

SBC and COVID-19 – one year on

This report is about the impact of COVID-19 on Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council, and how we have responded.

Like all organisations the Council has been affected by COVID-19. Not only have we lost members of staff, but our staff have also been ill, known others who have been ill or been affected by the death or illness of family members. Our staff have also had to cope with the restrictions and demands placed on all of us through restrictions, home schooling and not being able to see our loved ones.

As an employer, we know there have been additional challenges for our staff in responding to the past 12 months. We have had to move to very different ways of working quickly, both for those formerly office based and those who have continued to visit, to serve, to clean, to support.

COVID-19 has impacted us in many ways. This report tells out story of how the staff at the Council have responded, have continued to keep services running, have changed what they do, and in some cases the completely different roles they have taken on to respond, and to keep doing what we do best – supporting each other, supporting the borough.

“I got to see my colleagues at their best. Everyone was really kind to each other.”

“This has been Stockton at its finest.”

“I am really proud of the Council.”

“I am proud to work for a Council that really stepped up.”

“People really felt they were contributing and will remember this.”

Impact

- **COVID-19 in Stockton**
- **COVID-19 and Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council**

Our response

- **Continuing to deliver services**
- **How we have adapted our services**
- **New services**
- **New roles**

How well have we responded?

- **What our staff say..**
- **An external view**

Where next? Reaction, response and recovery

- **To June**
- **July – March**
- **From April 2022**

COVID-19 and its impact in Stockton

COVID-19 has had a huge impact on physical and mental wellbeing, economic stability and social connectedness locally, nationally and internationally. People have lost loved ones and are suffering the longer-term impacts of Covid-19. Many have lost their jobs or are living with real financial insecurity, for the first time. The true economic costs are not yet known. There are real worries for physical and mental health. Social connections have been broken. Children’s education has been disrupted. The disease has impacted more on those from poorer backgrounds and on lower incomes.

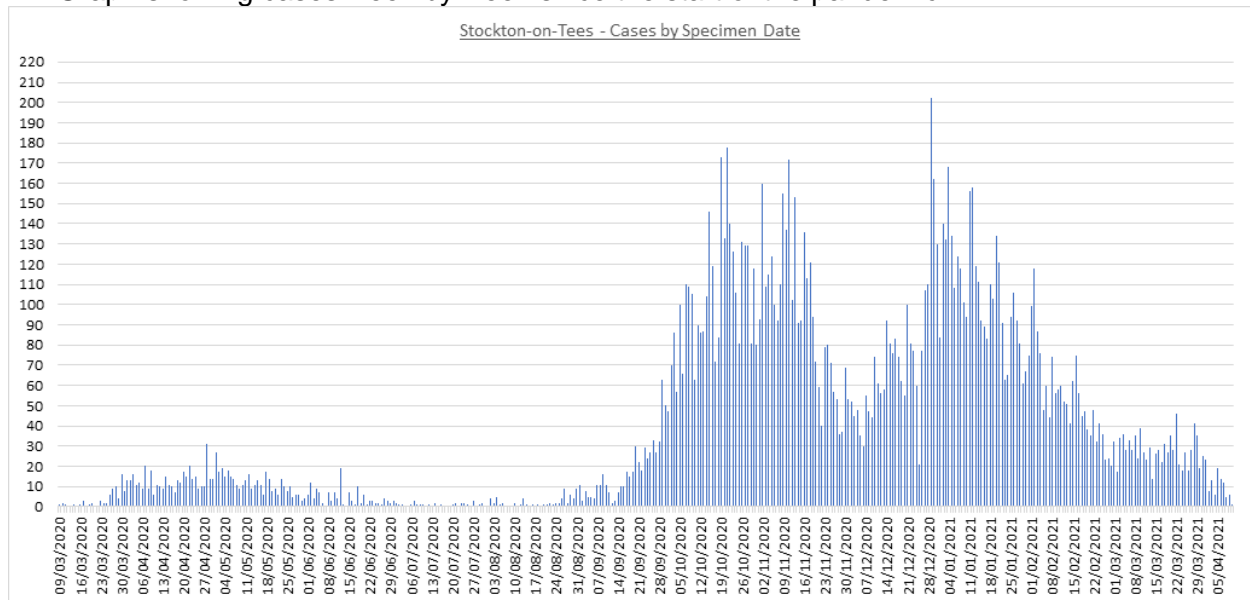
The way we live our lives has changed significantly, possibly permanently. How we work, how we travel and how we socialise may never be the same again. We need to establish a way of ‘living alongside’ COVID-19, balancing the health risks with the need to help our communities to return to living their lives as normally as possible.

We have had to work quickly to respond: responding to duties, requirements and guidance, supporting communities and individuals, enabling our staff to work safely.

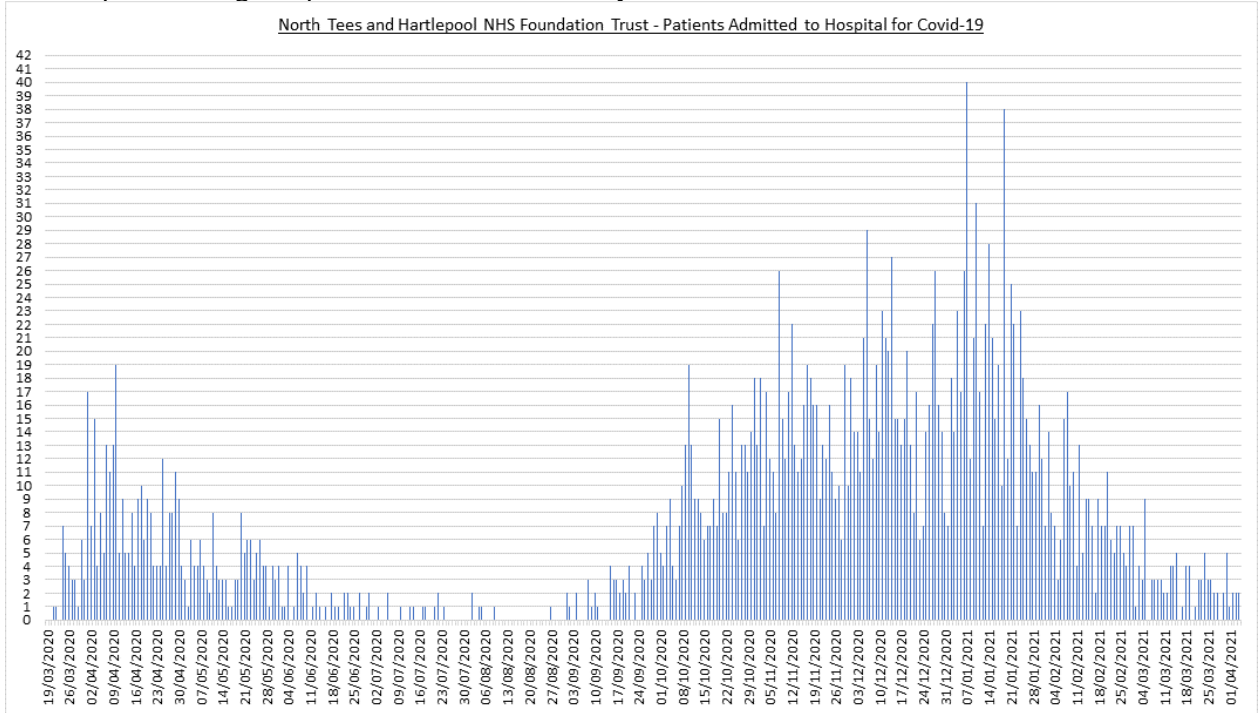
This report details our response, but to put that response in context, we start with an overview of the impact of COVID-19 in Stockton over the past 12 months:

- Stockton-on-Tees totals as of 31/03/21
 - Deaths – 490
 - Cases - 15,669
 - Admissions - 2,639 (North Tees and Hartlepool NHS FT)
 - Vaccinations – 59.1% of the adult population have had at least one vaccination dose

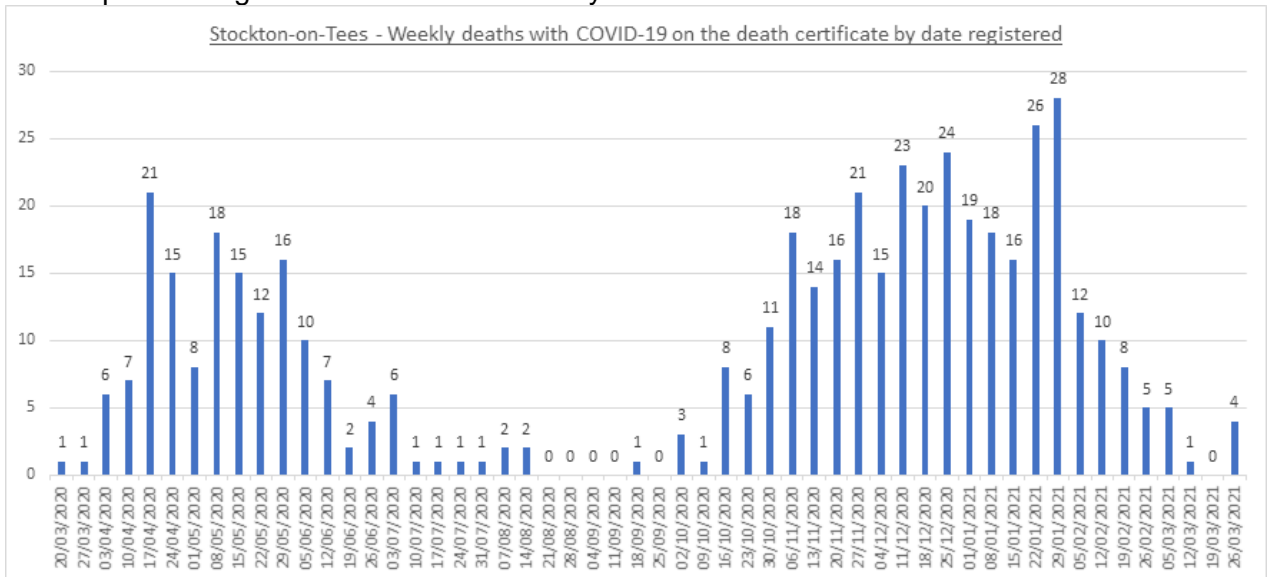
- Graph showing cases week by week since the start of the pandemic



- Graph showing hospital admissions week by week



- Graph showing number of deaths week by week



COVID-19 and Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council

How our staff have worked...

We have put in place a weekly system to track our workforce – where and how they are working, absence due to illness and to isolation. The latest position is:

Working as normal	1,238
Working from home/adapted/redeployed/or combination	1,266
Working at home with caring responsibilities	202
Self-isolating and working	84
Not working	44*
Self-isolating not working	90
Sickness absence	113
Other absence – maternity leave/holidays/flexitime etc	138
Total SBC Employees	3,175

*This equates to 16 FTEs as most posts are very few hours per week – eg. STEPS supported employment roles and catering staff where school site is closed

Sickness absence

Sickness absence levels remain high at 6.3 days average per FTE in the first 9 months of 2020/21. This level is comparable with the same point in the previous year (6.2) and with other organisations but is higher than target.

However, absence due to Stress /Anxiety/Depression/Mental Wellbeing is the most significant underlying cause, accounting for 37% of all absences this year, followed by Covid-related illness (15%).

Support for employees

- We have ensured comprehensive guidance is in place to support home working.
- We have ensured we have support in place for any employee who is affected by mental health issues and will review this further in 2021.
- We have supported the delivery of vaccinations for priority front-line employees. 1,411 employees received their first vaccination by 12 February 2020.

<p>Health advice</p> 	<p>Mental wellbeing</p> 	<p>Physical fitness</p> 
<p>Activities and interests</p> 	<p>Resources for children</p> 	<p>Money information and advice</p> 

We have continued to support the people and business of the borough throughout.

Throughout the past 12 months, the Council has continued to deliver services to the people of the borough including:

- Helping mobilise an army of volunteers to deliver 3,397 food parcels, 3,024 prescriptions and undertake 936 shopping trips and many other kinds of help to the vulnerable during lockdown
- Providing vital front-line social care services and worked closely with the care homes and carers across the borough to support them
- Offering advice and support to 15,215 clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) people in the borough
- Working closely with schools to support them to stay open for vulnerable children and children of key workers and then to widen opening for selected year groups. Even before the national free school meals voucher scheme, we co-ordinated the preparation and delivery of on average 1,300 packed lunches each day.
- Administering swift financial support for over 2,500 businesses.
- Re-billed 14,000 households to provide Council Tax reductions and rescheduled payment dates for thousands more to provide financial support.
- Maintaining weekly bin collections and recycling services throughout.
- Leading the local public health response and have done everything we possibly can to support vital public health messaging
- Contacting over 1,000 people aged 75+ who may be entitled to Pension Credit in response to the TV licence fee changes

Throughout the pandemic, like all other organisations we have had our challenges maintaining a stable staffing structure especially in some areas such as Community Services where, due to the age profile of the workforce, a large number of staff were either isolating, absent due to contracting COVID-19 or were in the shielding cohort.

Although in the first 6 weeks of the pandemic, some services were stood down to support the national message that only essential services should be operating. Over time, we were able to take on board national guidance and bring services back in a safe way.

We continue receive high levels of enquiries from members of the public seeking welfare advice and support. During the four-week period from 23 March 2020 we received an unprecedented 1,200 enquiries. Payment arrangements have been negotiated with utility providers and a number of families referred for assistance have been supported through the provision of white goods.

We continue to work closely with social housing providers to support families fleeing domestic violence, ensuring that they have adequate household items to set up at a new address. There has been high demand to support and advise customers who have been furloughed or lost their jobs, many of whom are unfamiliar with the welfare benefits processes.

We continue to carry out assessments for adults who have a need and support services are commissioned including home care and reablement. Hospital discharges are supported 7 days a week by an integrated health and social care team.

We have continued to provide adult safeguarding services to support people and manage safeguarding investigations.

We have continued to support people who find themselves homeless or are threatened with homelessness. Since the commencement of the lockdown we have been contacted by 484 households and secured temporary accommodation for almost 300 households.

We have supported the Government's national 'Everyone In' initiative to secure accommodation for those who may otherwise find themselves rough sleeping. We also continue to work in partnership with a range of registered provider and private sector landlords to secure accommodation. Over 100 households have now either moved into a tenancy and/or have been 'matched' against a property and are waiting for repairs to be completed before their tenancy can commence.

We continue to work with the substance misuse, domestic abuse, sexual health and 0-19 services to continue to provide crucial care and support, enabling residents to access services throughout the lockdown. This has included the setting up of virtual consultations and groups, home testing and online services.

We have continued to provide information to residents about changing national public health advice and guidance through our website and social media. In addition, targeted information has been sent out to specific groups e.g. children, migrant communities and shielding residents.

We have applied credits to the council tax accounts of all of those currently eligible for council tax support with each beneficiary receiving £150 in 2020/21 as an offset to their council tax bill. All new eligible working age claimants will receive this additional support automatically throughout 2020/21. This hardship grant funding amounts to £2.54m for Stockton.

We reviewed the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates, used to calculate Housing Benefit for tenants renting from private landlords, and increased them to the 30th percentile of local market rents. As a result, 1,658 customers had their benefit recalculated from April and received additional awards of up to £6.69 per week. The DWP has projected that Stockton-on-Tees will be entitled to a subsidy uplift of £95,000 to cover the cost of these changes for the financial year.

We temporarily suspended action to recover unpaid Council Tax from our residents. In addition, we have supported residents requiring financial support to defer their normal monthly payments for April and May until June and to spread their payments over 12 months instead of 10.

We have seen a significant increase in the number of requests for support through the Council Tax Support (CTS) scheme. To assist in this, an online application form has been developed along with a means to upload supporting documentation. Telephone support is available for those customers who need support to complete the form.

We rolled out a packed lunch distribution scheme from Monday 23rd March 2020 across the four family hubs and a network of VCSE partners to ensure that families had continued access to food provision in the short term while schools adapted to the new national requirements. The scheme provided daily pick up points at family hubs and community points and also provided home delivery for self-isolating families. The scheme delivered on average 1,300 packed lunches each day.

We implemented a new way of working, intensifying our work with schools, sharing information with partner agencies, creating a single point of contact for queries, and the development of a vulnerable children matrix so we can ensure support is being provided to the most vulnerable children.

We reviewed all 1700 Education Health and Care Plans for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities to develop a risk assessment to inform a decision on whether children would be best supported in school or at home.

We launched a new enhanced emotional health and wellbeing support offer. This includes training, support and quality assured resources for use within a whole setting approach, access to a range of group sessions for children and young people facilitated by emotional health and wellbeing practitioners, direct work with parents/carers to help them to support their child and/or manage their own emotional health and wellbeing and access to 1:1 specialist therapeutic intervention as clinically appropriate.

We implemented social distancing in frontline services through a range of solution such as physical modifications to the workplace including screens on offices, larger depot modifications for one-way flow of staff and the use of additional vehicles such as welfare vehicles.

Where some services were stood down temporarily in line with guidance, including grounds maintenance and green waste, we had to catch up – we achieved this through weekend collections of green waste as well as additional weekend working and using additional vehicles and equipment to allow us to get back to our usual service position.

We introduced bubbles in our own services to complement those in use elsewhere, in schools and in care homes for example to ensure that children and adults were transported in the safest possible way.

National changes to the way births, and death could be registered, and wedding services held were a major challenge. Not only did this lead to a backlog but placed major emotional demands on families and our staff especially where limited on attendance at funerals had to be enforced, whilst COVID-19 related deaths were increasing.

A number of business support grant schemes have been operated since March 2020 to support Businesses through National and Local restrictions.

We have also introduced discretionary schemes where we have provided funding to a wide range of businesses who did not qualify for the National Scheme but who were significantly affected. This has supported 470 businesses with grants support totalling over £3.25m

We are now in the process of administering additional grants to support businesses re-starting their activities. This should benefit around 1200 businesses in the retail, hospitality and Leisure sector by providing grants of up to £18,000.

Changes have been introduced to business rates with all businesses in the retail, hospitality and leisure sector and Ofsted registered nurseries receiving 100% rate relief. This resulted in 1,032 businesses receiving a total of £33.5m relief and no business rates to pay for the full financial year. A further scheme has been introduced for 2021/22.

COVID-19 continuity: how we have changed the way we deliver services...

All of our services have had to adapt to restrictions and work differently. Here are some of the ways we have changed what we do as a result of COVID-19...

COVID-19 secure status

We moved urgently in 2020 to establish safe working practices and establish COVID-Secure status for the organisation. Our organisation-wide risk assessment sets out how we are delivering this and is supported by:

- Over 200 service-specific risk assessments including PPE guidance.
- 8 building risk assessments.
- An online checking-in process to monitor the number and location of staff who are working in offices for track and trace and maximum safe building occupancy levels.
- An individual risk assessment process for all Clinically Vulnerable and Clinically Extremely Vulnerable employees to complete before they are able to work outside their home.

Changes to how we deliver Civic activity

During the initial period when committee meetings resumed, these were conducted using a hybrid approach until the beginning of July 2020 when we were able to proceed with remote meeting only and have done so ever since. We have since been able to deliver over 120 public meetings using this approach.

The pandemic has obviously had a big impact on our Civic Year and the engagements that make up the Mayoral year. We have made use of the Facebook page for the Mayor to communicate key messages, such as Show Racism the Red Card, VJ Day, and Civic Awards where we have had over 70 nominations.

Social media has been particularly useful for the Mayor to promote the COVID-19 vaccine take up. The Mayor has supported the Hospital's campaign, had numerous TV and radio interviews, as well as being a role model by being filmed getting his own vaccine. He is also supporting the COVID-19 Community Champions scheme, as well as assisting the Convalescent Plasma Programme to reach out to the BAME community.

We launched the Mayor's 100 Heroes campaign encouraging people to take up challenges to assist the Mayor in his fundraising and this has seen people baking and selling cakes, challenging themselves to walk and cycle 100 miles, as well as holding raffles and donating craft packs and even a sponsored slim.

COVID-19 has added an unprecedented layer of complexity and risk to the forthcoming elections and risk assessments have been carried out in respect of every aspect of administering the poll. A wide range of mitigation measures have been put in place including PPE, staffing contingency, staff bubbles, individual risk assessments, remote training, electronic submission of nomination papers for informal checks, encouraging early postal vote

applications, cleaning, signage, venue layouts. Recruitment is always a challenge and has been more so this year, particularly bearing in mind that a bank of reserve staff will also be required.

Changes to how we deliver services

We moved rapidly to enable home working for the majority of office-based staff. Improved IT capabilities, including widespread adoption of MS Teams as well as the well-developed process of replacing desktops with laptops and tablets enabled significant numbers of people to work from home with minimal disruption from March 2020. Virtual meetings are being held across all services and with key partners. Average monthly use of MS teams, all new since lockdown:

- 320,000 Teams chat messages
- 10,000 Teams meetings organised (single attendee)
- 31,000 Teams meetings attended (multiple attendees)
- 66,000 one-to-one Teams calls

For those services where home working is not possible, significant changes have had to be made to ways of working on shift patterns, changes to the physical environment and other adjustments to procedures and protocols to keep services running.

We have changed the way we manage the mail: incoming mail is centralised, quarantined, scanned safely and emailed to teams/services. Hand delivery and courier services have been removed. A hybrid model for outgoing mail has been introduced - requests emailed to D&P, printed, packed, checked and mailed, and the courier service is demand led only system with advance calls to ensure collection is required. Items are collected/delivered to an agreed point rather than to multiple locations within a building.

One of the most well used services that the Council provides is the Household Waste Recycling Centre (HWRC) which was unavailable for the first few months of lockdown. However, we were able to respond immediately to the change in government advice and established an online booking system in conjunction with Digital Services colleagues to allocate slots to our residents, implements a traffic management system using our Enforcement Service to ensure that the facility was re-opened and residents were able to exercise effective social distancing.

New school transport services were implemented using TCVA grant funding which was issued to allows LA's to support home to school transport. We have used this to provide additional vehicles and routes to children who would otherwise have struggled to make their way to school.

The national lockdown in March 2020 necessitated the cancellation of all Stockton Council events. However, we have taken advantage of technology to greater lengths than ever before to still be able deliver key events, such as Armed Forces Week, Remembrance Sunday, the Mayor's Carol Service, SIRF@home, Stockton & Darlington Railway 195th anniversary celebrations and Halloween Fright Night, opening these events up to potentially greater audiences including those who may not usually have been able to attend.

We worked with ONE IT to supplement the government scheme to ensure that all children have the opportunity to access appropriate technology at home. Over 700 new laptops have been provided to some of our disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils to enable them to access the online learning their schools are offering.

The food hub placed demands upon our Catering Team and the local distribution of PPE to many sites was another challenge which was managed by our Health and Safety Training Officer at the helm of the distribution process to all SBC and other care sites.

COVID creativity: how we have REALLY changed what we do...

COVID has presented all of our services with some difficult decision making and also the opportunity to work in different and creative ways, here are some examples.

Halcyon Centre

The Halcyon Centre provides a day service to adults with physical and mental disabilities. This service provides social interaction, respite for carers and a point of contact and support for the person attending. Usually there are 140 people who are registered for the service with an average of 60 people per day attending.

To ensure the most vulnerable in the borough continue to receive necessary care the centre remains open in an emergency capacity, offering a reduced number of places to those individuals who would be at risk should they remain at home and self-isolate. These reduced numbers allow us to ensure appropriate social distancing is implemented. In addition to the ongoing building based service a dedicated phone service has been set up.

Entirely manned by centre staff, this service ensures some 130 people currently unable to attend the service and their carers receive anything from daily to weekly calls to check on their welfare, signpost, help where possible with any problems and often, simply have a good chat as we all know self-isolation is tough and a daily call can make all the difference.

The feedback from people receiving this service has been fantastic with one carer saying "Care team at Halcyon ring every week just to check to see how M is doing – amazing job they do. M thoroughly loved hearing her voice because as you can appreciate attending the Centre is his life & without it he would be totally lost!", and another saying "The services & the dedicated staff are without a doubt fantastic. I realise (with) scarce resources it is difficult to prioritize. Stockton must be the best council in the country, particularly in these difficult times the carers are keeping in contact with us. Thank you."

Sporting Steps

Sporting Steps is a service which is provided to adults with a learning disability, providing not only social interaction but also encouraging people to live a healthy lifestyle. Stockton Borough Council wanted to do something for our Sporting STEPs clients who under normal circumstances would be catching up with friends whilst taking part in sporting activities.

Firstly Sporting STEPs Virtual Walk was implemented, those who would usually attend the walking group were encouraged to take their walk at 10am (following government guidelines on social distancing), following the walk we all met up on 'Teams' and all had the usual social time whilst in the safety of their own homes. This was a great way of everyone catching up with one another, as the social aspect of our sports activities is as important, if not more, than the exercise to some individuals.

Funky Feet

Due to the lockdown and the cessation of all group activity, Leisure and Sports Development quickly responded to the void in provision with the development of Virtual-Funky Feet.

Starting on the 23 March, the first live session reached 3,023 people having 1.6k views and was shared 19 times. The second video did even better reaching 7,150 people with 3.8k views and was shared 40 times. Overall these sessions are proving a hit with existing and new participants, and we will continue to deliver these sessions and respond to the needs of our users.

Rosedale

Rosedale provides a bed based rehabilitation or an assessment of people's care needs and provides 24hr support to ensure they stay safe. People admitted to Rosedale may have tested positive for Covid and still be in the recovery stage. Following lock-down restrictions, Government mandates and Public Health advice the challenge of keeping people safe, healthy and most importantly giving people a high quality of life posed a great challenge. Staff in Rosedale have committed to the cause whole heartedly, making people welcome, purchasing phones for resident use, ensuring residents can access the window for social distance visiting and completing room based activity packs for stimulation when the staff are not available.

Ensuring the health of residents is vital, GP 'check-ups', community link worker's and professional specialist reviews have been restricted into care homes due to the current environment. However, Rosedale have overcome this with the use of video consultations via tablets. Residents have continued to have the most important aspects of their health and wellbeing reviewed and this is reflected in their personalised care plans.

Despite the dark cloud of a pandemic, and the fact that staff are having to wear a very different uniform consisting of PPE. The staff and residents are demonstrating true resilience, innovation and creativity to ensure the service continues with minimal impact on the residents, the resident in the picture is listening to her favourite film. While she recalls seeing the film due to a sight impairment she can no longer watch it. Listening to the songs she recalls reminds her of happy days watching the film and brings a smile to her face each time the music is played.

Online Libraries

We already had an online eBooks and eAudio offer that could be accessed by any members on their own equipment, as well as a number of online databases such as Ancestry which could normally be accessed in our buildings. Since the lockdown period hit us, we've been able to temporarily allow access to many of these through customers own devices.

The usage of our online libraries increased dramatically and the number of users has doubled. Anyone who lives or works in the Borough can join our online (and physical) library service and if you don't already belong or want to access our eBooks, follow the links on our webpage for details. For eBooks we have a special app which can be downloaded to a device to view our books.

We've learned a great deal over recent weeks about how to promote our service digitally and how to produce a wide variety of activities online. It's true to say that some "stars" have emerged from our teams and in some cases from their families! In one promotional video one of our team's rather talented dogs has helped to make people aware of our online lending service.

Learning and Skills

With the suspension of all face-to-face activity we had to adapt to meet the needs of our learners, apprentices and project clients.

Classroom-based learning is now being delivered digitally using technology such as Google Meet and Google Classroom (the Service Virtual Learning Environment) which allows learners to participate in an online video 'classroom' environment in order to maintain learning direct from their tutor. This also allows learners to access a variety of other teaching resources and activities online which they can complete in their own time and maintain their learning.

Tees Valley Music Service

The Care Home Singalong is an inter-generational initiative which aims to support emotional health and well-being, including our care home residents, during the coronavirus pandemic.

The Tees Valley Youth Choir's lockdown rendition of 'Something Inside So Strong' was released in April and received over 53K views on Facebook. Inspired by this success we designed an inter-generational lockdown singalong pack. The pack was put together to connect with those who are feeling lonely and vulnerable at this time. It includes many soloists from the Tees Valley Youth Choir and a couple of duets chosen by the students.

Short breaks offer

A 'short break' from the caring role can be a lifeline for some families and can provide children with the opportunity to take part in social opportunities and activities that otherwise may not be available. In most circumstances this would be by accessing specialist activities and in some cases providing additional support for a child to access universal opportunities. COVID-19 was a specific challenge as many groups and activities that the young people benefitted from had to be cancelled, so we worked creatively with the parent Carer Forum to design a new offer for 'in the home', including

- Sensory items including calming toys and dens.
- Bikes
- Online dance, music and exercise coaching
- Trampolines
- Craft items
- Baking equipment
- Subscriptions for Children's channels and movies
- Dance and yoga mats
- Play dough, books and paints.
- Musical instruments
- Disabled friendly swings and slides
- Hot tubs were the most requested item !

This offer has been well received by families – the feedback has been very positive throughout, and we have received nearly 1000 applications!

We have done new things....
(ie new duties and roles we have undertaken over the past 12 months, not just changes to what we do)

Many additional and new services have been developed to focus to be on COVID-19 related activity.

We worked in partnership with Catalyst to establish the Community Support Team and the Shielding Hub – a multi-disciplinary approach to providing a one-stop service to support the most vulnerable, providing support around access to food, medicines and emotional wellbeing support and also links into services such as social care, mental health and welfare support.

We proactively contacted every shielding resident in the Borough and responded to enquiries from shielding residents offering advice and support through the community support team.

We took the lead role in the development of outbreak management plans and responses, including the provision of advice, guidance, support and risk assessment support to workspaces, schools and other settings, 7 days a week.

We have set up testing sites and helped others to set up theirs – in schools, workplaces and in the community.

We provided advice and guidance to staff, the public and service providers and partners.

We have recruited and trained a dedicated team of COVID Marshals to help keep residents and businesses safe across Stockton-on-Tees. The Marshals provide advice and guidance to businesses, members of the public and other agencies to help stop the spread of COVID-19. This can cover anything from offering face masks to anyone who has left their home without one, to reminding people about social distancing or helping businesses put appropriate measures in place to keep their staff and customers safe.

We have set up a new employment and skills hub to help with anything employment and training related including employability support (CV writing, job searching, interview techniques), job searches, skills, education and training, funding and benefits advice.

We distributed business loans and grants with over £33m of business grants paid to a range of businesses across the Borough

A care home protection group was created to ensure that the care homes are supported in continuing with their role throughout the pandemic, ensuring that the residents were kept safe and protected from COVID-19. The aim of this group was to provide expert advice and information regarding infection prevention and control. The group acted as a point of contact for care homes, and a conduit for information being sent to the care homes, to ensure that the homes were acting on the most up to date advice and guidance. The group was made up of representatives from the local authority, the NHS trust, TEWV and the voluntary sector. It also included an advocate to ensure that the impact of any guidance and advice was considered from the residents perspective. As well as providing advice and guidance the care home protection group did carry out visits to care homes to support them if there were any concerns or any COVID-19 outbreaks.

Some of our staff have taken on new roles...

Some staff have been voluntarily deployed elsewhere to provide capacity and build resilience to support residents and business in the Borough.

Community Hub Call Handlers

A number of employees worked shifts to help people who call the COVID-19 Community Support telephone line.

Fiona Riley, a Townscape Heritage Project Officer, is one of the call handlers and in her words: "I think the support being offered to residents by the COVID Community Support Team is brilliant and am very proud to be involved in a small way.

The role is challenging at times, especially when you are speaking to vulnerable people. You just want to make sure you do your best to ensure that their requests are passed on accurately and efficiently.

It is also rewarding as callers are very appreciative of the service. It is great to feel that I am able to spend some of my time being useful in the response to Covid19 and supporting the team to undertake a vital service whilst still continuing to work on the Townscape Heritage Project. As a relatively new member of staff, I have met more colleagues across the Council and am beginning to feel like I have been here for years – in a good way. My cat called George, who has just turned 15, sits with me every day and keeps me company when I take calls. Well he's snoozing most of the time to be honest - What a life!!"

Community Hub – Daily Delivery of Prescriptions

A number of staff offered to help provide a much needed service to isolated residents across the Borough.

The Prescriptions Team have been delivering up to 50 prescriptions a day, filling a huge gap in provision that pharmacies struggled to fill at this unprecedented time.

Stepping into that role, and enabling our residents to receive vital medication, often urgently, is alleviating concerns and reassuring people from all walks of life that, in a crisis, we are there to help.

Thanks to the dedicated delivery team (for countless hours in countless queues...) and to all of the amazing call handlers for talking people through their needs.

Our staff are taking on new responsibilities, engaging more than ever with the community and acting safely, flexibly and most importantly, with great care for those vulnerable to this pandemic.

Collaboration across Directorates, as well as support from Billingham Town Council which is taking on deliveries for prescriptions in that area demonstrates that we are working together well to deliver solutions and build systems quickly. Claire Frawley, an Economic Growth Officer, sums it up by saying "A really rewarding experience all round!"

Logistics Hub

A Logistics Hub was created at the back of Splash by installing a marquee and converting the sports activity hall. A number of Council staff were needed we help make up food parcels for some of the Boroughs most vulnerable and isolated people.

Essentials such as bread, milk, eggs, flour, cereal, tea, coffee, sugar and pasta arrive each week in bulk delivery which we all then sort and put together into hundreds of individual food packages. These packages are then taken away and delivered to hundreds of homes.

Public Health team

The team led the co-ordination, oversight and delivery of outbreak management, working with partners through the COVID Control Group. The team provide support, prevention and response advice to all settings including care sectors, workplaces, schools and education settings, hostels and vulnerable groups.

The team has also led and co-ordinated the planning and delivery of contact tracing activity and the local approach to testing. This includes the establishment of 3 large community testing centres, planned transfer to 6 or 7 smaller community-based sites, an intensive 2-week surge testing effort following the detection of a case of a variant of concern in the Borough and the development of a range of wider testing programmes including in schools, workplaces and day centres.

How well have we responded?

An external view...

In July 2020 the Council was assessed as continuing to meet the Customer Service Excellence standard with full compliance with all 57 aspects. The assessors report acknowledges that over recent months, the Council has had to deal with the impacts of the pandemic and has been able to transform the way it works with residents quickly and effectively. The assessor observed that many commercial organisations would be envious of the agility and effectiveness that has been demonstrated and the way that partnership working has enabled complex delivery and logistical issues to be handled very effectively. The assessment identifies the following examples that shone out that the Council should be really proud of –

- The continued passion and dedication of staff. There were many examples to demonstrate how staff are continuing to go above and beyond for customers.
- Teamwork across the organisation has developed evening further during the COVID crisis and staff are hopeful that this will continue.
- The offer to customers has developed over recent months and become ever more personalised and holistic. There is a real sense that staff consider the customer at every interaction and this focus helps them to think widely of the customers' needs and find ways to meet these.
- The communication processes have evolved and developed through the COVID crisis to make sure that everyone both inside and outside the organisation have access to relevant, comprehensive and up to date information.

Partnerships with other organisations have developed in order to meet the challenges of COVID and meet the needs of customers.

The views of our staff...

We completed an extensive Covid Employee Survey at the end of 2020. 1,504 employees completed the survey with a range of questions about the impact of Covid on their working life. The results were extremely positive with employees identifying "Operating as normal" and "Supporting our Customers" as their top two achievements during the pandemic. They have also felt well supported:



However employees also reported a significant impact on their working lives. With the top concerns whilst working during the pandemic being:

1. Anxiety and worry about Covid-19
2. Impact of Covid-19 on my work/the Council
3. Loss of contact with co-workers
4. Isolation
5. Potential to spread virus to my co-workers
6. Cost of heating and electricity when working from home

We will use a detailed analysis of these results to inform the ongoing development of employee policies and support in 2021.

Customer Service Awards

We have adapted the annual Customer Service awards to include 2 new categories to recognise the contribution of staff during the pandemic.

- The Caring Colleague or Team (during the Covid pandemic) will recognise an outstanding example of an SBC colleague or team who has provided guidance, practical or emotional support to other colleagues through the Covid crisis.
- The Outstanding Contribution Award (during the Covid pandemic) will be made to Individuals or Teams who have made an outstanding contribution to Covid response work beyond the expectations of their day job and have demonstrated examples of all the positive cultural behaviours through the Covid crisis.

Investors in people

The impact of the pandemic on the workforce was also the focus of the enquiries for the scheduled reassessment visit from the Investors In People accreditation team which took place in January 2021. The virtual visit provided a good opportunity to provide an independent check of the employee survey results. The assessment noted positive progress.

Where next? Planning for recovery and future response

We know 2021/22 will bring further challenges in balancing the ongoing pandemic, but also enabling our communities to begin to return to as normal a life as possible. Our own planning includes the following:

The roadmap to June

- The end of shielding and the implications of those for our more vulnerable residents
- The return of non-essential retail and the end of all social restrictions
- Outbreak management plan principles in operation

From June to March 2022: Reacting and recovery

- Managing and supporting our workforce – those who are not able to return to work, or who might have had other treatments suspended, or who are suffering from the impacts of COVID-19
- Maintaining new forms of service delivery where necessary: ongoing outbreak management approach including local test and trace, management of PPE provision.
- Implications of changed service delivery where we need to maintain social distancing.
- Loss of income for some service areas and the financial implications of this
- Many of our key work areas are already set out in our new Council Plan. Key aspects are:
 - an approach to the use of technology, and ways of working. We are working to develop a model which enables staff to have flexibility, based on a hybrid approach of days in the office and days at home or working elsewhere.
 - Responding to changing transport patterns associated with wider changes in employment
 - Three key strategic responses:
 - Economic recovery
 - Environmental sustainability
 - Tackling inequalities

April 2022 and beyond: long term recovery

- We are also planning further head, looking towards the long term recovery, and we are already planning our response to address the longer term issues associated with widening inequalities, and the issues face by those communities already more vulnerable to poor health or finding it more difficult to access support and services and who have been over-represented in suffering the social and economic impacts of COVID-19, as well as admissions to hospital and death.
- Key aspects of this work include a focus on:
 - The economic impact on those unable to work or who lost their job due to pandemic or are in unstable employment
 - The particular impact on those already with poorer health and / or economic outcomes (at population level) including those living in deprivation; people with a disability / learning disability; people from BAME communities; people who have existing poor health / are at risk of poor health e.g. existing chronic conditions, overweight / obese, those who use substances or tobacco
 - Digital poverty
 - The impact on children and young people – particularly on child development and on education
 - The economic and social impact of long-COVID

- The impact on mental wellbeing / increased anxiety and depression / loneliness that will impact population's ability to live healthy lives and contribute socially & economically
- It will also focus on the key positives, including:
 - Community assets, cohesion & volunteering
 - Better work/life balance for some
 - Better access to services for some