

EAST RENFREWSHIRE COUNCIL**29 June 2022****Report by Chief Executive****COVID-19 RECOVERY - UPDATE****PURPOSE OF REPORT**

1. To provide Elected Members with a further update on response, recovery and renewal work taking place across the Council and the Trust since the previous update in December 2021.

RECOMMENDATION

2. That the Council note and comment on the report.

BACKGROUND

3. Throughout the period of the pandemic, the Council has considered a series of reports on how the Council was dealing with the impacts of the pandemic and also highlighting how continuing to respond to the effects of the pandemic was impacting on the ability of departments to deliver “normal” services and had contributed to significant backlogs across all departments. The reports also referred to challenges still ahead not least of which was managing public expectation that services should all be back to normal,

REPORT

4. The purpose of this report is to provide a further update to Members on work being carried out across the Council since the previous report to [Council in December 2021](#), and should be read in the context of the previous update reports presented to the [Emergencies Committee in May](#), the [Council in June](#), the [Council in October](#), the [Council in December 2020](#), the [Council in June 2021](#), the [Council in September 2021](#); and [Council on 27 October 2021](#).

Mass Vaccination Clinics

5. Carmichael Hall and Barrhead Health and Care Centre remain operational as vaccination clinics and provide ongoing COVID-19 vaccinations. This continues to represent a significant commitment from the Trust and HSCP. Staff support non-clinical operations, facilities management, queue management and liaison with clinical staff.

6. Vaccination of the population has been a crucial factor in the Scottish Government having confidence to remove COVID restrictions, as it slows down the spread and severity of the virus. Therefore, work continues with our NHS partners to maximise the opportunities for our residents to be vaccinated. The Council's vaccination programme Single Point of Contact officer remains in close contact with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde colleagues, as well as neighbouring Local Authorities.

COVID-19 Testing

7. In March 2022, the Scottish Government published a Test and Protect Transition Plan, outlining that the primary purpose of COVID testing was moving from population wide testing to targeted testing to support clinical care. The intention is that testing will remain within clinical care settings, supported by surveillance and outbreak response; rather than being widely available for all of the population.

8. Asymptomatic testing ended in Scotland on 18 April. Consequently, on 14 April the mobile testing units (testing buses) utilised in East Renfrewshire were stood down. Symptomatic testing ended nationally on 30 April, with the Mobile Testing Unit (MTU) that had been in place at the Greenlaw Works (Business Centre) closing on 29 April.

Impact of Rising Costs

9. There is well-documented concern across the UK with regard the cost of living, seeing the price of goods and services rapidly climb. The Council is not immune from this, witnessing significant volatility in the prices of materials and challenges in availability of goods and labour to provide services. This is leading to significantly increased costs, including for tenders, which is having a detrimental impact on ongoing and planned projects. While it is impossible to pin point COVID as the sole cause for this instability, it is a significant contributory factor; along with wider supply chain concerns and the situation in Ukraine.

Environment Department

10. The Environment Department has dedicated considerable resource to supporting COVID response elements such as supporting Test & Trace, ensuring compliance with COVID Statutory Regulations, community testing and vaccination. Some of this continues, particularly in relation to vaccinations. Additionally, staff bubbles continue to be in place across key frontline services to protect our staff and acceptable levels of service delivery. As a result of this, and other factors (including lockdowns), significant backlogs exist across the Department. Consequently, the Department is in no way back to “business as normal”.

Economic Development

11. As per previous updates, Economic Development staff have had additional responsibilities in relation to COVID business grants. This has included agile response to new tranches of Covid business support grants as the Scottish Government announces these. The service is prioritising key elements of its service plan, to be delivered in the remainder of 2021/22.

Corporate Health and Safety Unit

12. Corporate Health and Safety Unit (CHSU) officers continue to provide resource to COVID related issues, but with restrictions easing; risk assessment reviews are taking place with a longer-term focus. This approach will free resource to deal with the backlog of health and safety training requirements, as well as carrying out general risk assessment creation and review – for which demand is high from other departments.

13. Approximately 75% of the CHSU service is now dedicated to business as usual activity, with the remaining time supporting COVID matters. The COVID PPE storage and delivery operation by CHSU is being wound up, with ordering of supplies by Departments returning to standard practice.

14. A new service plan for 2022 / 23 has been created, carrying forward objectives that were unable to be achieved in 2021 / 22 as a result of COVID. Additionally health and safety improvements have been factored into the service plan. While the plan will be challenging to deliver, it should be achievable if the COVID recovery position continues on its current trajectory.

Neighbourhood Services

15. During the last two years, “work bubbles” have been a fundamental tool in both protecting Neighbourhood Services employees from the risk of contracting Covid-19 and in allowing the continuation of frontline service delivery. However, bubbles have severely restricted the Service’s ability to flexibly deploy employees on the ground, across various work activities and consequently in delivering essential training.

16. With the easing of restrictions in many areas of life, Neighbourhood Services, in conjunction with Corporate Health & Safety, have now removed the need for “work bubbles” as of 16 May 2022. It may take time for the Service to rebalance the legacy of restrictions, in terms of clearing ongoing backlogs in work areas and in enabling employees to take accumulated leave, where it has not been previously possible.

17. Beyond the task of frontline service delivery via our people resource, the impact of restrictions and other external factors are bringing new pressures to the Service. These include, restrictions and monitoring of fuel availability by Scottish Fuels and the availability of vehicle parts coming into the UK, which may impact our ability to run our essential fleet if it continues into the longer term. There is currently a lack of availability of Hire Vehicles, due to lack of imports of new vehicles, significantly reducing this as a backup option to our existing fleet model.

18. The above circumstance has the potential to detrimentally impact the running of frontline essential services, as we move beyond Covid. The Service is doing everything possible to mitigate the effects, but many of the factors raised are resultant from external pressures that are beyond the full control of the Council.

Trading Standards

19. Trading Standards played a significant and leading role in enforcing and advising businesses on the Regulations restricting trading activities during COVID-19. This led to a significant shift in resources away from the core service planned activity for 2019/20 and 2020/21. The service continued to prioritise key elements of its service plan for delivery in the remainder of 2021/22 while continuing to monitor and advise traders in relation to COVID-19. Key priority delivery has been supported through creative risk assessments and new ways of working going into 2022/23.

Environmental Health

20. All Environmental Health staff have undertaken additional COVID responsibilities, which have been unpredictable in complexity, often unique and very time consuming.

21. The Environmental Health Service will continue to work at a national level liaising with other local authorities and partner organisational to promote the adoption of the baseline measures and enforcement of the COVID certification measures as required.

22. The Society of Chief Environmental Health Officers of Scotland continue to recommend extending the COVID Compliance Officer funding made available from the Scottish Government until 31 March 2022 and is co-ordinating with COSLA and SOLACE at every opportunity.

23. The COVID Compliance Officer post has been extended for one year, utilising funding made available through the Flexible Local Authority COVID Economic Recovery Fund, as approved by Cabinet on 7 April 2022.

24. The Service will continue to prioritise any Coronavirus related enquiries. However, as detailed in previous reports, it remains the case that with a significant increase in public health work, the reintroduction of food law visits, and the impact of other Services and organisations now requiring Environmental Health input; the ability to perform the full range of functions in an effective manner has been compromised. However, work is underway to address the backlogs.

Housing Services

25. Housing Services is first and foremost a frontline customer facing service; whilst the service has adjusted to deliver to the highest standard during the pandemic, it has not been able to do this to the level expected by customers. Additionally, it is a very paper based service and many areas of remote technology to support the service were not available at the start of the pandemic or throughout.

26. At present, service delivery is as follows:

- Homeless and Housing Advice services have reintroduced face-to-face meetings in homes and in Council buildings. Whilst customers are offered the option of face-to-face and telephone interviews; the nature of these discussions means face-to-face is the preferred method in order to support customers effectively.
- All in home visits including visits from Housing Officers, Housing Support Workers & maintenance officers are in place.
- Allocation of housing continues to face significant demand from homeless households awaiting a permanent offer of accommodation and in temporary accommodation. Within the allocations waiting list, the level of homeless households awaiting permanent accommodation remains consistently over 100 households at any given time, with a remaining waiting list of over 4,000 households. The time to repair empty homes has improved significantly.
- Rent arrears have continued to rise through 2021/22, in light of the negative impact the pandemic has had on family incomes. The return of home visits mean that officers are able to discuss issues in tenant's homes to address arrears. Additionally, Housing Services are taking advantage of the Tenants Grant Fund provided by the Scottish Government. This fund was to prevent homelessness and was predominately focused in residents in the private sector. However as a landlord, Housing Services were able to utilise this fund.
- The response repairs service has no significant backlog of works from previous restrictions.
- Planned improvement works (such as kitchens & bathrooms) commenced in the autumn, beginning with the 2019-20 backlog. All procurement work is complete to deliver the outstanding programme. However, the construction industry is still experiencing a shortage of some materials, which is driving up costs. It will take some time to work through a two year backlog.

27. All existing face-to-face service delivery is supported by thorough risk assessments and safe systems of work.

28. Housing Services has adapted its delivery through various stages of the pandemic and maximised service delivery as much as possible; despite limits to frontline service delivery and working from home restrictions. In addition, the service has invested in new technology to be implemented in 2022; which will improve online services, reduce paperwork and allow officers to be in the community supporting customers.

Property and Technical Services

29. Supply chain issues continue to affect the construction industry, influencing pricing and completion in some circumstances. Property and Technical Services continue to work with Procurement and other services to try to mitigate both cost and time impacts to projects. Technical Services continue to support services in realising agreed capital plan aspirations and meeting the challenges faced.

30. Ventilation in Council premises remains a primary focus for the Property Services Team. They continue to liaise with external ventilation engineers to assess properties, including undertaking any works identified to comply with Government Guidance. Progress in the ventilation programme will be dependent on the availability of contractors, materials and access to buildings.

31. Carbon Dioxide monitors have been installed to all Education teaching areas. These are fixed/permanent and provide real-time information over the Internet to staff who can monitor the position on a dashboard. Property Services and Education collaborated on this undertaking following earlier Scottish Government announcements of funding and reporting, as outlined in previous reporting. Carbon Dioxide monitoring is also being rolled out to other Council premises as appropriate.

32. Property Services are also leading efforts through the Scottish Heads of Property Services network to develop how the policy of Carbon Dioxide monitoring should be further developed and to agree longer-term strategies for improving ventilation in schools, to improve the educational environment for teaching.

Development Management and Building Standards

33. Development Management and Building Standards continue to be able to carry out statutory duties but with protective measures in place. Both services continue with limited public interaction, with members of the public still not permitted within the offices. Officers are contactable by phone, email and via Teams. Some other face-to-face meetings are beginning to resume, although this is more likely to be with other agencies and local authorities. The Service is now working on a hybrid basis, attending the office on two days.

34. Developers are asked to provide Building Standards with photographs or videos as evidence, to supplement site visits. This approach has increased workload, requiring extra communications. There has also been an increase in completion certificate refusals where satisfactory evidence of the work undertaken has not been produced resulting in extra work for the officers.

35. There are high levels of householder applications, particularly for extensions and garden rooms. The additional workload has resulted in a backlog in processing planning application, which has been exacerbated by staff shortages and additional online demand seeking advice, reporting unauthorised work and complaining about service problems/delays.

36. Public and business demand on Development Management continues to be very high, almost certainly due to the desire for lifestyle / employment changes across society.

37. In addition, the demands on internal and external stakeholders arising from COVID has affected the ability for others to provide consultation responses to Development Management. Consequently, the determination of some planning applications, particularly large and complex applications have been unavoidably delayed.

Strategy/Local Development Plan

38. Local Development Plan 2 (LDP2) was adopted on 31 March 2022, following Examination by Scottish Ministers. The Plan is now available to view online, in Council offices and in local libraries. LDP2 is the Council's key strategic land use planning documentation, which aligns with and supports the vision and objectives of the Council's Corporate and Community Plans. The Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 provides the basis for future development planning in Scotland and work on LDP3 will commence in tandem with the enactment of this legislation.

39. Timescales for the preparation of the annual Housing Land audit, Vacant and Derelict land and employment monitoring have been impacted by COVID, but are now being completed.

Roads & Transportation

40. Roads are continuing with their revenue and capital programme without any significant issues at present. Concerns remain in relation to issues surrounding HGV drivers and their potential to present issues with delivering winter maintenance. This concern is exacerbated by potential COVID impacts among staff. Additionally, there is reliance on Neighbourhood Services to deliver Winter Maintenance. Given they will face the same issues outlined above, this could further adversely affect the delivery of the Winter Maintenance programme.

Education Department

41. With the gradual easing of restrictions in recent months, the Education Department has continued to recover from the ongoing impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, and in particular the significant levels of disruption to schools and nurseries over the last 2 years. Whilst the department continues to recover well, the level of ongoing disruption cannot be understated as schools and nurseries have sought to continue to focus on supporting children and young people with their own learning and wellbeing, following unprecedented challenges throughout the pandemic.

42. The emergence of the Omicron-variant in late 2021 and early 2022 resulted in significant levels of disruption across schools and nurseries, most notably through the significant increase in pupil and staff absence. Whilst often short term in nature given the testing and isolation requirements that were in place, a large number of staff were often absent at the same time, presenting significant levels of challenge in ensuring the ongoing operation of the education service. Whilst rates of absence have fallen in recent months, schools and nurseries are continuing to report short term staff absence as we adapt to the new approach to managing Covid symptoms.

43. Facilities Management have continued to experience ongoing challenges with staff absence across the service. In addition, the national challenges around recruitment have resulted in difficulties filling vacant Facilities Management positions. Officers are continuing to liaise with departments across the Council to ensure ongoing service delivery.

44. Whilst our schools have experienced higher than average rates of pupil absence throughout the pandemic, East Renfrewshire has continued to perform very strongly, with attendance rarely falling below 90%, and now sitting at 94.8%.

45. The department's Building Back Better and Fairer Framework has set out the key priorities required to support schools and services as they recover during 2021-22, complementing the activities set out within the department's Local Improvement Plan (LIP). Purposefully, the framework was designed as a single page, providing a clear simple summary

of next steps for improvement. This has included supporting schools to review the curriculum in light of the pandemic with a 2025 focus for curriculum, learning and teaching; the completion of the review of additional support needs provision within East Renfrewshire; and the launch of the new Parental Involvement and Engagement Strategy 2022-25.

46. The ongoing impact of the pandemic on learners should not be understated and it is important to recognise the continuing challenges schools face in supporting this wider recovery. As reported to Education Committee, the pandemic has resulted in challenges to the ongoing high performance of our learners, with an impact across attainment measures across recent years. Using quantitative and qualitative data our school staff have identified learning needs and gaps caused by the continued disruption for most of 2021/22. They have effectively used additional resource such as Pupil Equity Funding to support carefully selected interventions and specific learning and teaching approaches to ensure learners have every opportunity to progress in their learning and at a pace that is sustainable and will support long term attainment targets.

47. As we move beyond 2021/22, we are developing future improvement planning approaches, including through the use of Strategic Equity Fund and Pupil Equity Fund. Plans for the use of SEF and guidance to support schools in the use of PEF are being finalised and will support improvement activities in the coming years.

48. Despite the significant challenges faced, schools have successfully delivered the SQA exam diet following the alternative arrangements having been in place for the previous two years.

49. In addition to the significant impact on learning and teaching, there has been high levels of disruption to the wellbeing of young people across our schools. The Healthier Minds service continues to provide health and wellbeing advice to children, young people, staff and families, recognising the impact the pandemic continues to have on wider wellbeing. The number of referrals continues to increase, with almost 600 individuals accessing the service in the previous 6 months. As part of the Access to Counselling funding, the school wellbeing service has been launched and complements the work of the Healthier Minds service.

50. The department is continuing to focus on improving the attendance of children and young people, as we know that in order for children and young people to learn and thrive, they need to be in school. In addition to a general reduction in attendance rates, we continue to support a number of young people who have struggled to attend school due to emotional or mental health issues. As stated in Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child, children have a right to an education. In order to ensure all children receive that right, the department is developing a range of different interventions, working with partners across the Council to put the right support in place to encourage these young people back in to learning.

51. With the gradual easing of the Covid restrictions since March 2022, schools and nurseries have been adapting to the 'new normal', learning from the experiences throughout the pandemic to inform future approaches. Most notably, following an absence since March 2020, families are now once again able to physically visit schools and nurseries, for meetings and larger assembly and performance events. This has been a very welcome development and represented one of the final major restrictions that education establishments continued to face over recent months. The changes have been particularly welcomed by those families with children in the earliest stages of primary who had, until now, never been able to physically visit the school or early years establishment.

52. As we adjust to new ways of working, schools and nurseries have been looking at the opportunities to consult with families on the most effective methods of engagement, recognising the more flexible opportunities of remote engagement that emerged from the

pandemic. Over recent weeks, head teachers have been consulting with families around the future of parents evenings with initial feedback suggesting families would be keen to maintain a hybrid approach, offering the opportunity for either in person or remote meetings. Similarly, for parent council meetings, feedback has suggested that online meetings may offer greater accessibility and schools are considering how best to support these flexible approaches in to the new session.

53. The department continues to have a very strong focus on all learners and their families, having once again received an outstanding report as part of the Customer Service Excellence accreditation. This year's full assessment has been recently considered by Education Committee and has demonstrated a strong customer focus present at all levels. The assessment focuses on the customer journey using evidence from a range of customers including pupils, staff and parents. Their "customer journey" was examined, within the current context. The assessor highlighted the very high levels of customer satisfaction and how these continue to improve over time. It also noted the well-established and very strong corporate commitment to putting the customer at the heart of service delivery and the way in which leaders actively support this.

HSCP

54. The HSCP, in common with health and social care services across Scotland continues to be under significant pressure. A combination of increased demand across services, staff absence and recruitment/retention challenges continues to create issues with capacity. Over the period this has been particularly acute in care at home, but evident in all services. However, staff absence has begun to stabilise following the Omicron phase, aiding our recovery; and services are now seeing improving performance outcomes. We continue to experience higher rates of referrals and more complex presentations as a result of the pandemic.

Winter planning and Strengthening Adult Social Work

55. The Scottish Government provided additional funding to support health and social care providers tackle additional pressures. Phase One of the additional resources was the recruitment of 16 additional Health Care Assistants for the Greater Glasgow and Clyde health board area with local deployment to East Renfrewshire to enhance the capacity of our Care at Home Responder Service, Community Nursing and Community Rehabilitation teams.

56. We have strengthened our HSCP adult services front door to include a much wider MDT team approach, a focus on Technology Enabled Care (TEC) and a more streamlined pathways for individuals and families to access our supports. East Renfrewshire HSCP have contributed to the development of a discharge hub across GGC hospitals to prevent hospital admissions and support timeous hospital discharges.

57. Phase Two of the funding programme included an additional £2.1m for East Renfrewshire in 2021/22 to support Interim Care, Care at Home and Multi-disciplinary Teams. In 22/23 we will continue to implement our model for interim care including the development of our intensive support model at Bonnyton care home. This creates a step up/step down service locally, to avoid unnecessary hospital admissions and timely discharge to home/homely settings. For Care at Home, the additional resources has been used to address the ongoing demand pressures we are experiencing, increase frontline staff as well as management and support, and increase capacity for the Home First model and Technology Enabled Care. We are continuing to enhance the capacity of our multi-disciplinary teams across the HSCP including: developing our multi-disciplinary Front Door model and leadership arrangements; additional capacity for social work and our Care Home and Community Review Team; support for the wider GGC frailty hubs; and increased capacity for frailty practitioners, data and quality analysis and peripatetic business support.

58. Phase Three funded by Scottish Government funding to strengthen Adult Social Work has allowed us to create additional leadership posts within Communities and Wellbeing. This has provided us an opportunity to create a dedicated transition team to support young people with complex needs in the transition to adulthood, and Long Term Conditions team to support the local residents with long term conditions as we recover from the pandemic.

Supporting people at home

59. Our focus on developing approaches for day services has continued with the re-introduction of a face-to-face Cognitive Stimulation Therapy (CST) 14 week programme. This has just ended and outcomes and measures are being evaluated. Twelve individuals from the programme are moving on to CST maintenance for 24 weeks. Sixteen individuals have been referred for the next CST programme which is just about to commence. A survey for carers focussing on the pandemic experience has been conducted and the results are being analysed. Face-to-face carers support meetings have recommenced also and these have been well received by attendees.

60. For our Care at Home team, there has been continued pressure as a result of the volume and complexity of new referrals into the service. As a result, at the end of May, seven people in hospital were awaiting a package of care to facilitate a safe discharge, 66 people in the community were awaiting a new service or an increase in support, and two people are in an intermediate care bed whilst awaiting services. Covid-related absence amongst frontline staff has reduced but remains a feature. There has been no significant upturn in the level of service provision being taken on by the external market and it is anticipated that this will remain the position for the foreseeable future. Recruitment into the service (to cover vacancies created by leavers and to create some extra capacity) has continued but has been challenging in terms of volume and suitability of available candidates. Following a multi-channel advertising campaign running during the early months of 2022, 59 recruits have accepted roles (including 13 on a bank staff basis) and 28 have so far completed induction training. Recruitment efforts continue with an aim of securing a further 18 FTE to deliver the additional capacity needed.

61. The Telecare Team has recruited extra staff to assist in overnight response. Face-to-face reviews have now resumed after these being conducted by telephone throughout the pandemic. This is allowing responders to more thoroughly check on telecare customers and their home environments and ensure they have telecare equipment appropriate to their level of need, helping keep them safe in their homes. Progress is being made on the analogue-to-digital journey with our new cloud-based call handling system (including responder app) which is scheduled to go-live later this year.

62. Our Hospital to Home team (which facilitates complex hospital discharges) has been supplemented by the creation of a new team focussing on the appropriate and effective use of intermediate care beds. This supports timely hospital discharge where the required homecare package is not immediately available and delivers improved outcomes from assessment activity carried out in this setting (versus hospital). The targeted work by the new team includes requests for intermediate care beds, care home liaison, occupancy tracking, data collation, arranging interventions / reablement and carrying out outcomes focussed reviews and care planning. A specific test of change within this involves early involvement at hospital admission point. The collaborative working between these teams has ensured that delays in hospital discharges have been minimised and kept within manageable levels.

63. Our Community Rehabilitation Teams continue to experience increased pressures due to the ongoing impacts and consequences of the pandemic on the older population, with an increase in frailty and frailty related falls. The average of 40–50 referrals per week in 2019 / early 2020 has risen to and been sustained at 65-70 referrals per week over the past two years. Due to increased complexity of need and deconditioning, the service is finding that services users are requiring longer and more frequent inputs, adding to demand pressures.

64. Across all mental health and recovery services, the position in relation to staff absences has stabilised. We are planning our recovery from the pandemic in terms of establishing what a hybrid working model looks like for all teams. This work is led by our short life working group reviewing use of accommodation. Primary Care Mental Health Team (PCMHT) staff have devised a rota of staff returning to the office this month, in order to deliver face-to-face interventions with patients. Our psychiatry resource is a concern across both the Community Mental Health Team (CMHT) and the Older People's Mental Health Team (OPMHT) due to long term vacancies and pending retirement of consultant psychiatrist. The Mental Health Officer (MHO) team are fully staffed allowing us to support our most vulnerable population. We are in the process of hiring a Development Officer to facilitate the coaching and mentoring of newly qualified MHO staff, which will also increase capacity within the team. We successfully hired an additional Post-diagnostic Support (PDS) worker through our partnership with Alzheimer's Scotland. This new member of staff joined the team in May. The roll-out of the Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT) standards are operational from 1 April. This enables people to access same-day prescribing for opioid use disorder, facilitating low barrier access to assessment and treatment. We are actively hiring into vacant posts with this funding stream.

65. Our locality social work teams experienced a growing backlog of overdue community care reviews throughout the pandemic. This resulted from a combination of additional support being required in the community (both increases in demand and complexity) and from the requirement for teams to focus on our pandemic response and most urgent need. In response, we have created a designated resource to replicate the permanent care review work, and focus on completing a review for each individual currently awaiting a statutory community care review. Since the turn of the year, we have made significant progress, with 92 community reviews completed.

Support to Care Homes

66. Support to our care homes continues using our existing support and governance mechanisms including the newly established Care Home Collaborative Hub model. The Collaborate held their online launch in June 2022. They have provided a number of training sessions to East Renfrewshire care homes which included pressure ulcer prevention; food, fluid and nutrition and catheter care which were well received, as well as additional support.

67. Outbreaks within care homes reduced significantly throughout May and June. Community transmission has also reduced which helped to improve staffing levels and reduced the use of agency staff. At present we have one care home RAG rated as 'Amber', due to a COVID outbreak.

68. Care homes continue to face staff shortages, albeit this is slowly improving. They continue to implement contingency plans and recruiting using agency and bank staff when necessary. Care Homes have also been creative in terms of extending current staff hours.

69. Following a successful pilot within NHS GGC of the newly established Falls Pathway via Flow Navigation Centre for Nursing care homes, the pathway has been rolled out to include residential care homes. All East Renfrewshire care homes have signed up to use the pathway which commenced on 16th May 2022. To support the sector, Scottish Care have recruited a new Independent Sector Lead who will support East Renfrewshire Care Homes. The post commenced 23th May 2022. A number of Care Homes are supporting the training and orientation of the recent recruitment within the NHS GGC support workers bank. Care homes have also been approached to become practice learning environments for student nurses.

Care Home Assurance Tool (CHAT) Visits

70. Care Home Assurance Tool (CHAT) visits are now well established within East Renfrewshire and will be supported by the Care Home Collaborative colleagues as/if required. Due to the significant impact of the Omicron variant CHAT visits to the care homes were paused over the winter period. A schedule for the next round of visits is currently being finalised following discussion at a recent Care Home Managers Forum meeting. The schedule will be agreed at our Care Home Oversight meeting. The new electronic version of the CHAT will be issued to care home managers week beginning 20 June to complete as part of self-evaluation in advance of the joint visit undertaken by HSCP staff.

Support to Children and Families

71. Children's Services continues to be under considerable pressure. A combination of increased complexity and significant staff absence is affecting capacity. We received notification of the Joint inspection of services for children at risk of harm in East Renfrewshire inspection on 22 February 2022. The inspection is ongoing and case file reading is now complete. Initial feedback on emerging themes from the case file reading and staff survey was positive. The Position Statement was submitted on 8 June 2022. Preparation for the interviews and focus groups for week beginning 20 June 2022 is under way. The Care Inspectorate will provide their draft report on 13 July 2022 and it will be officially published week beginning 15 August 2022.

72. Children's Mental Health continues to be a focus with an increase in referrals to both Healthier Minds and Family Wellbeing Service. There has been a significant increase in the number of children referred for autism assessment and services are working together to respond effectively and support children and their families in the right way. The increasing needs of children and young people with a neurodevelopmental diagnosis or suspected diagnosis is still continuing into this year and is expected to continue going forward. The HSCP and partners are working together to quantify the level of need in order to be clearer on how to ensure service responses are effective and the workforce is sufficiently equipped to help children and their families in the right way. In addition, there remains a comparatively high number of children with complex disability requiring to be looked after away from home. Costs associated with the residential care needs of the children continues to be significant.

73. Since December 2021 we have welcomed three Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children through the national transfer scheme. This places a significant demand on staff resource. However, all three young people are settling well in their new communities. We have very recently had one spontaneous arrival of an unaccompanied child. Should arrivals continue at the current rate we would face considerable constraints on identifying suitable placements for these young people given the limited resource for foster care both locally and nationally.

74. In addition, there may be Ukrainian children who have travelled without a parent or guardian who may be placed with a sponsor. Proposals are that local authority hosts will assess and support these arrangements as if they were private foster arrangements which may impact on capacity of children's services. In addition, the potential risk of placement breakdown requires consideration should children need to become looked after by the local authority and suitable foster placements sought.

Criminal Justice pathways

75. The provision of unpaid work has been significantly impacted by the pandemic with Community Payback Orders suspended on 23rd March 2020. Legislation was introduced in March 2021 to reduce the number of hours originally imposed on Community Payback Orders (CPOs) by 35%. This excluded CPOs imposed for domestic abuse, sexual offending or

stalking. The legislation reduced the backlog of hours by 2,329 hours. The current outstanding backlog of hours for completion totals 6,402. East Renfrewshire has one of the lowest rates of outstanding hours in mainland Scotland and the justice service has significantly increased capacity to ensure people complete their orders. During the period of January to March 2022, the percentage of unpaid work placement completions within court timescale has risen to 93%.

76. In line with the increased throughput through the courts the justice service has seen a 166% increase in Diversion from Prosecution requests received from the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS) during April 2021 to March 2022. Requests for Criminal Justice Social Work Reports have also increased by 149% over this period compared to the same period last year.

Supporting people affected by domestic abuse

77. During the period April 2021 to March 2022, East Renfrewshire Women's Aid service reported a significant increase in referrals across their services compared to the same period last year. In total, 1,226 women and children were supported across the three core services, helpline and drop-in enquiries compared to 805 during the same period the previous year. This is an increase of 16% supported in the three core services, 72% increase in duty and helpline contacts and 52% increase across the whole service.

78. The reporting period saw the highest recorded number of women supported in outreach services in the past two years. Outreach staff have worked closely with partner services including mental health, the Community Addictions Team and Justice Social Work to reach and support very vulnerable women.

79. Request for Assistance (RFA) total referrals received in 2021/22 was 748: a 30.4% decrease on last year's 1074 referrals. The number of referrals where domestic abuse was the primary concern was 177. This is 23.7% of total referrals received for 21/22 and a 51.5% decrease in the number of referrals where domestic abuse is the primary concern when compared to last year's 365. Similar to last year, domestic abuse remains the main cause of referral to the request for assistance team.

80. The East Renfrewshire Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) has witnessed an increase in referrals for high risk victims and children as the COVID restrictions have eased. In the period April 2021 to March 2022, there were 125 victims and 205 children discussed at MARAC. This is an increase of 4% and 19% respectively compared to the previous year.

81. It is expected that domestic abuse referrals will continue to increase longer-term and that there are significant challenges in ensuring our services have sufficient capacity to respond.

Business Operations and Partnerships Department

82. The Business Operations & Partnerships Department was heavily involved in leading and shaping the Council's pandemic response since early in 2020. As some key examples:

- the Head of Digital and Community Safety chaired the Council's Crisis Resilience Management Team throughout most of the pandemic, supported by the Environment Department, with daily meetings throughout 2020 and 2021;
- the Department led the Council's Humanitarian response to the pandemic, including support for those shielding and isolating as part of Test & Protect (with initial proactive outbound calls made, with the support of services across the Council, to over 2000 shielders); staffing of the local response to the National Assistance Helpline;

establishing a food hub which ran between April and September 2020; supporting Voluntary Action with their Community Hub; supply of supermarket vouchers and hardship grants; and arranging prescription deliveries; administering the 'Connecting Scotland' digital device scheme locally; and managing the various Humanitarian funding streams from Scottish Government;

- there were significant impacts for our ICT team in the deployment of new devices and supporting transitions to homeworking;
- our Communications team in leading a high level of internal and external communications to ensure staff and residents were aware of all measures, precautions and service impacts;
- our HR team who had stringent national absence reporting requirements and the need to keep manager guidance up to date as new guidance emerged and also demands for recruitment driven by short-term pandemic-related funding;
- our Customer First team who dealt with a high volume of calls throughout the period and the transition to the more time-consuming remote death registrations. Remote death registration has now been extended nationally until at least September 2022;
- our Money Advice and Rights Team (MART) who saw an increase in income maximisation referrals and assisted the Council's humanitarian response with provision of a COVID discretionary grant;
- our Scottish Welfare Fund team who not only dealt with implementation of a new Council Tax and Benefits system, but also rising caseload and processing of Self-Isolation Support Grants;
- our Community Safety team who assisted with food and prescription deliveries in 2020 and seconded 2 community wardens for over the last 18 months to deliver isolation support and assessments for support grants;
- our Democratic Services team who transitioned to hybrid meetings and delivered Council elections with the additional burden of pandemic guidance;
- our Strategic Insight and Communities teams which facilitated the daily call lists for isolation support; provided COVID dashboards for CRMT and senior leaders on key metrics and trends; and which led the humanitarian response including research and several national funding streams; and
- our Accounts Payable team who processed thousands of additional COVID hardship payments and grants.

Communications

83. During this period COVID related internal and external communications have continued to ensure that residents and staff are aware of all measures and precautions in place to tackle the pandemic promoting guidance, Public Health messages and vaccination clinics.

HR

84. COVID absences for the Council have been significant over the last two years however have greatly reduced since the last report in December. Over the last month there has been a weekly average of 34 employees affected. Employees are still encouraged to follow national guidance within the workplace though updated employee and manager guidance and communication.

85. The team have continued to support staffing concerns arising from COVID absence, sickness absences, natural turnover and vacancies. This has been resource intensive for managers and HR as a number of complex cases have been supported during this time. Recruitment volumes continue to remain high as a result of additional COVID funding and the timescales placed on the spending of these funds. There are also recruitment challenges in certain sectors where it is difficult to recruit due to market competitors and this can mean

repeat recruitment advertising in many cases. As we move into the winter months and the risk of absences increasing further the team continue to work with services to understand the contingency plans that need to be considered.

Customer First

86. Customer contact remains high across all channels. Call handling and waiting times have improved slightly however have continued to be impacted by staff absence which has included long term and covid related absences. Council tax backlogs have continued to impact enquiry volumes, however with the launch of the customer portal, My East Ren and Council Tax Online an improvement is expected as customers will have access to their council tax online, leading to quicker response times. Barrhead Service Centre is open for face to face customer enquiries and Giffnock via appointment. A steady increase in face to face enquires has been seen since the easing of restrictions. Face to face visits to our Barrhead service centre increased by 33% in March 22, compared to the previous monthly average.

87. Levels of demand for the registration service are starting to settle and return to pre-covid volumes. A significant increase of 61% was seen in marriage enquires with the lifting of restrictions at the start of this year. Citizenship ceremonies have also seen a rise of around 32% in demand due to backlogs. The remote death registration legislation has been extended to September 2022. This brings benefits for the bereaved however this is more resource intensive for the service. The National Records of Scotland are in a consultation period with all authorities to review the process with an aim to offer a blended registration service both remotely and in person, including births and deaths. There has been a significant increase in demand for copy certificates, mainly due to passport applications.

88. The Money Advice and Rights Team (MART) are continuing to see an increase in demand particularly for Income Maximisation. The team are moving back to business as usual with a focus on community engagement and prevention including supporting Talking Points, attending foodbanks, food pantries, and education outreach.

Community Safety

89. The Community Wardens continue to operate normal working practices with staff being able to go into households when required, subject to COVID screening questions and windows being opened. Two members of the Community Warden team are still seconded to the isolation support calls team for assessments for support grants.

ICT

90. The ICT Service continues to operate a blended approach with continued high levels of support calls and service requests. The Service Desk team remains under significant pressure, especially the end-user device team who are facing combined pressures of increasing new device build and deployments. The service is still unable to accommodate low priority service requests due service pressures.

Democratic Services

91. The team successfully conducted the local government elections in May including the continued provision of additional COVID measures.

92. Works in the Council Chamber to enable hybrid meetings to take place have been carried out and a number of hybrid meetings (including the statutory Council meeting on 25 May) have now taken place. Guidelines on hybrid meeting participation are being drawn up and will be circulated in due course.

93. Members Services staff have now started to return to the office more frequently in order to support the return to the office of Elected Members and the restarting of meetings in the Council Chamber.

Isolation Support

94. Early in the COVID pandemic, councils were asked to establish support arrangements for vulnerable local people including a 'shielding' service to support those with the most high risk medical conditions who were advised by the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) to stay at home for at least 12 weeks from 24 March 2020. Shielding was replaced in September 2020 with a High Risk List (HRL) with specific advice and guidance issued regularly from the CMO.

95. With the majority of the HRL achieving significant protection from COVID-19 through vaccination, and better understanding of the ongoing negative impacts for those on the HRL of physical and mental health and quality of life, the Scottish Government has outlined that it does not expect nor want a return to shielding in the future. This has been true even with the emergence of the Omicron variant and high case numbers seen in 2022. Since summer 2021, the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) has advised everyone on the HRL to follow the same advice as the rest of the population in Scotland, unless otherwise advised by their GP or clinician. The Scottish Government announced that the Highest Risk List (HRL) would end on 31 May 2022 and the CMO wrote to confirm this to all on the list.

96. Consequently the National Assistance Helpline, for which East Renfrewshire's calls diverted to our own Isolation Support staff, has also closed.

97. The Isolation Support service requirements also ended nationally at the end of April 2022, with details of new cases no longer being passed to the Council for follow-up contact and support. This service had been staffed since September 2020 principally by our Community Safety service, with leadership from the COVID Humanitarian Support group (including Voluntary Action East Renfrewshire) and additional staffing cover from the Money Advice and Rights Team (MART), Community Learning & Development and the East Renfrewshire Culture and Leisure Trust. Over its run, the Isolation Support service dealt with over 11,000 calls, including over weekends and Christmas holidays, resulting in over 3000 Self Isolation Support Grants (SISGs) and hundreds of referrals for money advice; food provision and connecting people to wellbeing services. There was also significant work required to handle the daily data received from Public Health Scotland and ensure that daily call lists could be prepared and passed to the team and that Scottish Government weekly reporting requirements could be met.

98. Scottish Government has indicated that SISGs will continue until October 2022, but in a reduced form. Community Safety will continue to assist with initial triage and evidence-gathering for SISG applications until July, with Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF) team then taking over the end-to-end process until October.

Pandemic Payments & Humanitarian Funding

99. Since the beginning of the pandemic, various funds have been made available by Scottish Government to ensure support for vulnerable local people affected by the pandemic. We continue to manage these funds and work closely with local partners like Voluntary Action East Renfrewshire; Citizens Advice Bureau; Housing Associations and the food network to join up resources and achieve the best outcomes for local people.

100. Spend has included provision of support to those on clothing grants with additional winter clothes for outdoor education; supporting vulnerable Social Work clients and families with wellbeing packs to ease tensions in households during lockdown; provision of digital devices to young people via Community Learning and Development services as part of the

'Connecting Scotland' programme; supporting the establishment of food larders as a longer-term solution to poverty-related food needs in the area; provision of additional support to Citizens Advice Bureau and commissioning research on the impact of COVID-19 in East Renfrewshire. This research is being used to shape and influence our recovery strategy and future spends including the Local Authority Covid Economic Recovery Fund, detail of which was reported to Cabinet in April 2022.

101. The Council has been responsible for administering various pandemic-related hardship and business grant payments since 2020. This has been a significant workload for teams including Economic Development in Environment; the Education Department; and the Revenues, Benefits, Business Support and Accounts Payables teams in Business Operations & Partnerships. Hardship and humanitarian support payments include:

- Hardship bridging payments made during each holiday period to families receiving Free School Meals (£948,000 in 2021/22, supporting around 1700 pupils)
- Free school meal payments to cover meals during school holidays (£93K in 2021/22)
- Humanitarian top-up payments to families receiving Free School Meals (£84,000 in 2021/22)
- Humanitarian top-up payments to families receiving only Clothing Grants (£78,000 in 2021/22 supporting 500 pupils)
- Low Income Pandemic Payments in October 2021 to support residents in receipt of Council Tax Reduction (over 5000 payments);
- Cost of Living Award administered in March 2022 for residents in Council Tax Bands A-d and those in Bands E-H in receipt of Council Tax Reduction;
- Discretionary grant payments aimed at low income households affected by the pandemic (£83,000 paid to 390 households in 2021/22).

Chief Executive's

Accountancy Services

102. Accountancy services staff are now working on a hybrid basis, partly from home and partly in the office, and are covering all of their usual duties. We are, however, continuing to experience increased workloads due to the demands for COVID related financial information, returns and grant monitoring and staff are struggling to keep up with all demands. This has also affected progress in developing the new financial system, introduced in 2019, with a view to maximising efficiencies and so some of the anticipated benefits for staff across the Council have not yet been achieved. Despite these challenges, the 2022/23 budget exercise was completed on time and work to submit the Council's unaudited 2021/22 annual accounts by the statutory deadline of 30 June 2022 is on schedule.

103. Due to the ongoing impact of COVID, the Council's external auditors expect to need more time for their audit of the Council's 2021/22 accounts, with the statutory deadline for accounts sign off being extended to 31 October rather than 30 September.

104. Financial pressures experienced by the Council in relation to the pandemic have been covered to date by COVID grant funding from the Scottish Government, however no further funding is anticipated going forward.

RECOMMENDATION

105. That the Council note and comment on the report.