

REPORT

SUBJECT: COVID-19 RESPONSE, LEARNING & PREPAREDNESS FOR ANY FUTURE PANDEMIC

MEETING: PERFORMANCE & OVERVIEW COMMITTEE

DATE: 19th March 2024

DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED: ALL

1. PURPOSE:

- 1.1 To provide Members with insight into how this Authority responded to the Covid-19 pandemic 2020 to 2022, with particular focus on our 'track and trace' service and partnership working.
- 1.2 To outline our response, working with other health professionals and Welsh Government, to any future pandemic.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 Members of this committee note the content of this report, together with Appendices, and comment accordingly. Appendix One refers to the various national restrictions, Appendix Two the regional (Aneurin Bevan footprint) response and Appendix Three describes how Monmouthshire 'Track, Trace and Protect' (TTP) service was organised and delivered.
- 2.2 Members are provided with an understanding of this Authority's contribution to reducing person-to-person viral spread, particularly should there be any future significant pandemic that require a similar partnership response.

3. KEY ISSUES:

- 3.1 At the Performance and Oversight Committee on 21st June 2023 the annual Public Protection performance report for 2022/23 was presented. Recommendation 2.2 asked Members whether they wished to scrutinise a specific area of Public Protection work. A report on the section's work relating to the Covid-19 pandemic was requested, with reference to lessons learnt and our readiness for any future pandemic.
- 3.2 Clearly Monmouthshire CC did not work in isolation and adhered to Welsh Government (WG) guidance throughout the pandemic. National requirements were provided through various amendments to the Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Wales) Regulations 2020 together with guidance documents, 'Standard Operating Procedures', etc. The various legislative changes and Alert Levels introduced by WG are outlined in **Appendix One**. Although the focus of this report is on our TTP service delivery and working with health colleagues (to reduce community viral spread), Public Protection Officers in all 3 disciplines – Environmental Health (EH), Licensing and Trading Standards – worked diligently to ensure compliance in the county with the various legal requirements outlined in Appendix One. Advice was given on social distancing, outdoor event requirements, 'bubbles' in schools, screening and outside spaces in the licensed trade, protection of taxi users, etc. etc. This involved close working with various MCC departments, Social Care, Education, Communications, Emergency Planning, Communities & Place (re compliance in our own workplaces), Training, SRS (IT issues), etc.

together with external partners, notably Public Health Wales (PHW), Aneurin Bevan Health Board (ABUHB) and Gwent Police.

- 3.3 Useful background information, covering aspects such as maintaining protective behaviours, surveillance and responding to Covid-19 outbreaks, the role of TTP, can be found in the WG document – [Together For A Safer Future](#)
- 3.4 Ways of working had to be established at pace when Covid-19 started spreading through communities. Regional working arrangements were set up throughout 2020 and these are summarised in **Appendix Two**. Close working arrangements were essential to respond rapidly to the evolving emergency legislation aimed to protect and keep everyone safe as Covid-19 spread locally, nationally and internationally. Various regional groups were set up, as referenced in Appendix Two, to ensure consistency of approach and enable quick decisions to be made as the situation rapidly evolved, eg. our response to the different ‘variants of concern’ and ensuring consistent messaging to the numerous settings that were particularly impacted.
- 3.5 How Monmouthshire CC set up a TTP system from scratch is described in **Appendix Three**. The TTP team, managed by MCC Environmental Health Lead Officers, worked incredibly hard (note this was a 84 hour a week operation) to control the spread of the C-19 infectious disease via contract tracing. Establishing routes of transmission, determining close contacts of notified cases, ensuring self-isolation, etc. involved building trust with those called, who could be very reluctant to admit, for example, they had broken the rules. Having our EHO’s leading the work ensured rapid responses to any investigatory work thereafter, eg. knowing premises visited could determine if testing needed in a specific workplace.
- 3.6 Appendix Three also provides a summary of cases managed by Monmouthshire CC’s TTP, our approach to working with neighbouring LA’s and other partners and indicates positive aspects which we would continue in the event of any further major outbreaks or a national pandemic.
- 3.7 Any outbreaks follow the national ‘Communicable Disease Outbreak Plan for Wales’ (CDOPW) that was updated last year and published in December 2023. Here is the revised plan –

phw.nhs.wales/topics/the-communicable-disease-outbreak-plan-for-wales1/

Any future outbreaks or pandemics would require a collaborative, system wide approach with organisations working together to protect public health. To test the revised CDOPW there is a national desktop exercise on 19th March 2024. This will be attended by 4 MCC Officers, 3 from EH (experienced in infectious disease control) and one from Emergency Planning.

3.8 **Lessons Learnt**

3.8.1 **Positives –**

- Environmental Health led the set up and management of an efficient and effective TTP team. Within a matter of weeks, a 8am to 8pm service, 7 days a week was **rapidly implemented**, (84 hours a week).
- The **flexible workforce** – a combination of permanent EH staff, redeployed staff from other MCC departments and others recruited externally – allowed staff numbers to vary according to demand. MCC were also able to assist other Gwent LA’s where the need arose.
- EH, with support from their colleagues in Licensing, Trading Standards and other teams, provided a quick understanding of how the virus was transmitted, be it in households, workplaces or whilst out and about in the community. **Fast determinations of sources and spread** were crucial to limit the onward transmission of C-19, as was **backward tracing** (see Appendix 3).

- **Co-production** of key documents, eg. Standard Operating Procedures, ensured they were effective on the ground, eg. SOP's for care homes and schools.
- **Data recording**, our 7-day analysis of all cases ensured transmission and clusters could be readily identified. These were discussed every week through the local Incident Management Team, (IMT).
- **Source of EH expertise to internal departments** – deciphering the various changes (see Appendix One) to rules and regulations was welcomed by Social Care, Education and other sections of the Authority.
- **Networking with English colleagues** – knowing who to go to regarding all the cross-border infections (PHE, Forest of Dean EH, Bristol CC, etc.) proved invaluable in establishing modes of transmission quickly.
- **Regional working** with PHW, ABUHB and the other 4 Gwent LA's, and again knowing the local contacts, was a massive positive. Connections with health colleagues were limited pre-Covid but now are firmly established.

These provide some examples of positive working and would assist hugely should MCC need to help our health colleagues again in the future. We demonstrated how to provide an effective TTP system with EH back-up to follow up speedily on the investigations. EH Lead Officers would potentially 're-standup' Officers that were with the team during the 20/22 pandemic period, eg. those from MCC departments who now have experience in track and trace.

3.8.2 Negatives –

- The speed of rising case numbers (see Appendix Three) did put immense **pressure on many of our staff**. As it quickly established as a 12 hour a day, 7 day a week service, certain Officers, notably our EH TTP Leads, soon became on-call at all times. This affected their work-life balance and would need to be considered carefully should there be a further pandemic response.
- The TTP team was significantly bigger than the entire Public Protection teams, at 87 staff (with various contracts of employment) during the peak of the pandemic. There were significant HR and ICT issues to resolve, in an intense situation of high service demand.
- Being the 'go to' experts – internal departments, the business community, care providers, etc. – did put a strain on limited numbers of Officers. **WG changes to the national rules** (see Appendix One) often occurred on a Friday so calls would peak after latest national announcements, as they were to be implemented immediately or within a matter of days. MCC fed back this specific issue via the Public Inquiry call for evidence.
- There were often significant **differences between the Welsh and English restrictions**, which affected Monmouthshire disproportionately. Many workers and school pupils would live/work/attend school/participate and attend outdoor events in different nations. Where the C-19 restrictions were different, this needed more Officer involvement and time to resolve discrepancies.

MCC EH firmly believe the positives far outweigh the negatives and there's a solid platform to work from should we be asked to provide our professional assistance again in the future.

- 3.9 Although produced one year into the pandemic, (March 2021), Audit Wales provided a useful report highlighting the key issues at that time –

[Test, Trace, Protect in Wales: An Overview of Progress to Date | Audit Wales](#)

- 3.10 All health protection and civil contingency plans need to be reviewed collaboratively to ensure they are fit for purpose, now and in the future. These need to be reviewed to follow the cycle of plan, train, educate, exercise, review, plan, to ensure they are fully developed, that they align with other co-dependent plans, including local and national civil contingency plans, and that they include clear lines of communication and support. The All Wales Communicable Disease Outbreak

Plan, as 3.7 above, has indeed been through a rigorous process of updating and is being tested by front-line Officers on 19th March 2024.

- 3.11 Members of this committee will be aware that the UK Public Inquiry is currently hearing evidence in Wales. It is understood 'lessons learnt' nationally will be published later in 2024, as opposed to waiting for the Inquiry to finish and see those findings in the final published report. MCC will welcome sight of those 'lessons learnt' which can be discussed and acted on locally, regionally and at Wales level.

4. INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT, includes equality, future generations, social justice, safeguarding and corporate parenting.

- 4.1 No IIA is necessary as there is no proposal to take forward as a Council. This report serves to reflect on MCC's contribution to the pandemic and how we worked with our partners to seek to reduce community spread of C-19. The MCC TTP efforts most certainly reduced transmission rates and therefore contributed to reducing the strain of hospital admissions during the two years of the pandemic.

- 4.2 It is worth noting, however, that our more elderly members of society were prioritised and, regionally, specific campaigns targeted black and ethnic minority groups. Principles of collaboration, involvement and prevention (sustainable development principles) were at the fore of local and regional decision making.

5. REASONS:

- 5.1 This committee requested a report on the Authority's response to the pandemic and it is hoped this provides a summary of the MCC TTP response, and how that was linked to investigating sources and routes of transmission.
- 5.2 Specifically Members were interested in lessons learnt and how that would help should we need to contribute our expertise to a future pandemic. By understanding our response over the two years 2020 to 2022, that knowledge and experience can be harnessed to be better prepared for any future pandemic.

6. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

- 6.1 The additional costs associated with setting up a TTP team with all associated costs, eg. additional telephony system and laptops, were borne by Welsh Government. If there was to be a recurrence, again the expectation would be for WG to fully fund any new costs to MCC.

7. CONSULTEES & CONTRIBUTORS

Consultees -

Chief Officer, Social Care & Health
Principal Environmental Health Officers, EH Commercial team

Contributors -

With thanks to Welsh Government, Aneurin Bevan UHB & Gwent Health Protection Service

- 8. BACKGROUND PAPERS:** links to relevant national guidance and plans provided in report

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