

Notes of COVID 19 Elected Members briefing held on Friday 2 October 2020 at 3.00pm

In Attendance:

Councillor Tierney, Mayor (Chair); Aldermen Bresland, Devenney, Guy, Kerrigan, McCready, Ramsey, Warke; Councillors J Barr, J Boyle, M Boyle, Burke, Carr, Dobbins, Duffy, Durkan, Edwards, Farrell, Fleming, Gallagher, Harkin, Jackson, Kelly, Logue, McCann, McGuire, McKinney, Mellon, Mooney and Reilly.

In Attendance:

Mr J Kelpie (Chief Executive), Mrs K McFarland (Director of Health and Community), Mrs K Phillips (Director of Environment and Regeneration), Ms E Cavanagh (Lead Democratic Services and Improvement Officer), Mrs M Fox (Head of Planning), Mr C Canning (Head of Environment), Mr A Dallas (Lead Finance Officer), Mr P Kingston (Lead Legal Services Officer), Mrs D McDonnell (Lead Assurance Officer), Mr E Molloy (Head of Planning Performance and Improvement), Mrs R Craig (Strategic Business Manager), Ms A McCourt (Public Relations Officer), Ms A McCarter (Head of Culture), Mr F Morrison (Head of Capital Development and Building Control), Mr K O'Connor (Head of Business), Mr S Donaghy (Head of Community Health and Wellbeing), Mr B O'Hagan (Head of Community Development and Leisure), Ms O McGillion (Director of Legacy), Mrs S Faulkner (Personal Assistant to the Chief Executive) and Miss L Bell (Committee Services Assistant).

External Attendees:

Mr C Eastwood (MP), Mr J McLaughlin (Chief Executive, Donegal County Council), Mrs K Mullan (MLA), Mrs R Donaghey (Cathaoirleach, Donegal County Council), Ms S McLaughlin (MLA) and Mr G Middleton (MLA).

The Chief Executive (CE) welcomed Mr McLaughlin, Chief Executive of Donegal County Council and Councillor Donaghey, Cathaoirleach of Donegal County Council to the Meeting. He further welcomed MLA's and MP's from all parts of the District and Elected Members.

He presented the following outline of the current situation in relation to Covid 19 to Members.

Current Statistics

- DCSDC; Last 7 Day Rate per 100k
 - To 1st OCT: 422.8
- Comparators to 01 October

- Belfast: 161.5
 - Newry Mourne and Down 213.7
 - Mid Ulster 155.2
 - Fermanagh and Omagh 65.9
 - Causeway Coast and Glens 76.9
- Donegal > 200 over last 14 Days (per 100,000 of population).

Key Additional Restrictions – Derry City and Strabane District Council

- Hospitality limited to take-away, delivery or outdoor dining.
- Hotels to provide services to residents; pre-booked weddings/funeral teas.
- Museums, galleries and cultural attractions to close.
- All unnecessary travel to be avoided, Residents to walk, cycle or use private transport.
- Work from home where possible.
- Schools and colleges open, as well as childcare.
- Church Services to continue with weddings and funeral Restrictions on post-ceremony gatherings.
- Those who run a business in their own homes or in other homes can continue.
- Outdoor gatherings of up to 15 people in non-domestic settings permitted.
- Sport matches can go ahead-without any spectators.
- Individual training only for indoor sport.
- Group exercise on hold.

The CE commented that the new restrictions were nearly parallel to those introduced in Donegal last week. He welcomed Mr McLaughlin to the meeting.

Mr McLaughlin welcomed the opportunity to participate in the meeting and welcomed the opportunity for Donegal County Council and Derry City and Strabane City Council to work together to combat the virus. He presented the following information to the meeting;

Key Level 3 Restrictions- Donegal

- A maximum of 6 visitors from 1 other household in homes or gardens.
- No social/family gatherings should take place, with exemptions to this for wedding and funerals.
- No organised indoor gatherings should take place. Organised outdoor gatherings are permitted, up to a maximum of 15 people.
- People living in Donegal should remain in the county, with the exception of those who must travel for work, education and other essential purposes.
- People working in Donegal are asked to work from home unless absolutely necessary.
- Schools, Colleges, early Learning Centre and Childcare Services should remain open.
- You are asked to walk or cycle where possible.

- <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/f9a0c-donegal-is-at-level-3>

Donegal Key Issues

- All of Donegal placed on Level Three Restrictions from midnight on 25 September 2020
- Huge impact on people, society, economy, businesses and our communities
- Getting good support from Council and Government all along and expect that to continue.
- Covid cases worryingly high (especially in Lifford to Ballybofey border area)
- Main cause reported to be Community Transmission.
- Council working closely with HSE and Gardaí (and each are working with counterparts in NI).
- Very good Cross-Border relations and cooperation.
- Working with media on messaging with focus on youth using Tik-tok, Influencers, etc.

The CE thanked Mr McLaughlin for his presentation and continue his address to Members as follows;

Developing Issues

- Initiated Emergency Plan yesterday evening
- Briefings held with key City and District Partners & Full Council yesterday evening
- Emergency Multiagency meeting today
- Engagement with the PHA/PSNI/Chief Medical Officer/ Chief Scientific Officer ongoing
- Details of all local hospitality venues provided to Department of Finance
- TEO financial package for hospitality to be further considered and implemented
- Regulations due on Monday together with potential additional enforcement guidance

Issues/ Impacts DCDSC Staff

- Covid Internal Response Team (CIRT) established and meeting regularly
Numbers testing positive (12/c1,000 staff) and those requiring to self-isolate presently still low but rising
- Casual staff retained, re-trained and on standby for critical services and critical staff bubbled.
- Ongoing engagement with staff and Trade Unions. Risk Assessments and Safe Systems of Work in place
- 63 Staff currently on furlough and 19 on flexible furlough and considering additional furlough potential.

- Staff encouraged to work remotely. No physical meetings or unnecessary travel.

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Issues/Impacts – DCSDC Facilities and Services

- Alley and Tower Museum closed today
- Guildhall now closed to the public (with exception of pre-booked weddings;) Mayors Parlour remains in use and café still permitted to trade outside
- Council offices remain open and operational for staff and public
- Walled City Market tomorrow cancelled
- Main leisure centres currently remain open.
- Group classes and activities now cancelled. Gyms open for individual training only.
- Swimming pools remain open for individual swimming only.
- Environmental Health are engaging with EHNI; PSNI; PHA & SOLACE to shape new enforcement regulations (due on Monday) and currently providing advisory visits & responding to service requests
- Environmental Services / Planning / Building Control all continuing to function in accordance with established risk assessments and safe systems of work
- Outdoor play/parks & pitches remain open. Training can take place for up to 15 people
- Community Centres open for childcare and essential services only – however no gatherings or meetings.

The Public Relations Officer presented the following information to the meeting;

Key Messaging and Communication Plan

- Working to relay key government messages/toolkit
- Over last week multiple joint messaging with both Mayors/Cathaoirleach across print/broadcast/social media
- Ongoing engagement/video messaging via Corporate & Mayoral Platforms
- Community Partners meetings set up with the Mayor
- Information being circulated to sporting partners – Clubs; Societies; Organisations.
- Video messaging with businesses leaders; City and District Partners – Education; Health; Churches
- Local influencers/celebrities engaged to promote key messages through their networks.

The CE Summarised as follows;

- Continue the reinforcement at all levels of key public health messaging.

- Adequate and satisfactory financial support for impacted hospitality sector.

The Mayor thanked the CE and Mr McLaughlin for their presentations and invited Cathaoirleach Donaghey to address the meeting.

Cathaoirleach Donaghey acknowledged the need for Donegal County Council and Derry City and Strabane District Council to work closely to combat the virus. She also acknowledged the focus needed on extensive communication, particular via social media to the younger generation. She expressed her thanks for the good cross border relationship that already existed and highlighted the problem area of Lifford and Stranolar stating that the Councils could not afford to act complacently as a close eye was needed on this border region.

In response to queries from Alderman McCready, the CE informed Members that Council was currently working with Environmental Health to decide what format joint enforcement would take. He stated that the available resources and the remit of Council would be considered. He referred to the Health and Safety at work act and advised that most of Council's remit on this issue related to the enforcement of the act, adding that the closure of restaurants and cafés made this easier. He advised that Council's responsibilities may include ensuring that these premises are closed, serving closure notices to those who aren't and advising businesses who are allowed to be open on issues such as sanitation and social distancing.

He further advised that Council might be given authority to issue improvement notices but that a much shorter turnaround time than the usual 28 days would be required. He undertook to advise Members of any developments in relation to this as soon as possible.

Councillor Reilly asked for some clarity on the operation of children's dance and gymnastics clubs. He expressed support of the actions of the Public Relations team in reaching out to younger audiences via alternative social media platforms and the tailoring of specific messages to Derry and Strabane. He suggested that a message of thanks on social media to business who had already taken the decision to close would be worthwhile. He further requests some additional information on the re-furloughing of Council Staff. He asked if testing figures had been skewed by residents from outside the District travelling to the District to be tested. He further offered to help provide formal decisions on issues if necessary.

In response, the CE clarified that the only dramatic decision had been the closure of museums and attractions. He advised that leisure centres would remain open for individual use with review to take place in a week. He undertook to raise concerns surrounding the skewing of test figures with the Public Health Agency and stated that results were booked back to the resident's postcode so there should be no impact on the figures within the District. He advised that planned press releases could include a thank you to proactive

businesses who had closed if Members wished. He also acknowledged the helpful graphics that had been provided by the Northern Ireland Executive for the use in local communications. In relation to dance and gymnastics clubs the CE explained that the full regulations had not yet been released and that more detail on this should be available on Monday when they are published.

Councillor Duffy thanked the 2 Chief Executives for the reports. She commented on the sobering nature of the increase in Covid figures and on the change in the reaction of the public. She concurred with previous comments regarding the importance of communication and thanked the Public Relations Officer for her efforts in reaching out to social media influencers. She stated she was thankful that leisure facilities were not closing as she was aware of the detrimental impact this might have on the physical and mental health of constituents, she also highlighted that private gyms would remain open. She requested more information on the furlough scheme and stressed the need for a financial package to be put in place to ensure the survival of local businesses.

In response the CE explained that after consultation with the relevant employees, the re-furloughing of employees would commence next week for employees of the Guildhall, the Alley Theatre, the Tower Museum and a percentage of leisure staff. He advised that only staff which had previously been furloughed could be considered, that the furlough scheme was due to finish at the end of October and that a rate of 60 % of salaries could be claimed from the scheme at this stage. He advised that figures regarding this would be reported to Members next week.

Councillor Harkin commented that the rise in Covid 19 figures was both worrying and disappointing given previous efforts of the public. He made four proposals as follows:

1. That no individual be scapegoated for the rise in cases, and that the failure in government policy be recognised.
2. That masks be made available for free in public places such as shops and community centres etc.
3. That the rights of workers to walk away from unsafe workplaces be supported.
4. That a campaign is started to ensure the district is treated fairly in regards to a financial support package.

The Mayor agreed with some of the comments Councillor Harkin had made, however, he reminded him that this was a briefing and information session and not the platform on which proposals could be made. He advised that Councillor Reilly's comments had been suggestions not proposals.

Councillor Harkin advised that he wished to change his comments into suggestions also.

The CE advised that if Councillor Harkin wished to bring forward proposals within the appropriate meeting he was welcome to do so.

Alderman Devenney thanked the Officers for their presentations and concurred with comments made surrounding communication. He stressed the need for a collaborative approach to get through the Covid crisis. He commended the hospitality industry for taking a proactive approach in closing business and asked that MP's and MLA's take action to ensure that financial support is obtained for these businesses. In relevance to the furlough scheme, he commented on the difficult nature of the scenario Council faced, he also commented on issues faced by Environmental Health, Parks and Pitches and expressed the support of the DUP to participate in briefings. He questioned if people from outside the District would continue to be allowed into the District for testing. In reference to the situation in Donegal, he admired their ability to pinpoint Covid hot spots.

Councillor McCann concurred with previous speakers surrounding a collaborative approach and by way of example, reminisced on actions during the blitz, when people kept lighted turned off at night to protect themselves and their neighbours from bombers, he suggested Council place more emphasis on the rights of employees to walk away from unsafe workplaces.

The Mayor agreed with the sentiment made by Councillor McCann and advised Members of videos that would be circulated featuring discussions he had with the CE of the Chamber and the Chair of Strabane BID to ensure that businesses are taking steps to keep the public safe.

Councillor McCann explained that he wanted the public to be aware that they had rights under industrial law not to work in an unsafe environment.

Councillor M Boyle welcomed the Mr McLaughlin and Cathaiorleach Donaghey to the Meeting. She advised that Strabane had its own social media bloggers and suggested that the Public Relations Officer could consider involving them also, in particular Councillor Gallagher's nephew. She further advised that there was no Chamber in Strabane at present and expressed concerns that retailers may be disadvantaged in terms of financial support, she asked that the Head of Business engage with these retailers.

The Mayor suggested that any Councillor that had a suggestion of an influencer forward their suggestions to either himself or the Public Relations Officer.

The CE advised that the Head of Business had conducted extensive engagement with Strabane retailers through BID. He also advised that the Peter McDermott had spoken on Radio Ulster's Inside Business today concerning this.

The Head of Business advised that he had spent today in conversation with several businesses from the Strabane area. He also advised that he had conversations with Peter McDermott surrounding his address on Inside Business in order to make sure that not only the safety messaging was vocalised but also messaging surrounding the key challenges faced by the hospitality and retail sectors. He advised that a business engagement event had been held earlier in the week with another to be held next week to engage Strabane businesses.

Councillor Gallagher concurred with comments surrounding messaging and suggested a live question and answer session online for the public and Elected Members. He highlighted that enforcement should be the last resort and that a positive message should be communicated.

The CE undertook to examine this suggestion further to provide a facility which would make business information sessions more two-way.

Councillor Boyle questioned Mr McLaughlin regarding the enforcement powers of An Garda Síochána, given that it was only advice not to travel across the border and not a restriction.

In reply, Mr McLaughlin explained data on hot spots for the virus was provided to Donegal County Council by the HSE on an electoral area basis. He advised that Donegal County Council met with An Garda Síochána weekly and that the role of An Garda Síochána was more one of awareness and education rather than enforcement. He advised that he felt the visibility of the Gardaí helped to indicate to the public how serious the situation was. He confirmed that Donegal County Council had no enforcement powers.

In conclusion the CE thanked Members, the Mayor, the Cathaoirleach, Mr McLaughlin, MLA's and MP for their attendance at the briefing session. He undertook to process and act in as many of Member suggestions as possible and advised another meeting would be scheduled for next week.

The Mayor thanked Mr McLaughlin and Cathaoirleach for their continued co-operation, he also thanked the Senior Leadership Team for their work over the last 24 hours. He implored MP's and MLA's to use their influence to help secure a financial package for the businesses of the City and District as soon as possible.

The Meeting ended at 16.18 pm