

Notes of COVID 19 Elected Members briefing held on Thursday 1 October 2020 at 6:45pm

In Attendance:

Councillor Tierney, Mayor (Chair); Aldermen Bresland, Devenney, Guy, McClintock, McCready, McKane, Ramsey and Warke; Councillors J Boyle, M Boyle, Burke, Carr, Cusack, Dobbins, Donnelly, Duffy, Durkan, Farrell, Ferguson, Gallagher, Jackson, Kelly, Logue, McGuire, McKeever, McKinney, Mellon, Mooney and Reilly.

John Kelpie (Chief Executive), Stephen Gillespie (Director of Business and Culture), Barry O'Hagan (Head of Community Development and Leisure), Ellen Cavanagh (Lead Democratic Services and Improvement Officer), Conor Canning (Head of Environment), Eamon Molloy (Head of Planning Performance and Improvement), Francis Morrison (Head of Capital Development and Building Control), Aidin McCarter (Head of Culture), and Theresa Johnstone (Committee Services Assistant).

The Chief Executive provided an outline of the current situation to Members, as follows.

The Chief Executive advised that a press briefing had been issued by the First and Deputy First Minister at 5.30pm which outlined the new restrictions for the Derry City and Strabane District Council area as follows:

- No indoor gatherings should take place where people from different households are mixed, with certain exemptions in place for: weddings, wedding receptions, funerals and post funeral gatherings (existing restrictions and strict social distancing requirements continue to apply); services of worship in places of worship; indoor sport for individual training only (e.g. no exercise classes); workplaces where working from home is not possible; educational settings; managed youth and childcare services.
- Hospitality venues can remain open for take-away, delivery and outdoor dining only. Wet pubs can serve customers outdoors only. Existing restrictions for outdoor settings will continue to apply. Hotels can only provide services to residents as per previous restrictions. A support package for affected venues will be brought forward.
- All museums, galleries and cultural attractions must remain closed and libraries can operate a call and collect service.
- Outdoor gatherings are permitted, up to a maximum of 15 people only. There cannot be gatherings of more than 15 people even with a risk assessment.
- Sports training and sporting events are exempt but they must take place without any spectators.

These restrictions will be in place for a time limited period of a minimum of two weeks, and will be reviewed weekly.

In addition, the following measures are recommended in guidance:

- People living in Derry and Strabane local government district area are required to avoid all unnecessary travel. Similarly, people should only travel to the area where it is absolutely necessary.
- People working in the Derry City and Strabane District Council should continue to work from home where possible.
- Schools, Early Learning and Childcare services in the local government district area will remain open.
- Adult and Higher Education Institutions will also stay open. Managed youth settings will remain open. However, in these settings, protective measures should be reviewed and steps should be taken to limit congregation as much as possible.
- People are asked to walk, cycle or use private transport, shared only with members of their household where possible. Where public transport is taken, social distancing should be observed and face coverings should be worn.

The Chief Executive the number of positive test results over the past 7 days per 100,000 of population. He advised that Derry City and Strabane District Council were currently at 322 per 100,000, described by the Chief Medical Officer, senior politicians and the Deputy First Minister as a very urgent situation. He stated that this was a pivotal moment for the Council area and because of the action taken by Council previously, have ended up on the right side of the situation.

He noted that as of two weeks ago, this Council area were at 12 cases per 100,000 and at the 12 to 20 mark throughout the summer. This number has now accelerated rapidly. Belfast City Council currently sits at 124, Newry, Mourne and Down District Council at 131 and Mid-Ulster at 131. Therefore, DCSDC are 2½ times higher than the next suite of highest councils. Mid and East Antrim Borough Council sits at just 26 and Donegal County Council is in excess of 200 with some areas of Donegal in the 300 mark. He explained that it was likely that the Derry City and Strabane District Council area will be in the top three of the council areas throughout Ireland, such was the gravity of the situation.

He referred to the Department of Health Northern Ireland website which contained a covid dashboard, updated on a daily basis at 2pm which gave information on a breakdown of per age group and hospital admissions etc. which Members may find useful.

He stated that in terms of the spread of infection, it may have been the case a couple of weeks ago that there were pockets of infection within the Council area. However, it was outlined very clearly today that the virus was widespread throughout the Council area. He advised that this morning he had met with CMO and CSO, Junior Ministers within the Executive office and the Minister of Health who

advised that, *'it is spilling over from our Council area into other Council areas, it may have spilled over from here from Donegal but we are now impacting on other Council areas'*.

He advised that there was widespread community transmission currently taking place throughout the Council area. However, there was no evidence of significant clusters in places of significant employment such as factories, but evidence of small clusters in various hospitality venues or workplaces. There are numerous small clusters that have now been transmitted by community interaction, by people gathering and being in contact in every type of setting where social distancing was not as good as it should have been. He stated that this had resulted in the virus rapidly spreading from person to person and that's why restrictions have been put in place.

Continuing, he advised that the restrictions will be in place for two weeks initially, reviewed on a weekly basis and they will be underpinned by a set of regulations, currently being drafted and will be finalised over the weekend. Therefore, there will be a specific set of regulations for this Council area. The request of the Executive Office today is that while the regulations would not be enshrined in law until next week, the request is that as many of these measures are put in place on a voluntary basis with immediate effect. He advised that he had been in contact with business leaders and civic representatives to call on the hospitality sector to close with immediate effect on a voluntary basis.

He stated that the Executive were in the process of implementing some form of financial support scheme for those who will be financially impacted and was advised that the Department for Finance were currently working on this with a significant amount of work being carried out over the next couple of days. He advised that the Executive hope to issue details of the scheme early next week. He further advised that Council had provided the Department of Finance with a detailed list of all businesses throughout the City and District that could be directly impacted to assist with the process of some form of support directly to those businesses as quickly as possible. He stressed that Council will do everything it can to assist in the matter and with the up-to-date list of businesses being forwarded to the Executive and today the Executive now has that up to date list, with all sectors categorised to enable them to act as swiftly as possible.

The Chief Executive stated that a lot of discussion has taken place regarding the enforcement of restrictions and noted that the Minister for Justice was reviewing the matter. He stated that there will be tougher penalties issued in relation to enforcement and Council's will be asked to share a role in such enforcement. He advised that after consultation with PSNI today, the organisation was still very much of the view that a 4 E's method to engage, explain, encourage and enforce would be the approach taken. He noted that Council will be given powers in regard to improvement notices which will be reduced from the normal 28-day period to carry out improvements to 24/48 hours.

He advised that in relation to the communication of information, it was his understanding was that the MPs and MLAs for both Foyle and West Tyrone were both briefed by the Executive Office at 4pm today and the Executive Office were

aware that this Members' briefing was taking place at 6.45pm. He stated that the Senior Leadership Team will meet at 9am tomorrow morning (2 October), to go through the details of the guidance. He stated that the immediate impact on Council would be the closure of the Guildhall, Tower Museum and Alley Theatre, to be undertaken tomorrow subject to Members' approval. Council and Committee meetings during the month of October would take place in a virtual setting. He advised that the Mayor's diary will be significantly curtailed in terms of activities and engagements, however there will be other activities to take its' place. He stated that Council will be doubling up on the message to work from home.

Continuing, he stated that Council leisure and community facilities had to be taken into consideration as any activities within leisure facilities will be curtailed, adding that the issue regarding the viability of keeping those centres open at all must also be taken into account. He stated that the furlough scheme was still available to businesses and Council staff during the month of October and tomorrow morning officers would be considering how many staff could return to furlough to attempt to minimise the financial impact to Council. He stressed that the same proviso would be in place that Council would provide the top-up to ensure that no staff member would be financially detrimentally impacted. He stated that consultation with Trade Unions and staff will also take place to ensure that staff fully understood the intent and are aware of the fact that these were temporary measures.

He advised that communication regarding the restrictions was extremely active. He stated that the Executive had been extremely complimentary on the manner in which Council had been communicating the situation to the public over the past couple of days. Therefore, they have requested that Council continue to do so on a joint basis with Donegal County Council. He stated that it was important to keep the messaging simple and asked everyone to reach out to community groups, churches and sporting groups.

The Mayor asked that Members appreciate this extremely fast moving situation and appreciated the Chief Executive and the officer team for giving Members as much information as possible at this time. He stated that it was important to afford the officer team the time and space over the next 24 hours to have the appropriate measures in place.

He then invited comments from Members who raised the following points:

- Commended the Chief Executive and officers on informing Members of the escalating situation at such short notice
- Members would appreciate being kept up-to-date over the next 24/48 hours by whatever means possible.
- Noted and welcomed the significant output on social media from Council to reinforce the messaging regarding the restrictions
- Requested an update on the number of Council staff who have tested positive for Covid-19
- Cross-party support to close the Guildhall, Tower Museum and the Alley Theatre as soon as possible
- Cross-party support shown in relation to staff returning to the furlough scheme with the proviso that staff received the same arrangements as

previously, in conjunction with the trade unions to receive the cover they required.

- Furlough scheme due to come to an end soon therefore there will probably be questions to answer on the way forward
- Asked if Council had intended to have designated safe zones in place throughout Council buildings.
- Members emphasised the importance of pushing the efforts to have a financial support scheme put in place for those businesses affected by the restrictions as they will be badly affected by this second closure.
- Members agreed to assist with continuing to broadcast the messages to the public as it was important to do everything possible to get the situation back under control
- Members agreed that regular Members' briefings during the lockdown period had been extremely useful and should continue during this time.
- Important to ensure that the public were made aware of any decisions or information as they will be the key factor in the current situation and that Council had to have a united front on the matter.
- Noted that a few information sources had stated that Derry and Strabane were under restrictions rather than the entire Council district and asked that this be corrected as areas such as Castlederg and Newtownstewart may not be aware that they are included.
- Asked if services such as hairdressers and beauticians would also be impacted by the restrictions.
- Asked that community centres were also considered for the restrictions as 2 community workers from the Waterside area have tested positive in recent days.
- Asked if the closure of gyms included privately owned facilities.

The Chief Executive provided the following clarification:

- In relation to Council staff testing positive for the virus, the number has increased by two in recent days
- Officers will work through the proposed closure of Council buildings but the Guildhall, Tower Museum and Alley Theatre will definitely close tomorrow.
- Situation regarding leisure and community facilities to be discussed at the SLT meeting on Friday morning (2 October).
- Likely that all activities within leisure centres would cease with the exception of swimming and possibly some individual, indoor training.
- A safe zone in Council buildings was not necessary in this particular situation and that both Derry Road and Strand Road offices operated under very strict social distancing guidance, adding that the only people in those buildings would be critical staff.
- Businesses such as hairdressers, beauticians and nail bars were un-impacted by the restrictions. Only the hospitality sector that had to comply with the new regulations.
- As the restrictions had outlined that no exercise classes could take place, all gyms would also be required to close.

The Chief Executive stated that the Director of Business and Culture has advised that a wedding was due to take place tomorrow at the Guildhall. He advised that the ceremony could safely take place as only a small number of people would be attending and it was his understanding that weddings in hotels were still permitted. He asked Members not to release any information this evening regarding the closure of Council buildings to prevent causing unnecessary angst, particularly to those getting married tomorrow. He stated that a quick briefing session would take place tomorrow afternoon at 3pm, where a list of recommendations from the SLT would be provided for Members' comments and clarification.

He advised that the Executive office had encouraged briefings to include Party MPs and MLAs as a collective briefing with Councillors. He referred to the flooding incident in 2017 when we could meet physically in the guildhall and invited many elected representatives for those informal briefings and suggested that it might aid in terms of communication and asked for Members comments on the matter.

The Mayor agreed that such a meeting takes place and advised he had been in contact with all elected representatives from this Council area asking them to help us get the public message out. He stressed that it was important to hold a further Members' briefing session before the weekend.

Members thanked the Chief Executive and the officer team for keeping them informed on the matter and that Council would once again play a leading role to encourage the public to follow the guidelines to reduce the rate of infection and flatten the curve.

The Chief Executive reiterated that the next Members' briefing would take place at 3pm tomorrow afternoon (2 October) and the Foyle, East Tyrone and East Derry/Londonderry MLAs and the respective MPs from those areas be invited to participate.

Councillor Reilly suggested that an invitation also be extended to a representative from Donegal County Council.

The Chief Executive advised that he was happy to do so and that it had been intended to call a meeting of the North West Regional Development Group early next week.

The meeting terminated at 7.30pm