support throughout the pandemic, hosted online business networking, delivered a Rushcliffe gift voucher competition and launched the digital grants programme which to date has received applications from over 30 high street businesses. The team also managed High Street Ambassadors to provide assurance and advice in town centres as restrictions were lifted. More recently, the focus for the Welcome Back Funding has shifted to delivering an enhanced events programme in West Bridgford, which has been delivered by the Council's community development team. Funding has also been allocated to the six larger town and parish councils to support them to deliver initiatives in their town centres. The Economic Development Team have worked closely with them on the allocation of this.
- 4.48. Our Property Services team were kept busy during the early phases of the pandemic working very closely with local businesses that rent our premises.

Many of these were closed during lockdown and the Property Services team worked with individual business owners to offer rental payment holidays and other initiatives to help business owners overcome the initial financial impact of being temporarily shut, an addition to making sure all were fully aware of the various Government grants available at the various stages of the pandemic. The team has since worked with the business owners to agree mutually acceptable rent holiday repayment plans, allowing tenants to continue to readjust to the changing market conditions, whilst also paying off accrued debts.

- 4.49. The Council's Financial Services team have been extremely stretched throughout the pandemic. The pressure on the budget has meant that Finance team have needed to continually monitor and adjust the Council's projections and budget to identify where resources are available to support the additional expenditure for example extra staff, overtime, and protective clothing. The team have had to manage and account for the additional emergency grant funding that was distributed to councils in response to the reduced income and expenditure pressures. This often involved applying for funding and submitting government returns for evidence. In addition to this, the closure of the accounts and audit process has been more difficult and included a greater depth of scrutiny and officer involvement, particularly on the grants process.
- 4.50. As well as the expected difficult conversations with residents and business owners over the last 22 months where they have found themselves unable to pay their normal Council Tax or Business Rates payments, impact on the Council's Revenues team has come in the form of relief and recovery grants to businesses affected by closure or loss of trade during the pandemic. This extensive additional work has often been introduced with short lead in times, limited guidance from central Government and requiring new systems and checks to ensure the right people are paid as quickly as possible. The team has received much praise for the effectiveness in getting grant payments out making a real difference to businesses in the Borough and their ability to bounce back following the pandemic. Over the last 22 months the team has delivered Restart and Discretionary Business Grants, a Special Hospitality Grant from the remaining discretionary funds, Extended Retain Relief, Additional Restrictions Grant, Closed Business Lockdown Payments, Council Tax Support Grant, Local Restrictions Support Grants and a Discretionary Business Rates Grant Fund. This amounts to 8,769 individual payments from a collective fund of over £50.7million.
- 4.51. The Council's Benefits team has also been steadily busy during the pandemic ensuring that residents of the Borough get the financial support they need. During 2020/21, the team's work also included processing the Council Tax Scheme Hardship Fund which provided working-age residents who were in receipt of Council Tax Support, due to low income, up to an additional £250 extra support with their Council Tax bills. There were payments made totalling £511,212,87 to 3,024 residents out of this fund which was provided by the Government. In May 2021, the team also processed the top-up payments of £20 per week for residents on Universal Credit (and removed these again

from October 2021) as well as delivering Test and Trace Support Payments (TTSP) to individuals required to stay home and isolate due to Covid and have a loss of earnings as a result. The team has also processed far more changes to benefits over the pandemic than during a normal year due to the impact of the pandemic on our most vulnerable residents, these have all been dealt with as swiftly and sensitively as possible. Between 12 October 2020 and 7 January 2021, 981 applications for a TTSP were made and payments totalling £194,500 have been made – there are currently 108 applications pending further information. Funding for these payments is provided by the Department for Health and Social Care. There has been a recent significant increase again in the number of application due to the omicron variant. The Benefits team along with Customer Services are now working with these County Council to administer their Household Support Grant scheme, which provides food, energy and water vouchers to our vulnerable residents as defined by the County Council's eligibility criteria – this scheme only went live towards the end of 2021 and runs to 31 March 2022.

- 4.52. For a small team, the Council's Communications team has been extremely productive throughout the pandemic. Because of their size the impact of this additional work has been immense. The team increased both internal and external communications in the early phases of the pandemic to ensure staff, Councillors and residents had access to information as quickly as it was available doubling the number of internal updates usually publicised including daily briefings at key times. The team used both traditional channels such as the resident's newsletter, Rushcliffe Reports, and the website, as well as more timely updates on the Council's multiple social media channels. The team also introduced an electronic residents' newsletter over this period which is based on a subscription service allowing news to be delivered directly to residents more frequently. The team played an active role in the LRF created Communications Cell ensuring news updates were consistent across the county and reflected the health priorities of the time. Additional communications were sent regularly to town and parish councils as well as the business network to keep people up to date and informed. As well as information relating to the pandemic, the team have focused across all channels on good-news stories to maintain morale, share insight into the lives of those working within the pandemic, and raise spirits with tales of community solidarity and volunteers going above and beyond. This has been an important part of making residents feel safe and cared for during this difficult time. As well as keeping the day job ticking over and coping with a huge amount of pandemic related work, the team have also been a key part of finding new ways to undertake projects that could have easily been shelved during the pandemic due to a lack of time – the totally virtual 2020 Community Awards is an excellent example of this.
- 4.53. In March 2020 at the start of the pandemic, all of the Council's face-to-face Customer Services closed. Residents could still speak to one of our advisors on the phone or by email, and the option of self-serving through the Council's website has become increasingly popular. Customer Service Advisors were key to providing residents with information they needed to stay safe during the pandemic and were always on hand to help with queries or changes in

resident circumstances. Face-to-face services were resumed in July 2021 on reduced opening hours, but the channel shift experienced during the pandemic to electronic methods of communication was so great that demand for face-to-face services has remained low allowing many more queries to be dealt with quickly and efficiently over the phone and via email.

- 4.54. Despite the postponement of many face-to-face meetings very early in the pandemic the impact of Covid-19 on the Council's small Democratic Services team has been considerable. To support the introduction of virtual meetings in April 2020, the team developed new working practices and protocols as well as training staff and Councillors in this new technology. Between April 2020 and May 2021, the Council held 65 meetings virtually including the live streaming of all meetings and new protocols for resident involvement and attendance. Over that same period, the Democratic Services team were engaged in developing safe systems of reintroducing face-to-face meetings as well as testing and trialling the Council's new hybrid meeting technologies to enable meetings to continue to be live streamed once they returned to a face-to-face format. Work has continued throughout 2021 to test and develop the hybrid meeting technology alongside the delivery of a full programme of meetings and the reintroduction of the Civic Events Programme. The pandemic has affected the way this team delivers its day-job, and these changes are likely to continue after the pandemic has officially ceased.
- 4.55. The Council's ICT team have been key to enabling the organisation to continue to work throughout the pandemic. They immediately brought forward the roll-out of Microsoft Teams to enable all staff to utilise video conferencing technologies whilst remote working, provided laptops to those staff that prior to the pandemic had been entirely office based (such as the Business Support Unit) as well as ongoing laptop replacement, and assisted a number of rural staff with connectivity to ensure they too could work safely from home. They moved the majority of their own working operations to a remote model but kept up with onsite tasks such as daily back-ups of data. As the pandemic progressed, they procured and installed the Council's new hybrid meeting technology and have supported meetings over the last 12 months as well as development of the system. They have also been involved in developing electronic forms to enable individuals and businesses to apply for grant support, introduced new software to enable electronic processes to be used by teams now working remotely, and ensured that the Council's IT systems continue to resist cyberattacks (a risk which arguably has heightened during the pandemic).
- 4.56. The Legal team have been vital during the pandemic in terms of ensuring decision making has been in line with the Council's Constitution even where normal means of making these decisions has not been possible. The Council's Monitoring Officer has also been vital to supporting virtual and hybrid meetings interpreting changing regulations as well as advising on legality of meetings. The team have also assisted the Council's other service areas in interpreting new emergency legislation and putting in place new systems and processes often with limited guidance.

- 4.57. The Council's Business Support Unit have provided a skeleton presence in the office throughout the pandemic, taking care of tasks such as scanning the post to ensure letters and applications are dealt with despite staff not being in the building, printing and laminating public health signage for use internally and across the Borough, completing printing on behalf of those not in the office, managing the allocation of PPE and providing a conduit between teams that are no longer able to meet up to work collaboratively, The Business Support Unit have also been able to mobilise resources remarkably quickly to assist other areas with large postal mailouts to vulnerable residents or businesses potentially eligible for grant support.
- 4.58. With the suspension of elections during 2020 it may have been that the Council's elections team were not impacted by the pandemic. In the early months the team were redeployed to assist other areas but soon returned to elections duties as although there were no actual elections the register of electors still needed to be maintained and kept up to date. This meant finding new ways of conducting the annual canvass to ensure the safety of residents and canvassers despite Covid-19 and encouraging more electronic registrations. From as early as late 2020, the team were engaged in planning a Covid-safe May 2021 Polling Day and Count for the County Council and Police and Crime Commissioner Elections (as well as a by-election and Neighbourhood Planning Referendum). This included sourcing thousands of bottles of hand sanitiser and other safety equipment, designing one-way systems around polling stations and recording a safety video to train all elections staff across the county in a Covid-safe delivery of the election. These elections were delivered professionally, democratically and in line with restrictions in place at the time – they are elections those involved will never forget.
- 4.59. The Council's Human Resources team has played an essential part in keeping the organisation running over the pandemic. As well as continuing to provide their normal services and support to managers, they have also managed the furlough scheme, conducted numerous additional risk assessments, sourced huge amounts of PPE and advised on its use. They have developed virtual induction days for new starters, been involved in both internal and external advisory groups, and kept up to date with every changing advice and legislation. They have also played a huge part in keeping the morale of staff high and ensuring staff mental health and well-being are properly checked and accounted for.

The Impact of Covid-19 on the Council's Significant Projects

- 4.60. Whilst dealing with the pandemic was all consuming for some staff and at times some teams were extremely busy, the Council did not suspend any statutory services or stop working on its significant projects. That is not to say that these have not been impacted by the pandemic. Work has progressed as expected on the new Bingham Arena and community facilities as well as the Council's Crematorium. However, delays to construction as a result of staffing and materials shortages have been experienced. The Council has worked closely with contractors to minimise these delays and communicate with

Councillors and the local community to ensure the impact of these delays is understood and minimised.

Critical Success Factors

- 4.61. **Ability to maintain delivery of critical services** – with critical services already identified in the corporate business continuity plan this placed the Council in a strong position to be prepared for responding to a major incident that affected its business continuity. The internal CTMT were able to swiftly reprioritise the critical services based on the reasonable worst case scenario planning assumptions for loss of staff and move resources from less critical areas to protect service delivery. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, the Council has been able to maintain all of its critical services delivering statutory and essential services to Rushcliffe residents.
- 4.62. **Ability to make decisions promptly** – the Council's ability to make sound decisions swiftly, to delegate responsibility for those decisions where it could and to take the necessary action without waiting for a single decision maker to weigh in was critical in the early days of the pandemic. This situation was greatly helped by strong support from Cabinet, the clarity provided by the Council's scheme of delegation and the member/officer protocol. These factors stood the Council in good stead throughout and avoided problems in terms of leadership and governance. All Rushcliffe staff hold the residents of Rushcliffe foremost in their decision making and understood that action was needed to ensure people had information, leadership and assistance where they were rendered unable to help themselves by Government restrictions, illness or employment circumstances.
- 4.63. **Ability to move the whole workforce to remote working overnight** – due to forward strategic thinking in terms of remote and flexible working, the Council was in a strong position when the country was asked to work from home. Rushcliffe was able to transition the majority of staff to working remotely without disrupting or delaying service delivery. Systems and processes were already electronic further increasing the success of remote working.
- 4.64. **Ability to respond to concurrent emergencies** – the Council has shown it has the staff and processes in place to provide both the capacity and resilience to respond to concurrent emergencies. The Council started 2020 in the recovery phase from the flooding incident in November 2019 and, while early preparation work was being undertaken to respond to Covid-19 (though it was unknown at that stage how extensive that response would be), Storm Dennis flooded Rushcliffe communities. Staff were then attending flood recovery group meetings, flood response tactical coordinating groups at the same time as staff were attending Covid-19 strategic and tactical coordinating groups. Additionally, during a second wave of Covid infections in January 2021, and amid a national lockdown, Council staff responded to Storm Christoph. Senior staff attended flood response TCGs, and additional senior staff continued to attend Covid-19 TCGs, SCGs and a range of Covid-19 subgroups and cells. Although a very lean organisation, Rushcliffe can call

upon the skills of a wide range of staff at different levels of the authority to assist when required.

- 4.65. **Ability to repurpose existing communications channels** – the Council’s communications team was able to rapidly respond to the need for clear and consistent information about the pandemic by utilising existing communications channels for both residents and Council staff (and Councillors). Using the pre-existing Communicating with the Public in an Emergency, the Council maintained information flow and communicated calmly to ensure clarity in the rapidly changing situation. The communications team also worked effectively across the county often leading the way through its ability to tune into resident concerns and react appropriately and swiftly. Avoiding a communications vacuum in a crisis is a challenging but essential task.
- 4.66. **Ability to continue to deliver normal workloads and develop significant projects alongside reacting to the pandemic** – through flexibility and careful management of resources, the Council has maintained normal levels of service delivery using redeployed staff or agency workers where required. It has also maintained its focus on the delivery of key corporate projects including the leisure and office development at Chapel Lane, Abbey Road and the Crematorium. Whilst there have been delays to some of these, this is due to the pandemic (for example, a shortage of manufactured steel) rather than internal capacity issues.

Lessons Learnt

- 4.67. Although the Council had a corporate pandemic flu plan in place, no agency had a specific Covid-19 pandemic plan. Despite this, as emergency plans deal with the consequences of an emergency it was possible to use these generic plans as a springboard which provided clarity and direction in the early days of the pandemic. Both similar plans and training in the event of an emergency that had already been taking place were significant factors contributing to the Council’s ability to act swiftly and appropriately to the emerging situation. In addition, the well-established LRF, including operational structures and relationships, was essential to early success in dealing with the pandemic. Lesson Learnt: take what you have and adapt it to the emerging situation – it doesn’t have to be perfect straightaway.
- 4.68. The Covid-19 pandemic has been a protracted incident which, at times, has been very intense. It has not followed the normal patterns or timescales of response and recovery that are planned or trained for in terms of emergency planning. It has tested staff skills and resilience as well as the operations of the authority. However, in testament to the positive can-do attitude of Rushcliffe staff, the flexibility of the organisation and its focus on doing what’s right for the residents of the Borough, the Council has dealt appropriately with all the pandemic has thrown at it. This has, and continues, to present challenges in terms of staff welfare and workload. Lesson Learnt: Rushcliffe staff can and will do anything that is asked of them but it comes at a cost that now must be repaid to ensure staff can give again.

- 4.69. There have been many ups and downs within the pandemic, and at times it has felt as if the country was moving forwards and out of danger only to have the national situation worsen and be brought right back to where we began. Given the longevity of the situation it was natural that at some point 'normal-work' would be expected and people would return to their day jobs. However, for many Covid-related work has continued alongside the day-job and workloads continue to be challenging. The Council naturally wants to deliver against its strategic objectives and come out of the pandemic positively, but the integration of emergency response and day-to-day life has proven a difficult partnership for many. Lesson Learnt: The re-entry to normal life (work and home-based) following an emergency incident is something that should be included in future plans and training exercises.
- 4.70. Given the longevity of the pandemic, with its many twists and turns, it is important that we make reference to the resilience of key staff. Whilst early in the pandemic the challenge was the sheer amount of work that needed to be done as quickly as possible, as things have progressed the challenge has changed to working in both response and recovery modes whilst also fulfilling the requirements of the day job. There has been very little let up for key officers and given the nature of the pandemic normal high intensity bursts of R&R such as a holiday in the sun have been hard to guarantee. Lessons Learnt: Consideration needs to be given to the rotation of staff in key roles to avoid burn out and what support can be given to those coming out of such roles so that batteries are recharged swiftly.

5. Implications

5.1. Financial Implications

There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

5.2. Legal Implications

There are no legal implications arising directly from this report.

5.3. Equalities Implications

There are equalities implications arising directly from this report.

5.4. Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 Implications

There are no Section 17 implications arising directly from this report.

6. Link to Corporate Priorities

Quality of Life	The quality of life for residents in the Borough has been a key factor in action taken by the Council throughout the pandemic.
Efficient Services	Wherever possible the Council has used existing staff and

	systems to cope with additional demand brought about by the pandemic, reprioritised work and reduced wastage where possible.
Sustainable Growth	
The Environment	

7. Recommendations

It is RECOMMENDED that the Corporate Overview Group:

- a) Considers the information provided by officers, both in the report and verbally at the meeting in response to the Group's questions
- b) Considers whether there are any additional critical success factors or lessons to be learnt from the Council's response to the pandemic
- c) Considers whether any actions are necessary at this stage in light of the increased knowledge and understanding the Group now has about the Council's response to the pandemic.

For more information contact:	David Banks Director - Neighbourhoods dbanks@rushcliffe.gov.uk
Background papers available for Inspection:	
List of appendices:	Appendix A – List of reports previously published relating to Covid-19 Appendix B – Generic LRF structure Appendix C – Timeline of Key Events Appendix D – RBC Covid Response Structure