



Final Report of the Response to the Pandemic Task and Finish Group

September 2021

"Allerdale – a great place to live, work and visit"

Background and membership

This report summarises the work of the Task and Finish Group exploring the Council's approach to dealing with and developing its response to the pandemic.

The group members were:

- Councillor Michael Heaslip (chair)
- Councillor Peter Kendall
- Councillor Elaine Lynch
- Councillor Carni McCarron-Holmes
- Councillor Paul Scott

The following Terms of Reference were agreed:

- Consider and scrutinise the effects of the pandemic on Council services and operations including how the Council responded and how services have been adapted
- Consider and scrutinise the 'test and trace' scheme and its local implementation
- Question any under-performance or significant variances caused by the pandemic response and highlight any valuable lessons learned or specific concerns in case of a similar situation
- Note all completed work and highlight / commend strong performance
- Identify any short, medium or long term actions arising which could improve operational performance and corporate resilience to future waves of Covid-19 (or any other pandemic/emergency scenario)
- Make recommendations for any improvements

National and legal context

The legal context for managing outbreaks of communicable disease which present a risk to the health of the public requiring urgent investigation and management is covered by the following:

1. Public Health England (Health and Social Care Act 2012)
2. Directors of Public Health (Health and Social Care Act 2012)
3. Chief Environmental Health Officers (Public Health (Control of Infectious Disease) Act 1984)

4. NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups
5. Other responders: specific responsibilities to respond to major incidents (Civil Contingencies Act 2004)
6. The Coronavirus Act 2020

Local authorities (specifically through public health and environmental health) together with Public Health England have primary responsibility for the delivery and management of public health actions to be taken in relation to outbreaks of communicable disease through local health protection partnerships.

The initial response in Cumbria

The initial response was set up as detailed below (highlighted aspects only, more groups and sub-groups were developed for different areas of need):

- Directors of Public Health have primary responsibility for the health of their communities and this applies to Cumbria
- The Health Protection Board met weekly and an incident management hub (including Allerdale Borough Council staff) met daily including weekends.
- Daily incident management meetings included all the district councils, Public Health England, NHS, the public health staff team at Cumbria County Council and the Director of Public Health.
- Outbreak control teams would meet when required: for example an Education Outbreak Control meeting to discuss cases linked to schools, this was daily due to new cases in schools arising each day; and the Care Home Outbreak control was also meeting daily – Allerdale staff were not part of this but would receive minutes and contact trace staff for their out of work contacts.

All incidents and outbreaks were discussed at the daily meetings which worked extremely well and those involved felt it meant they get the right information, guidance and advice. All districts and agencies felt these meetings were having a positive effect and members learned a lot and felt valued with great confidence in this approach.

A daily operating group met daily through the working week to set actions and have longer practical discussions about cases.

The Director of Public Health was required to produce an outbreak control plan. These documents can be accessed here:

Outbreak Control Plan Part 1 – Strategy, Management and Oversight
<https://www.cumbria.gov.uk/elibrary/Content/Internet/535/17941/17942/44012124112.pdf>

The initial response by Allerdale Borough Council

The meetings in response to track and trace referred to above began in May. The requirement to be involved in additional meetings has been over and above environmental health officers' regular responsibilities, which were already being impacted with regulation changes regarding food and occupational health.

Allerdale staff were involved in following up individuals identified through track and trace with direct contact (distanced as appropriate) and providing advice to food businesses, other businesses, following up incidences for example of homelessness issues as well as dealing with complaints or reports from the public and carrying out enforcement where required.

The Task and Finish Group appreciated the overview of the local response and was both satisfied with work being done and impressed with commitment and dedication of the staff involved working beyond their regular roles and hours.

The Group noted that the success of our work in controlling the outbreak was entirely dependent on the efficacy of the national testing system in identifying infected persons and speedily communicating their details to our tracing teams. There were grave concerns, across the country, as to whether the testing system is working effectively: this was something the Task Group agreed to continue to keep in view.

Second phase

At the conclusion of its initial meeting the group became aware of the effect of the pandemic locally on children and families, which had been the subject of a recent webinar hosted by West Cumbria Child Poverty Forum. This generated these two meetings focusing on this topic. The first meeting looked at the issues identified through the webinar and the work of local organisations delivering community based services. The second meeting arose from the group's concern to understand more about solutions being delivered both currently and potentially in the future. Over two meetings the group had presentations from and discussions with the Research Fellow in Social Inclusion and Community Development at UCLan, and the Council's Chief Executive, the Policy Manager (Health) and the manager of the Local Focus Hub.

The effect on children and families

In May 2020 West Cumbria Child Poverty Forum had published a rapid response paper highlighting the issues affecting families during lockdown. The key findings centred around three themes: wellbeing, education and hardship.

In November 2020 the Forum then held a webinar attended by over 70 people centred on building a therapeutic community around children experiencing poverty:

"In order to realise their potential as individuals and active citizens, children require an environment that fosters personal growth. They need to form relationships with others in an atmosphere of trust and security, they need to be valued, accepted and supported by those around them and they need to take real responsibility for themselves, others and their environment" (Oxford Health Complex Needs Service, 2018).

Outcomes and recommendations from the webinar, being informed by national and regional evidence, are:

- highlighted by this pandemic, food security and digital inclusion should be recognised fundamental human rights and all children should have access to these;
- schools are significant anchor institutions in communities and should be recognised accordingly;
- together we (agencies) must champion the benefits of collaboration and data sharing;
- we must approach working with people from the basis of relationships not transactions – “let’s work together”, not “I’ll do this to you”;
- we must trust in local expertise and the abilities of local community groups by sharing power;
- we must listen to, and respond to, the voice of the child; and
- finally but perhaps firstly we must ensure our approach is positive and inclusive, starting with considering the language we use and avoid defining or categorising people and areas by the words we use (such as deprived).

The first session concluded with an exploration of what the Council could consider towards these recommendations, following the suggestion that these could be to:

- fulfil statutory and discretionary obligations;
- adopt a relational way of working (doing with not doing to);
- reframe approaches to families experiencing poverty (language and attitudes); and
- involve children and young people when possible.

This progressed the discussion towards acquiring further knowledge about current work in the area and the potential to expand this approach to other communities across the borough.

Innovation in responsiveness and developing solutions

The second meeting focused on recent work in the Moorclose area seeking to understand community wants and needs of residents of all ages, and then on the initial work to begin to meet some of those with practical projects.

Also in this meeting the group heard about the work of the Allerdale Local Focus Hub in addressing the problems faced by some young people caught up in the justice system as a result of numerous incidents and circumstances experienced in their lives to date. A partnership of 21 agencies including the emergency services, public sector, third sector and housing associations, the purpose is to promote inter agency working and push forward a partnership approach to problem solving, and improve the way we deliver services in local communities through a shared understanding of the ‘whole problem’, so that where gaps in services exist these can be addressed by the most relevant partner.

Finally the group heard about other developments locally, focusing on the work of the Children and Families Partnership to bring about the changes being sought and implemented through its approach.

The research at Moorclose involved both adults and young people carrying out ‘connected communities’ research, supervised by UCLan, which identified all the strengths of the area alongside specific issues for particular groups of people. Just before the pandemic took hold, the results of the research were shared with the community and the efforts of the researchers were celebrated. While such celebration might be easily viewed as ‘just a bit of fun’, it becomes a hugely important aspect of concluding a project when involving and working alongside people in their communities. Following on from the research, a group formed to develop initiatives and the first activity with local people has managed to get started, even though the lockdown has meant different approaches needed to be adopted. Link to the presentation: [Stronger Together Moorclose for ABC TFG.pptx](#)

This chart shows the percentage of children in Allerdale living in poverty 2019 (End Child Poverty, 2019)

Ward*	Before housing costs	After housing costs
Allerdale area	19%	28%
Ewanrigg	29.7%	37.3%
St Michael’s	25.6%	34.1%
Wharrels	20.9%	32.6%
Moss Bay	29.1%	37.0%
Aspatria	20.9%	32.6%
Flimby	29.7%	37.3%
Solway	20.9%	32.6%
Ellenborough	22.3%	30.5%
Holme	20.9%	32.6%
Moorclose	21.3%	32.2%

*All these ward names refer to pre-2019 boundary changes. As a result the Wharrels ward no longer exists and no comparisons can be made with any post-2019 ward areas.

The principle behind the UCLan supported Connected Communities approach is that in everyday practice services are designed to integrate the value of social and community assets and networks in achieving wellbeing and inclusion outcomes.

The approach has a broad range of intended outcomes, for example:

Individual outcomes: Build capacities and resilience which can potentially offer various educational, employment or personal development opportunities.

Community outcomes: Enhanced community assets and address community needs, promoting self-reliance, pro-social behaviour and independence, measured through the Community Capital Framework (wellbeing, capacity, citizenship, social value) – part of the Connected Communities approach.

Social outcomes: Well-connected residents, both within their own neighbourhoods and local services, measured through self-reported measures and social network analysis. Reframed police-community perceptions, measured through increased police reporting, focus groups and interviews with the police and community, and case studies of collaborative working.

The group was interested in developing this approach across the borough and discussed how this might be possible, both by working with UCLan and involving other partners as or when appropriate. While recognising that there were clear reasons for the initial focus to be on the Workington area, as the figures quoted above indicate, other areas of the borough also require a focused and concerted effort to address the local conditions.

The significance of the highlighted adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) the group heard about, and the manifestation of these causing issues for the partners working together as the Local Focus Hub, underlined the need for a different approach, echoing earlier the work in Moorclose and the results of the webinar.

Based on experiences of prior local short term project based work, the group expressed concerns for exit strategies to be better planned, and ensure the continuity of funding for required services. The group also recognised the potential for the Council to promote and gain the maximum public value through its contracts and commissioning.

The group then heard about the four priorities of the recently formed Children and Families Partnership, chaired by the Council's Chief Executive, which cover:

- early help and early intervention (recognising the importance of the first 1000 days of a child's life);
- healthy weight and physical activity;

- youth unemployment and skills; and
- parenting support (for young parents in particular, including pre-conception).

The approach involves identifying both current provision and any gaps in that provision and making clear an expectation that it is incumbent on organisations to work to reduce local barriers, to create easy access to services, and to promote data sharing in getting beyond the experience of people being passed around from service to service.

Recognising the scale of the task in West Cumbria is important, however because this may involve less than 200 families in total, it ought to be possible for the Partnership's approach to make a significant difference.

Part of the solution, again building on and complementing the work of everyone involved in all of the work described to the group and here above, is the availability of a 'trusted adult' for young people needing support.

These trusted adults may be found in any of the organisations engaged in the partnership approaches described, but the most important aspect of building this trust is that the work is done *with* people *not to* people. This might encourage the greatest difference when it is in conjunction with staff working for all the partner agencies having the support and willingness to be able to 'do things differently' at their own initiative.

Roll out across the borough

Members were keen to understand what would enable the Council to potentially implement a 'connected communities' or similar approach in other areas of the borough, particularly to support those areas regularly highlighted in significant data sets such as the indices of child poverty.

The group was concerned that while the pandemic had meant many organisational barriers were quickly addressed to enable response work to be initiated, and that the experience was similar in some ways to community responses to the flooding events which the area has previously experienced, once the situation begins to normalise the benefits are potentially going to be lost as services return to their regular work. The questions around what will help to embed the positive changes and increase community resilience remain unanswered for now, however recognising there is a need for all partners to explore this further is a major first step.

The delivery of services beyond the pandemic

Having considered aspects of the effects of the pandemic on the community, the group decided to focus the third set of sessions on any resulting effects on the delivery of services and the staff team delivering those services. Over two meetings the group had presentations from and discussions with the Head of Transformation and the Chief Executive.

The proposed future operating model was being based on research and surveys of staff attitudes as well as taking account of changes in the external world.

The intended model is to provide options for services to be accessed online, using a principle of being able to speak to someone when needed and using technology when not, for example paying a bill. Contact with officers would be available as necessary though the preferred form of contact for many interactions would be through other methods, mainly online.

The proposed future working model for staff is a hybrid of working from home and time in the office, though as a result of the pandemic most staff have been working from home. Some emergency response services have had staff working from the offices.

The Group recommended that care be taken to ensure that this would not lead to a scattered provision and were concerned to ensure staff would gain some grounding in how the organisation works, especially newer staff.

Members also recommended that councillors are assisted to understand these changes and new staff arrangements or responsibilities to help them with any queries.

Members further recommended that due consideration be given to the legitimate expectations of citizens to have access to the Council and its services in ways appropriate to their circumstances, so far as possible, and that any transformation of service provision should consider “purpose” as the starting point, with “purpose” defined by outcomes for citizens, measured in their terms.

Members recalled that humans are social animals and value face to face contact in public offices and elsewhere, and the pandemic has cut many off from social contact: a pandemic response which reinforces isolation rather than promoting human contact is unlikely to meet the expectations of all citizens.

Innovation in responsiveness and developing solutions

The second meeting focused on discussion with the Chief Executive to understand the proposals for changes to the operating model and consequently to the staffing structure to deliver these proposals.

A key feature of the new model is dealing with as much work as possible at the frontline, enabling front line staff to resolve issues at first contact wherever possible without necessarily referring to the “back office”. It is recognised that this may involve significant changes in skills and knowledge for staff at the “front office”, with consequences for their training and development. It is also recognised that not everyone will want to or be able to work in this

way, and that staff have different strengths and are best used in ways which enable them to develop those strengths.

Capital programmes are at the heart of the Whitehall approach to pandemic recovery, and the new model will need to recognise this and deploy people with the appropriate strengths, skills and knowledge to work in that context.

Members recalled that the original *purpose* for which District Councils were called into being was Public Health, and most District Council functions have their origins in measures to protect and improve health. The pandemic has been a salutary reminder to us (if not yet to Whitehall) of the centrality of local public health to the well-being of the country, and any pandemic recovery measures need to include innovation in how we better approach securing the health and well-being of our citizens.

Conclusion

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee commends this Task and Finish Group report and its recommendations to Council.

Recommendations

The Task and Finish Group makes the following recommendations:

1. This authority and its successor authority should continue to recognise the importance of the environmental health officers' role in public health, infection control and responses to sudden, extreme public health concerns as highlighted by the pandemic.
2. The Council should consider the principles and approaches outlined in this report to be embedded in its Resilient Communities Strategy and approach, incorporating a model of community development which focuses on working with people and communities and includes councillors as collective community leaders in their areas.
3. The Council should ensure communities are able to take advantage of opportunities created by new funding programmes, for example Wigton in the Borderlands initiative.
4. The Council should be at the forefront of new approaches by creating opportunities
 - a – for staff to develop their skills in relational work with communities
 - b – for communities to be supported to adopt the approaches outlined in this report, including undertaking research then developing projects based on the results.
5. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee should explore the potential for public value to be achieved through the Council's contracts, commissioning and other funding.
6. The Council should collect appropriate data and/or conduct research to ensure service levels from the perspective of the citizen are the same or better since the implementation of any changes.
7. The Council must ensure the staff team is supported to understand, implement and deliver through any changes to service delivery models and practices.
8. Councillors must be supported to effectively support residents as a result of any service or staffing changes.