
Report To:	Policy & Resources Committee	Date:	22 Mar 2022
Report By:	Interim Director Environment & Regeneration	Report No:	PR/10/22/MM
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Subject:	Covid-19 Update		

1.0 PURPOSE

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update the Committee on actions taken to mitigate the risks around the Covid-19 outbreak.

2.0 SUMMARY

- 2.1 This report updates members on a number of specific areas of work in addressing the Covid-19 pandemic including the vaccination strategy. It does not cover all service related issues, for example education delivery, as the majority of these will be reported through the appropriate service committee.
- 2.2 Section 5 of the report covers general workforce issues, Section 6 updates on the Hybrid Working Pilot and Section 7 covers the update to the People & Organisational Development Strategy.
- 2.3 Section 8 is a brief update on some recent education impacts and Section 9 updates on the current situation around Covid support for businesses. Section 10 updates on the Vaccination Strategy and Section 11 is an update on the future of testing and Covid surveillance in light of the Scottish Government's recently published Test and Protect Transition Plan.

3.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 That members note the actions taken to date to mitigate the effects of the Covid-19 outbreak in Inverclyde.
- 3.2 That members note that this is intended to be the last Covid Update report albeit this can be reviewed if there are any significant developments in the pandemic.

Martin McNab
Interim Head of Public Protection & Covid Recovery

4.0 BACKGROUND

- 4.1 In the report to the February Policy & Resources Committee it was noted that the rate of infection was believed to be falling both in Inverclyde and across Scotland following the Omicron peak at the beginning of the year. Since then members will be aware that the rate across Scotland has increased significantly again and as of 14th March it was standing at 1795 cases per 100K in Inverclyde, slightly higher than the national rate at 1606 cases per 100K. At that point Inverclyde was roughly in the middle of the 32 local authority areas with the highest rate excluding the islands being over 2100 cases per 100K. There have been increases across the UK but at present they have been far higher in Scotland, the reasons for this are not clear at this time. The number of people in hospital with Covid has also increased to a very high level. This is not currently being matched by an increase in the number of people in intensive care albeit these numbers have risen slightly in recent days. This may indicate that these are mostly people in hospital with Covid rather than as a result of Covid or that the vaccine is generally giving sufficient protection to prevent serious illness.
- 4.2 The Scottish Government previously announced the lifting of remaining legal Covid restrictions on 21st March including the legal requirement to wear face masks in indoor public places. In light of the current high incidence of Covid 19 the First Minister announced a delay on the removal of the mask mandate in indoor public spaces and public transport although other remaining restrictions will be lifted on 21st March. The mask mandate will be reviewed in two weeks with the expectation that it becomes guidance rather than a legal requirement.
- 4.3 The Scottish Government published its Test & Protect Transition Plan on 15th March 2022. Details of the implications for testing and surveillance are detailed in Section 11 below. In brief however all community testing and contact tracing is to cease by the end of April.

5.0 WORKFORCE ISSUES

- 5.1 The issues in terms of workforce availability and confidence are crucial. Officers from Organisational Development, Policy & Communications are in contact with COSLA colleagues relative to workforce statistics, illness/absence rates, working from home, etc. This information is being collated at a national level and is helping to inform discussions between senior leaders in SOLACE, COSLA and the Scottish Government regarding the impact of COVID-19 on service provision, and the key staffing issues that require some form of national consideration.
- 5.2 Given the rate of spread of the Omicron strain of Covid 19, and the impacts arising, the Scottish Government asked individual Local Authorities to highlight any business areas/sectors where the ability to deliver key services are causing concern. Information has been sought on absence levels, along with details of the impacts that are being felt and any mitigation measures that have been put in place. Concerns were highlighted at the beginning of January within the Care at Home Service when employee absence levels were high, however, service delivery has been maintained throughout.
- 5.3 Employee attendance
Information is being gathered on a regular basis by managers across the Council. This allows managers to assess resource implications for delivering essential services and also to maintain contact and support those unable to attend work.
- 5.4 The table below provides approximate absence levels council wide and within some of our key essential service areas, as at 11th March 2022:

<u>Council</u>	
Historic average absence rate (%) (Pre Covid-19 to give a baseline comparator)	4.3%
Absence rate on 11 March 2022 (%) (This includes all those employees reporting sick, those isolating, those absent with caring responsibilities and shielding at home unable	Council Wide 6.1%
	<u>Essential Services Breakdown (% of Service Area)</u>

to work from home).

Please note that this excludes employees working from home.

Home Care	12.1%
Other HSCP	7.6%
Waste Management	4.6%
Facilities	5.1 %

5.5 The table below provides a comparison of absence levels across the Council over the past year which have been reported to this Committee:

	17.11.20	19.1.21	5.2.21	12.3.21	12.04.21	07.05.21	02.06.21	23.07.21	03.09.21	04.11.21	21.01.22	11.03.22
Council	6.1%	7.6%	6.6%	6.4%	6.0%	5.2%	5.0%	5.6%	6.8%	6.2%	6.0%	6.1%
Home Care	5.0%	12.0%	11.2%	8.7%	7.1%	6.7%	5.4%	7.1%	11.0%	11.5%	11.0%	12.1%
Other HSCP	4.2%	3.6%	3.9%	3.7%	3.0%	2.5%	2.5%	3.5%	7.1%	7.0%	7.2%	7.6%
Waste Mgt	8.0%	9.5%	10.7%	8.9%	8.7%	7.9%	5.9%	6.8%	5.8%	5.0%	3.9%	4.6%
Facilities	4.6%	8.0%	5.9%	7.2%	7.2%	3.1%	3.2%	3.0%	4.8%	4.1%	6.4%	5.1%

6.0 HYBRID WORKING PILOT

6.1 The hybrid working strategy is in the process of being phased in during March and April, and increased numbers of staff are returning to working from the office rather than remotely. However, given the current high Covid case levels the CMT have agreed that, in the short term, a more cautious approach should be taken until the current case numbers reduce. Managers are therefore pausing or slowing down the rollout of the hybrid working arrangements as appropriate. The CMT will monitor the national position and will review this on an ongoing basis.

7.0 PEOPLE & ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY UPDATE

7.1 The Organisational Development Strategy 2020-2023 was formally approved by the Policy and Resources Committee in 4th February 2020. The Strategy was designed to support the range of planned transformation and change management projects and to ensure the required skills are in place to deliver these and any required savings.

7.2 The impact of the pandemic on the public sector has seen significant changes being introduced and offered opportunities for us to think how we deliver services now and in the future. It is important that the Council has a strategy and workforce plans in place which will drive and deliver change across services while ensuring our employees continue to be, sufficiently trained, qualified and experienced to deliver quality services which meet current and anticipated service needs.

7.3 The priority workforce planning actions progressed during 2021/22 focussed on addressing the significant workforce implications arising out of the Covid Pandemic and the national financial climate. Examples of the key activities were: the introduction of the Workforce Refresh Programme, as part of the Inverclyde Jobs Recovery Plan which created employment opportunities for local people in appropriate posts within the Council and potential internal advancement for existing employees; the development of a Pilot Hybrid Working Strategy which will promote a flexible working culture which will support the recruitment and retention of the Council's employees; a number of recruitment and retention initiatives to attract and promote homecare staff and other 'difficult to recruit' groups; a number of leadership development activities.

A link to the report summarising the key actions progressed over the past year can be found at:

<https://www.inverclyde.gov.uk/jobs-and-careers/working-for-the-council/people-and-organisational-development-strategy>

8.0 EDUCATION IMPACTS

- 8.1 There have been ongoing difficulties with staffing across almost all educational establishments. By redeploying staff and using recovery staff for cover the services have been able to maintain full provision without the need for any closures. Due to ongoing high levels of staff absence at Craigmarloch School, and despite the best efforts of the school and the service to cover these, the decision was taken to close the two Communication, Abilities and Lifeskills classes from 16/3/22 – 18/3/22. The school provided remote learning for the 12 pupils having to stay at home. All parents were contacted and understood the situation, in particular the need to have staff who knew their children and their needs in place. The decision was taken as a last resort, taking into account the specific needs and safety of the pupils after entire teams had previously been redeployed to provide support.

9.0 BUSINESS SUPPORT

- 9.1 The Revenues and Benefits team is finalising the delivery of a series of 4 new business support grants announced by the Scottish Government in late December 2021.

The December/January Business Support Top Up - Hospitality fund provided financial support to businesses in the hospitality sector affected by the public health advice who have lost crucial bookings during this key trading period. Grants of £4,500 or £6,800 totalling £389,500 had been paid to 84 businesses by 18th February.

The January Business Support Top Up – Hospitality and Leisure Fund supported businesses in those sectors under protective measures with one off grants of between £1,400 and £3,150. 101 businesses had been paid £156,100 by 18th February.

The Night Club Closure Fund grant provides a one-off grant of £25,000 or £35,000. A total of £85,000 has been paid to 3 businesses.

By 18th February, £57,500 had been paid from The Public House Table Service Restriction Fund with 21 public houses receiving grants of £2,500 or £5,000.

Officers have also been administering the latest taxi driver and operator fund. To date 321 payments have been made to a cohort of 338 eligible drivers and 114 payments have been made to a cohort of 127 operators to a value of £409,750. The additional support to those not eligible previously is underway.

10.0 VACCINATION STRATEGY

- 10.1 As of 11th March 2023 80.6% of over 18s in Inverclyde had received two doses of vaccine plus a booster compared to the Scottish average of 77.5%. This rises in Inverclyde to 90.1% of over 40 year olds. Attendance at vaccination clinics in recent weeks has been slow suggesting that there is little interest from those who have not yet received their full vaccination to complete this. For the sake of comparison 95.5% of over 18s had received 1 dose (99% of over 40s) and 92.3% of over 18s had received 2 doses (97% of over 40s).
- 10.2 With the increasing Covid rate possibly indicating waning immunity from the vaccine over 75s and the immunocompromised will receive a second booster in a spring campaign which will be run concurrently with the offer of a first dose to 5-11 year olds. Both will be delivered via the town halls although the over 75s campaign will obviously also involve a significant amount of delivery at home and in care homes from the HSCP. There is also likely to be a need to once again set aside parking provision in Cathcart Street given the ages of this cohort. Beyond this spring campaign the future vaccination strategy is less clear although at present the most likely planning assumption is for a booster campaign for over 50s and vulnerable groups in the autumn. Obviously should there be a new variant causing significant illness this could be significantly more extensive.

11.0 TESTING AND SURVEILLANCE

- 11.1 Members will be aware that the UK Government is phasing out universal testing from April 2022.

Following on from this announcement the Scottish Government published its plan for testing on 15th March. The plan sets out the Government's plans for the withdrawal of universal testing and the cessation of contact tracing. The majority of asymptomatic (LFD) testing will cease by the 17th April. This includes the site at Boglestone and the community collect scheme for LFDs. PCR test sites will remain for those with symptoms until the end of April together with some LFD provision for close contacts. At the end of April we expect the Crawfurdsgate and Parklea PCR sites to close. At the point general population testing ceases contact tracing and the provision of isolation guidance and support will also cease. General advice for people to stay at home if they have respiratory symptoms will replace the testing regime.

- 11.2 With Covid 19 now effectively established as endemic in the UK the main focus of testing and outbreak control going forward is likely to be around new variants and mutations which might pose an increased risk of serious disease. To this end Public Health Scotland is developing a Variants and Mutations (VAM) plan which will detail how outbreaks of new variants will be addressed going forward including how testing can be ramped back up when such outbreaks are detected. A certain amount of background testing will continue, for example in the Health and Social Care workforce and visitors to hospitals and care homes and where required for clinical care. This background testing, in concert with international surveillance, will be used to model infection rates and to screen for new variants. In the event of variants of concern arising the public health response, including contact tracing and any enhanced testing, will be led by health board Health Protection teams. There are no plans to stand the national contact tracing and testing capacity back up.

12.0 IMPLICATIONS

12.1 Finance

None

Cost Centre	Budget Heading	Budget Years	Proposed Spend this Report £000	Virement From	Other Comments

Annually Recurring Costs/(savings)

Cost Centre	Budget Heading	With effect from	Annual net impact £000	Virement From	Other Comments
N/A					

Legal

- 12.2 None

Human Resources

- 12.3 The Head of Organisational Development, Policy and Communications has been consulted on the contents of this report.

12.4 Equalities

- (a) Has an Equality Impact Assessment been carried out?

	YES (see attached appendix)
X	NO - This report does not introduce a new policy, function or strategy or recommend a substantive change to an existing policy, function or strategy. Therefore, no Equality Impact Assessment is required.

(b) Fairer Scotland Duty

If this report affects or proposes any major strategic decision:-

Has there been active consideration of how this report's recommendations reduce inequalities of outcome?

	YES – A written statement showing how this report's recommendations reduce inequalities of outcome caused by socio-economic disadvantage has been completed.
X	NO

(c) Data Protection

Has a Data Protection Impact Assessment been carried out?

	YES – This report involves data processing which may result in a high risk to the rights and freedoms of individuals.
X	NO

Repopulation

12.5 There are no impacts on repopulation arising from this report.

13.0 CONSULTATIONS

13.1 The Corporate Management Team has been consulted on this report.

14.0 BACKGROUND PAPERS

14.1 None.