

SUBJECT: MCC's Public Protection response to the Covid-19 pandemic – during the six months March to August 2020

MEETING: Adults Select Committee

DATE: 29th September 2020

DIVISIONS/WARDS AFFECTED: All

1. PURPOSE

- 1.1 To provide the Committee with an analysis of the Public Protection response to dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 The Committee is invited to use the information to inform its understanding of the role of Public Protection in preventing the spread of the virus and enforcing the measures put in place by Welsh Government.
- 2.2 Noting the importance of protecting the public, including our most vulnerable, a further report be submitted in another six months' time, to allow further scrutiny of our performance.

3. KEY ISSUES

- 3.1 The Public Protection division consists of Environmental Health – two sections 'Commercial' and 'Public Health' – Licensing and Trading Standards. This report serves to illustrate the work of these teams in direct response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

3.2. Environmental Health (Commercial)

- 3.2.1 The team has been instrumental in setting up and running the contact tracers for MCC TTP, as outlined in the earlier report to this Committee, 'Test, Trace & Protect – progress report'. The expertise of the team has ensured cases and contacts have been dealt with swiftly and professionally, essential to minimise the spread of Covid-19. In the months of July and August the team covered over 300 hours of TTP work.
- 3.2.2 Numbers of service requests have doubled with the extra being related totally to Covid-19 advice and compliance. Keeping up with the various changes to the Coronavirus Restrictions Regulations in Wales has proved challenging, and time consuming when relaying this information to local businesses, community groups and the public. Work currently involves ensuring compliance with the regulations and dealing with care home and school queries.
- 3.2.3 In addition to the cases traced within Monmouthshire, the team provided crucial support to the other four Gwent TTP teams. For example, over the two week period

3rd to 17th September, the team contact traced 134 non-Monmouthshire cases, with 322 advisory follow-ups and 97 'warn and inform' calls.

3.2.4 Some of the areas of work that the team have been heavily involved with include -

- Covid in care homes (Members of this Committee received a report on this specific topic on 2nd July 2020) - continuing to support with controls and investigation of any cases, working closely with the Commissioning team
- Providing open 'Q and A' fora for all care providers on a weekly basis
- Providing open Q and A for businesses and also ones for educational establishments
- Key worker accommodation approval during full lockdown
- Legionella advice to all business before reopening
- Identifying and verifying business for grants
- Providing advice to many new businesses setting up and those wishing to diversify
- Providing regional Gwent specialist EHO cover during evenings and weekends
- Prioritising high risk premises for inspection
- Fielding large numbers of complex queries from schools
- Responding and visiting businesses regarding Covid-19 non-compliance in businesses as lockdown continues to be eased
- Event advice and enforcement – agreeing the cancellation of various events that contravene the Welsh Coronavirus restrictions regulations.

3.2.5 A comparison of the last six months and the same period in 2019 is provided below –

Service Request type	1/3/2019 - 31/8/2019	1/3/2020 - 31/8/2020
Food	401	225
Covid	0	416*
Other	76	51
total	477	692 **

*By 17/9/2020, this figure has gone up to 519

**By 17/9/2020 this figure has risen to 795

This represents a 45% increase in complaints this year compared to last.

The dedication of the team during this period has been immense, with many needing to work late into the night and weekends, to assist the pan-Gwent TTP work.

3.3 Environmental Health (Public Health)

3.3.1 The reactive work undertaken by the team has continued throughout the pandemic, a period which has seen a substantial increase in some complaints types and a 19% overall increase as illustrated below:

Service Request type	1/3/2019 - 31/8/2019	1/3/2019 – 31/8/2020
Noise nuisance complaints	197	248
Smoke nuisance complaints	41	113
Fly tipping	110	188
Rats and mice	38	68
Total service requests	1018	1208

In view of the restrictions on movement during the lockdown period the team have had to be flexible and smart in investigating and dealing with these complaints.

- 3.3.2 In addition Officers have liaised with the owners of our 18 licensed holiday caravan sites in the County regarding their responsibilities, outlining latest Covid guidance regarding reopening. A number of sites have decided to remain closed until next season but the majority are open for business. These have been risk assessed for Covid compliance.
- 3.3.3 Three EHOs in the team are now contact tracers for MCC TTP, helping ease some of the existing pressure on colleagues in the Commercial team.

3.4 Licensing

- 3.4.1 The Licensing team has strived to keep businesses running throughout this difficult time. Guidance was provided to the trade immediately on receipt from Welsh Government via e-mails and website updates. Licensing continues to play an active part in Monmouthshire's Business Forum and Re-Opening Town Centre Protects, with the aim of keeping businesses as successful as possible during a pandemic.
- 3.4.2 Towards the end of March pubs, clubs and restaurants closed. Takeaway food was permitted, which resulted in licensing permissions being altered to accommodate this change. Immediate advice was given to the trade on our website, including risk assessment information. Spot checks and enforcement visits were carried out by Licensing and the Police to ensure Covid Regulations compliance.
- 3.4.3 To ensure taxi and private hire drivers could continue working, medical self-certification was permitted, and knowledge tests and safeguarding training were put on hold as the college closed. Licensing are currently working with Torfaen Training to introduce on-line training and safeguarding. Vehicles had MOT testing delayed, which was permitted by DVSA. As a result of this we permitted a delay in taxi tests.
- 3.4.4 At the request of the trade, free hand sanitiser was distributed (10 gallons) to taxi drivers, for which they were very grateful, due to a shortage in early summer. Licensing also allowed street traders to close and retain their pitches delaying payment until they were able to trade again, to support them through 2020.
- 3.4.5 Two 'Teams' events were held by Licensing and Environmental Health in the summer to engage restaurants, pubs and clubs, enabling them to ask any questions prior to

Welsh Government implementing a phased opening of the hospitality sector. Advice was given on grants available, Covid compliance and risk assessments. The events were very well received by the trade, with positive feedback and thanks for taking the time to provide this service.

3.4.6 Licensing issued guidance and procedures to the taxi trade if they requested temporary screens to be inserted into their vehicle, to provide some protection to both drivers and passengers.

3.4.7 On 13th July restaurants, pubs and clubs were allowed to re-open outdoors. Immediate advice was provided and monitoring conducted to ensure social distancing and compliance. Licensing played an active part with Highways to put in place pavement licences to assist premises to increase their trading area, and were consulted on 34 pavement applications.

3.4.8 On 3rd August 2020 restaurants, pubs and cafes were allowed to re-open indoors. Licensing actively assisted with queries and took part in the Re-opening Town Centres project.

3.4.9 A comparison of 'service request' and 'inspections' for the six month periods indicated is provided below. It shows very similar level of activity -

	1 st March to 31 st August 2019	1 st March to 31 st August 2020
Service Requests	456	390
Covid Service Requests	0	70
Inspections	112	60
Covid Inspections	0	42

3.5 Trading Standards & Animal Health

3.5.1 Our Trading Standards service has maintained its' key functions including responding to consumer issues especially where victims are vulnerable, or the issue is high risk such as scams/fraud, product safety or animal disease control.

Complaints and enquiries for the six month period 1st March to 31st August have seen an increase of 51% from the same period as last year -

	1/03/2019	31/08/2020	
Complaints/Enquiries	365	550	+ 51%

3.5.2 Protecting vulnerable residents, and prioritising high risk/harm issues - Several Coronavirus related scams, frauds and trading malpractices have been identified either locally or elsewhere in the Country.

3.5.3 Business advice e.g. supply chain issues, compliance, product safety etc.- This pandemic is affecting businesses very differently depending on their trade and has led to a number of approaches for advice.

3.5.4 Product safety, animal health, ongoing criminal cases and investigations - Several areas of our work have continued to ensure the ongoing safety of people and animals. It would also be inappropriate to pull away from work to investigate and prosecute criminal offences as this might further encourage criminals as they feel they can 'get away with' crimes.

3.5.5 Due to the typically negative effect on businesses, many have diversified into products they do not normally manufacture or import, without due regard to PPE or biocidal controls that apply. For example, Intelligence received resulted in hand sanitiser being sampled and submitted for analysis. This showed that the product did not provide the level of protection claimed putting users unknowingly at unnecessary risk. This led to a further six products being submitted for analysis and, whilst the levels of alcohol were above the minimum required to be effective, all products had either warning, other labelling issues or were misleading in their description.

3.5.6 Examples of Coronavirus related Scams –

Here are just some of the scams we are aware of, but please note that fraudsters come in all forms and can contact residents or businesses at the door, by phone, post or online.

- People offering miracle cures for coronavirus – there is no specific treatment for coronavirus (COVID-19).
- The council DO NOT need to enter houses to do a deep clean
- Bogus healthcare workers claiming to be offering 'home-testing' for coronavirus
- Emails claiming that you can get a refund on taxes, utilities or similar are usually bogus and they are just after your personal and bank details.
- Fake products that say they can protect you or cure coronavirus. These will not help and are designed to just take your money
- New mobile phone apps that claim to give you updates on the virus, instead they lock your phone and demand a ransom
- People offering to do your shopping and ask for money upfront and then disappear

One incident included a lady in her 80s who, despite self-isolating, was compelled to answer the door by a stranger who tried to demand £220 in cash to complete a health and safety check. The team have experienced complaints of fraudsters trying to steal people's bank details by misleading families into believing they need to cover payments for school meals whilst the schools are closed, or business details being altered in order to obtain Government support funding by deception through multiple submission of false claims.

3.5.7 In addition the team have supported Public Protection colleagues by responding to non-food/non-licensed premises for any Covid related enquiries.

3.5.8. Animal Health and Welfare

Animal Health have continued to operate and deal with ongoing investigations and complaints despite the pandemic. Whilst there were some initial reductions in attendance at market it was soon encouraged by Welsh Government as intelligence

showed an increase in welfare problems both at market and in animals arriving at slaughter during that early period.

Most significantly was an ongoing farm welfare problem that resulted in the need to seize 128 cattle. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, there was a significant delay in the Court system and subsequent hearings so the case, now concluded, took several months.

3.6 WG – Covid Enforcement Data Return (25th March – 28th August)

For Committee Members information, the Public Protection section submits regular returns to Welsh Government. A five month period is captured below -

COVID-19: local authority enforcement activity

Public Protection

ID	Data Item	Public Protection	V
001	Number of accommodation premises directed to reopen	38	✓
002	Number of care homes contacted about infection control measures	44	✓

		Business closures	V	Social distancing	V	Total	V
003	Number of premises proactively advised	402	✓	286	✓	584	✓
004	Number of visits	28	✓	22	✓	47	✓
005	Number of warning letters issued	2	✓	2	✓	4	✓
006	Number of prohibition notices issued	0	✓	0	✓	0	✓
007	Number of fixed penalty notices issued	0	✓	0	✓	0	✓
008	Number of prosecutions initiated	0	✓	0	✓	0	✓
009	Number of premises closed voluntarily after the first contact	7	✓	0	✓	7	✓
010	Number of premises closed that had prohibition notice served	0	✓	0	✓	0	✓
011	Total number of enquiries	572	✓	512	✓	962	✓

ID	Data Item	Trading standards	V	
012	Number of price gouging / profiteering incidents reported	4	✓	
013	Number of COVID-19 related scams reported:	Online	4	✓
		Phone	1	✓
		Text	0	✓
		Email	4	✓
		On the doorstep	0	✓
		Other E.g. Post	1	✓
	Total number of COVID-19 related scams reported	10	✓	
014	Number of COVID-19 related breach of contract, refusal to refund and return deposit incidents about cancellation of holidays, events and provision of services reported	8	✓	

4. EQUALITY AND FUTURE GENERATIONS EVALUATION (INCLUDING SOCIAL JUSTICE, SAFEGUARDING AND CORPORATE PARENTING)

- 4.1 This report highlights the positive work undertaken in a range of different circumstances. Vulnerable people, be they in care homes, disturbed by neighbours, targeted by scammers, etc. are protected wherever possible. Business support has also been a priority during the pandemic, with interventions in place to assist people to continue operating, and hence helping to protect valuable jobs.

5. REASONS

- 5.1 To ensure Members have an understanding of the comprehensive work undertaken by relatively small teams. The total staff number for the teams referred to in this report (front-line Officers) is 26 full-time equivalents. Timely and effective responses to the large number of Covid-related queries and complaints, together with our proactive work, is key in attempting to prevent the spread of the virus.
- 5.2 Noting the very dynamic nature of the virus, our response will vary based on number of cases, local intelligence received, etc. So a follow-up report in six months' time would serve to keep Members informed of this essential element of Council work.

6. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Certain TTP related work is funded through Welsh Government. The increased work, as a direct consequence of the current pandemic, is certainly impacting on these small teams. This will be kept under review, and substantive posts back-filled where necessary, eg. when EHO's undertake TTP work.

7. AUTHOR

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