

DATA LABEL: PUBLIC



COUNCIL EXECUTIVE

COVID-19: PLANNING AND PRECAUTIONS

REPORT BY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

A. PURPOSE OF REPORT

To advise committee of actions taken to date and contingency planning arrangements going forward to address the risks arising from the COVID-19 contagion. Separate reports deal with financial issues and the calendar of committee and other meetings.

B. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. To note the contingency planning arrangements and summary of the significant actions taken to date to deal with the risks to West Lothian and its residents and businesses related to the COVID-19 contagion
2. To note the contingency planning arrangements that will continue for so long as those risks continue
3. To agree the proposed arrangements for communication to staff, elected members and members of the public
4. To agree that a report relating to COVID-19 is a standing item at future meetings of Council Executive and Education Executive until determined otherwise
5. To note that reports will be presented to the Governance & Risk Committee on a regular basis in relation to COVID-19 in the risk register

C. SUMMARY OF IMPLICATIONS

I	Council Values	Being honest, open and accountable; making the best use of our resources
II	Policy and Legal (including Strategic Environmental Assessment, Equality Issues, Health or Risk Assessment)	Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973; Standing Orders, Scheme of Delegations to Officers; Civil Contingencies Act 2004
III	Implications for Scheme of Delegations to Officers	None
IV	Impact on performance and performance Indicators	N/a
V	Relevance to Single Outcome	N/a

Agreement

VI	Resources - (Financial, Staffing and Property)	N/a
VII	Consideration at PDSP	None
VIII	Other consultations	Corporate Management Team

D. TERMS OF REPORT

1 Background

- 1.1 In late December 2019, the People's Republic of China reported an outbreak of pneumonia due to unknown cause in Wuhan City, Hubei Province. In early January 2020, the cause of the outbreak was identified as a new coronavirus. COVID-19 can cause respiratory illness of varying severity. Currently, there is no vaccine and no specific treatment for infection with the virus.
- 1.2 The main symptoms of COVID-19 are a cough, a high temperature and, in severe cases, shortness of breath. As it is a new virus, the lack of immunity in the population (and the absence as yet of an effective vaccine) means that COVID-19 is spreading extensively. Among those who become infected, some will exhibit no symptoms. Of those who develop an illness, the majority will have a mild-to-moderate, but self-limiting illness – similar to seasonal flu. A minority of people who get COVID-19 will develop complications severe enough to require hospital care, most often in relation to pneumonia. In a small proportion of these, the illness may be severe enough to lead to death. The risk of severe disease and death increases amongst elderly people and in people with underlying health risk conditions. Illness is less common and usually less severe in younger adults. Children can be infected and can have a severe illness, but overall illness seems rarer in people under 20 years of age.
- 1.3 On the 30 January 2020 the World Health Organisation declared that the outbreak constituted a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. On 11 March 2020 the World Health Organisation declared a global pandemic. In response, guidance and advice from the UK Government, Scottish Government and NHS has been issued frequently and is being updated and escalated on an almost daily basis. Health Protection Scotland has guidance and advice available on its website. This includes Guidance for Non Healthcare Settings. Legislation is being taken through the UK and devolved parliamentary processes at a rapid pace to give powers to over-ride existing legislation and impose mandatory restrictions and precautions.
- 1.4 This is a complex, dynamic and fast moving situation. Maintaining council services which support the most vulnerable people in West Lothian will remain highest priority. The Council has been, and will continue to, work closely with the Scottish Government, NHS Lothian, and other partners to monitor and respond to the situation.

2 Council contingency planning to date

- 2.1 The council has a well-established Corporate Business Continuity Plan to deal with incidents causing severe interruptions to council functions or services. Each service has its own service-based Business Continuity Plan which complement the corporate approach. The council also has robust plans in place to deal with civil emergencies under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. As yet, none of those plans have had to be implemented in response to COVID-19.

2.2 The council maintains a detailed risk register which is reported regularly to the Governance & Risk Committee. Risk management, through the corporate Risk Management Strategy and the Risk Management Policy, is embedded in the council's services. The risks posed by COVID-19 have been taken into account in the risk register. It is anticipated that a report will be represented to the next meeting of the Governance & Risk Committee on COVID-19 as happened during 2019 and 2020 in relation to Brexit preparations.

2.3 Since the risks posed by COVID-19 were recognised officers have taken steps to assess the risks to the council and its services and to plan to address those risks. The procedures which have been put into place are as follows:-

- Regular meetings of the Executive Management Team take place, at least weekly, with COVID-19 as a standing item of business
- Special meetings of the Corporate Management Team have been held, dedicated to COVID-19. Their frequency has increased and presently two such meetings take place on every working day. The meetings are chaired by the council's Chief Executive and are attended by Deputy Chief Executives, Heads of Service and the Governance Manager. The Emergency Planning Officer, HR Manager, Coordination Team Manager and Corporate Communications Manager also attend
- Service Management Teams have been considering the risks and actions relevant for their service areas. A Senior Manager is identified to act as a substitute for an absent Head of Service to ensure operations can continue
- Sources of guidance and advice, now appearing almost daily, are being reviewed regularly and digested to ensure that appropriate measures and actions are being put in place
- The Scottish Government Resilience Room has been activated and is meeting regularly
- The Scottish Resilience Partnership is meeting regularly, and frequent teleconferences are being held between the local authority representatives to share information and best practice and identify areas of concern
- Lothian resilience partners continue to work together through established mechanisms and networks. This includes the third sector organisations routinely involved with resilience issues
- The Corporate Transformation Team has been conscripted as a dedicated COVID-19 Coordination Team to implement and coordinate the actions arising from Executive and Corporate Management Team meetings

2.4 The actions taken through those structures include:-

- The provision and sharing of service updates in relation to the impact of COVID-19 on council services and on council staff
- Provision of regular updates to staff on guidance emerging at a national level in relation to their health and well-being

- The incorporation of that emerging guidance into the council's HR Policies and Procedures. In particular, guidance has been issued about sickness allowance and leave arrangements that will be made for staff who self-isolate or care for someone who must self-isolate, the disapplication of the procedure for managing attendance at work in those circumstances, and the extension of sick pay to those newer employees who do not have the period of service normally required
- The monitoring of pre-school and school attendance and teacher and pupil support worker absence rates to inform decisions that may be required about closing schools
- Arrangements for the deep-cleaning of council premises where someone attending has tested positive
- Prohibition on staff attendance at conferences, awards and similar events
- Contact and discussions with key suppliers concerning continuity of supplies and services
- Addressing the need to close adult social care day care and respite facilities
- Actions arising from the First Minister's announcement on 18 March concerning school closures

3 Infection control

3.1 In relation to infection control, the council has followed the advice from Health Protection Scotland for organisations to prevent the spread of infection:-

- Routine cleaning and disinfection of frequently touched objects and surfaces
- Ensuring regular environmental cleaning is done
- Promoting hand hygiene by making sure that staff, contractors, service users and visitors have access to hand washing facilities and where available alcohol based hand rub
- Removing any shared crockery and cutlery in shared kitchen areas in office buildings
- The council is also ensuring that all members of the organisation are aware of the requirements for social distancing and to self-isolate if they, or a member of their household, develop symptoms and will support them in doing this
- Guidance is also being followed for accommodation which houses particularly vulnerable individuals
- Guidance is also being followed for accommodation which houses particularly vulnerable groups, such as care homes. Visits have been restricted and residents are following guidelines for social distancing

3.2 Signage has been provided for staff and all users and visitors to council premises about hygiene and social distancing precautions. Standard handwashing advice has been incorporated into the signature and footer on all email communications.

- 3.3 The council has also been following and disseminating the advice about respiratory problems and precautions – “catch it, bin it, kill it”.

4 Contingency planning going forward

- 4.1 The structures outlined above will be maintained but will be kept under review and revised should circumstances require it. The monitoring and application of guidance and advice given at a national level will continue. Council staff will receive regular and frequent bulletins in relation to health and safety and HR issues.

- 4.2 It is anticipated that some of the most significant issues to be addressed going forward will be:-

- School and pre-school closures and the provision of school meals during that period
- Mitigation of impacts on the provision of social and health care services to those most in need
- Prioritisation of council services as staff and other resourced become more stretched due to illness, caring responsibilities and other absences
- Support for council staff affected by COVID-19 illness personally and in their close family
- Ways in which council resources can be utilised and redeployed to deal with service pressures and risks
- Arrangements that may be made for working from home where consistent with the continued provision of vital public services
- Public transport pressures, given the relaxation of notice periods for service changes by operators
- Impacts on West Lothian Leisure, the potential closure of their facilities and delivery of their financial plan
- Continuing availability of council community resources such as libraries and community centres
- Maintaining the provision of advice to the public through the Advice Shop and other resources and dealing with an anticipated increase in demand
- Dealing with arrears of council house rent payments, council tax payments and rent for the non-operational property portfolio

5 Volunteering

- 5.1 The council is aware of significant interest from community groups to support vulnerable people in the community as a result of difficulties arising from COVID-19. The council's Community Regeneration Team has been tasked with mapping this activity in order to provide coordination of local action and avoid any duplication of effort. They are continuing to contact local groups to map the activity which is taking place in each area. Contact details have been provided on the council's web site and through its social media channels.

- 5.2 The focus of voluntary activity is on food distribution and befriending contact, particularly where vulnerable people are self-isolating. However, demand may change over time and the council will continue to monitor activity. If any gaps are apparent officers will work with community partners, including the Voluntary Sector Gateway, to address those gaps. The council will also be coordinating those wishing to volunteer from its own workforce.
- 5.3 The council communication on volunteering has thanked groups for the very welcome support they are providing. Volunteering groups have, however, been reminded that care should be taken to ensure that their work does not increase the risk of transmission of the virus. The council encourages all groups to follow government advice on minimising transmission including guidance on social distancing.

6 Communication and reporting

- 6.1 It is recognised that clear, concise and timely communications is paramount in relation to service changes, both for internal and external customers. It is recognised that given the continual updates at both local and national level council officers will endeavour to provide regular and relevant information to all customer groups as quickly as possible.
- 6.2 The council's intranet page has been established and the site will be updated with all service updates (www.westlothian.gov.uk/coronavirus). The council's social media channels will also be utilised to ensure public messages are communicated. The council will also ensure that public health information is shared via the council's social media channels. Local and national media are being updated on changes to local services.
- 6.3 It is recognised that elected members are a key group and must receive relevant and timely information relating to service delivery. All elected members will receive regular email communication updating them on major service changes/updates. It is likely that the daily communication will be distributed late in the afternoon to allow officers to collate relevant information. However councillors are also advised that information and updates will be regularly posted on the council's social media channels (see below). the information provided that is available for public dissemination will be clearly marked on all communications.
- 6.4 The council's intranet and global email system are the primary resources being utilised to provide staff with information. Both have been utilised frequently. To date, staff have been provided with information relating to health advice, HR advice and information on home working. A staff FAQ and additional advice is currently available on the intranet which can be accessed from outwith the council network meaning that all staff can access this site from anywhere on any device. The page can be accessed at: <https://intranet.westlothian.gov.uk/coronavirus-advice>. A dedicated email address has been established whereby service managers can submit questions from staff. The Coordination Team will provide responses to questions relating to staff issues.
- 6.5 It is recommended that COVID-19 is a standing item on the agenda for future meetings of Council Executive until determined otherwise. It has already been added to the Work Plan for the Governance & Risk Committee. As happened with Brexit, it is expected that regular reports will be presented to that committee in relation to its particular remit.

E. CONCLUSION

The council has instigated effective contingency planning measures to tackle the risks posed by the COVID-19 virus and will continue with them until the need for them is ended.

F. BACKGROUND REFERENCES

- 1 Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973
- 2 Council's Standing Orders - <http://intranet.westlothian.gov.uk/article/6941/Councils-Standing-Orders-and-Corporate-Governance>

NHS website

Government website(s)

Appendices/Attachments: None

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Graham Hope, Chief Executive

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