

Notes of COVID 19 Elected Members briefing held on Thursday 8 October 2020 at 2.00pm

In Attendance:

Councillor Tierney, Mayor (Chair); Aldermen Bresland, Devenney, Guy, Kerrigan, McClintock, McKane, Ramsey, Warke; Councillors J Barr, R Barr, J Boyle, M Boyle, Burke, Carr, Cooper, Cusack, Dobbins, Donnelly, Duffy, Durkan, Edwards, Farrell, Ferguson, Fleming, Gallagher, Harkin, Jackson, Kelly, Logue, McCann, McCloskey McGuire, McHugh, McKeever, McKinney, Mellon, Mooney and Reilly.

In Attendance:

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

The Chief Executive (CE) completed the roll call. Apologies were received from Councillors Fleming and McKinney. He presented an overview of the current situation relating to Covid 19 as follows:

Current Statistics

- **DCSDC - Last 7 Day Rate per 100k**
 - To 7th OCT 636.5

- **Comparators to 07 October**
 - Belfast 317.7
 - NMD 338
 - MU 231.8
 - F&O 157.5
 - CCG 115.8

- **Donegal** 293.4 over last 14 Days (per 100,000 of population)

The CE further provided some more recent figures to Members as follows; He commented on the huge rise in the DCSDC figures since yesterday but warned that the figures of 1 day should not be completely relied upon.

Rate per 100K

- DCSDC 704.6
- Belfast 343
- NMD 322
- MU 250
- FO 174
- CCG 126

He further commented that whilst the overall figure for Donegal Council was approaching 300 per 100,000 people, the sub regional data indicated that areas in the east of Donegal has rates as high as in DCSDC.

The Lead Legal Services Officer (LLSO) presented information regarding the Restrictions that had been introduced to the area on Monday as follows:

Health Protection Restrictions DCSDC

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) (Amendment No.8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

- Came into operation from Midnight on Monday 5th October 2020
- Applies to the whole DCSDC Area
- Will be reviews every 7 days with the first review due in the 20 October 2020
- "A person shall not during the active period, in the designated district, organise, operate or participate on an indoor gathering which consists of persons from more than one household"
- Gathering consists of 2 or more people doing something together for a common purpose.
- Number of exemptions- so does not apply to weddings, funerals or places of worship, workplaces, education, and childcare.
- Hospitality businesses have to cease trading except for consumption off premises or outdoors
- Hotels and guesthouses may supply residents.
- Cinemas, museums or galleries must close.
- Libraries open for click and collect.
- Sporting events permitted provided there are no spectators.

The LLSO clarified that hairdressers and beauticians could continue to trade under these regulations.

Councillors McCloskey and Jackson joined the meeting at this point.

The LLSO explained that whilst bingo halls technically were allowed to open, they could not function as a business because of the nature of the group activities that occurred within them, he further advised that, as it was possible to play within an amusement arcade alone these were permitted to remain open.

Councillor Burke joined the meeting.

The Director of Business and Culture presented the following information to the meeting;

Business Advice and Support

- Business Advice and Support- Council’s Business Team offering one to one support/advice for businesses impacted by the pandemic and the latest restrictions
- Recovery Grants- Council currently processing over 150 applications for DfC Funded Business Recovery Grants (Up to £3k available for capital investment). Urban grants currently closed. Rural grants still open and accepting applications.
- Recovery Cluster Grants- Officers currently working on 8 Cluster applications (Capital Investment of up to £25 K) for multiple businesses in specific streets/areas.
- Mentoring- Businesses can avail of up to 5 days’ specialist mentoring to assist with Digital Transformation and Innovation.
- Business Start Up – Businesses can access free mentoring to develop business plan for new business idea.

Hospitality Sector Grant Scheme – DSCDC

- Announced on 7.10.20
- £400- 600 per week. (Business in properties with an Annual Net Value (NAV) of £15,001 or > will receive a payment of £600 each week.
- In addition to 12 months’ rates holiday
- Identified by EH to DOF as a local Café/Hotel/Restaurant/ Pub/Guesthouse
- Re-opened after lockdown and trading on 1 October
- Social Enterprises also eligible
- Initially for 2 weeks but will be extended if restrictions remain

The CE advised that Council would furnish the Department of Finance with a list of all eligible businesses registered within the district.

The Head of Head of Community Health and Wellbeing presented the following information to Members regarding Engagement and Enforcement;

Health protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (NI) Regulations 2020		
Council Enforcement Statistics from May 2020 to date		
No of Complaints requests for service	474	
No of visits/verbal warnings/advice	192	Advice on Regulations Guidance and COVID-19 Risk Assessments

Number of Letters	829	Guidance to a range of sectors
No of prohibition notices	0	
No of FPN	0	
Service Requests – Restrictions /Public Health Advice Advisory Visits- Retail- hospitality sector Enforcement MOU/ISA		

MOU between 11 Councils and PSNI

- Memorandum of Understanding between the 11 Councils and the PSNI:
 - Supersedes MoU approved by Council (July 2020)
 - Working together to protect public health
 - Roles and Responsibilities- District Councils and PSNI
 - Enforcement of Regulations 4A, 4B or 4C
 - PSNI remain the lead enforcement authority ref licensed premises
 - Council investigate breach of regulations weekdays (office hours)
 - PSNI lead on inspections from %pm weekdays and weekends
- Wearing of Face Coverings Regulations- PSNI are Enforcement Authority
- Social Distancing/ Risk Assessments within premises- Health and Safety at Work (NI) Order 1978 (HSENI/Councils).
- Enforcement Approach- Engage, Encourage, Educate and Enforce.

The CE presented the following information to the meeting;

Multi- Agency Collaboration

- Multi-agency co-ordination meeting chaired by the Council
- WHSCT/PHA/PSNI/EA/NWRC/UU/CCI/DfC/DAERA/ TEO/ NIFRS/ NIAS
- Liaison with PHA on mobile testing sites
- Engagement with WHSCT on requests for support
- MoU with PSNI on enforcement
- Information to DoF on support for businesses
- Co-ordination of communications and Messaging
- Possible escalation to CCG (NI) from next week

The CE commented that the rapid rise in the number of hospital admissions had been concerning for the leadership of WHSCT and that there was a possibility that their recovery plan would be put on hold.

The Public Relations Officer presented Information of Communications and Key Messaging as follows;

Video Messaging

- Joint Mayoral video with Donegal CC- 8.5k view-66 retweets/shares
- Joint MPs/MLAs from DCSDC area – 8.3k view-112 retweets/shares
- Business video with Chamber and BID- 9.1view and 51 shares/16 retweets

- Sports video with Derry City manager and Sigerson's GAA player- 13.2k views- 93 shares and 42 retweets
- Youth 19 bespoke video aimed at younger audience – 1.9k views and 12 retweets and shares
- Total views in excess of 40,000 with a reach in excess of 760,268

Print and Social Media Messaging

- Joint press releases with Donegal regarding collaboration
- Four main churches joining with Mayor in press statement
- Post briefing press statements
- Regular service updates outlining changes in services
- Community messaging through the Local Growth Partnership DEAs
- Sharing NI Executive messaging and Information
- Regular Sharing of Public Health messaging

Looking Ahead

- Working with PSNI, Western Trust, PHA and Central Government on joint initiatives and sharing messaging
- Local Growth Partnership DEA's- video messaging and joint PR
- Council service updates communicated to press, Members and on social media
- Sports- looking at other sports including youth spots influencers for additional videos this week
- Youth- local blogger video message to be issued this week and ongoing engagement via youth19 and various databases including UNICEF, schools etc.
- Mayors twice weekly Vlog-opportunity to get out messages and key decisions on Council services

The Public Relations Officer advised Members that other regular Council PR projects were continuing in addition to the work arising from Covid. These included Halloween, work on Capital Projects and Press releases on the new Play Park in Artigarvan and the community hub in Ballymagroarty. She also presented an infographic of the current restriction provided by the NI Executive to Members.

The CE reinforced his support for Council staff stating that the additional workload Covid has created had been layered upon normal Council business.

The Lead Human Resources Officer delivered the following presentation;

Council Staff, Facilities and Services- Current Issues /Impacts

- Staff- Approx. 20 tested positive; 39 self-isolating – majority able to work from home (approx. 10 operational staff self-isolating). Approx. 95 enrolled on Job Retention Scheme (additional staff enrolled from leisure and culture) /circa 1000 staff. Continuous communication /liaison with staff and unions.

- Alley and Tower museum closed. Guildhall closed to the Public (with the exception of pre-booked weddings). Mayor's parlour remains in limited use.
- Leisure-open for individual training only. Group exercise classes and activities now cancelled. Outdoor sports with no spectators can continue. Public events on Council land discouraged to avoid breaching guidelines.
- All other services operational and continuously monitored.

Councillor Cooper joined the meeting.

The Mayor expressed his thanks to the CE and the Senior Leadership Team for the useful briefing.

Councillor Reilly concurred with the Mayor and recognised the impact sporting influencers were having on social media. He suggested widening the scope of this. He further raised concerns surrounding the worrying Covid figures within the district and suggested that a webinar be broadcast by the Advice Services Groups to tackle the issue of employee rights during the pandemic.

Alderman McClintock requested that the regulations be disseminated and distributed to Members. She expressed concerns surrounding the impact that pandemic was having on the hospitality service and whilst she welcomed news of the grants from the Department of Finance she showed concern that this may not be adequate for some businesses. She further requested that communication took place to remind the public to wear face masks and questioned if the wearing of masks was mandatory. She commended the work of the Public Relations Team at this time.

The LLSO clarified that whilst not mandatory in all indoor spaces, facemasks were mandatory in certain shops and on public transport. He informed Members that the infographic compiled by the NI Executive explained the regulations and advised that Council Officers were available for individual guidance if required.

Councillor Jackson thanked the CE and the Council Officers for their efforts, particularly the Public Relations team. He expressed the support of Sinn Fein for the co-ordinated multi-agency approach. He stated that he would support the use of Council facilities by other agencies if needed in response to the pandemic. He relayed public confusion surrounding the opening of bingo halls and arcades and queried if Council had enforcement responsibility of arcades given that Council was responsible for arcade licensing. He stated he would be keen that Council displayed a proactive approach in relation to breaches of the regulations and ensuring that facilities that can remain open do so in a safe manner. He relayed his appreciation for all the work that had taken place to date and the regular briefings.

The CE clarified that arcades could remain providing appropriate social distance could be maintained as the activity within arcades was of a solitary nature. He clarified that as activities in a bingo hall involved the gathering of more than 2 people for a common purpose they could not remain open.

The LLSO advised Members that he had viewed email correspondence between the draftsman of the regulations and the PSNI which collaborated this viewpoint.

Councillor McCloskey commended the work of the Officer team and Council Staff during the pandemic. She stated that fundamentally disagreed with the Conservative Government's Policy surrounding the pandemic. She stated that she felt that the lockdown would make no

difference to the outcome and highlighted the potential negative impact on the health and wellbeing of the public. She emphasised the need to ask scientific questions surrounding the driving factors of public policy.

The Mayor reminded Councillor McCloskey that discussion must be relevant to the information circulated within the presentation.

Councillor M Boyle expressed her thanks to the Officers and acknowledged that Council had a duty of care to keep everyone safe and well. She stressed the importance of clear messaging and suggested that billboards relaying social distancing and hygiene messages be placed at the Derry/Donegal borders. She further suggested that Council provide free facemasks to the public as they were becoming increasingly expensive.

In relation to Bingo Halls she voiced concerns that the public would not understand the provided position and asked if the PSNI would be enforcing this.

The CE reiterated that Bingo halls should be closed and that this would be communicated to the PSNI. He added that this would be strengthened if the Executive clarified this within the guidance. In regard to face masks he stated that Council would encourage the use of reusable, washable facemasks rather than disposable which are more cost effective and environmentally friendly.

In regards to billboards, the CE explained that the communications team was investigating opportunities to display messaging on electronic billboards within the City and undertook to examine Councillor M Boyle's suggestion also. However, he was unsure if messaging provided by Council would stand out amongst the multitude of unregulated signage at the suggested locations.

Councillor Harkin thanked Officers for the report and expressed his pleasing at the suggestion of free facemasks as he had suggested this at a previous meeting. He concurred with Councillor Reilly's suggestion regarding workers' rights and suggested engagement with local trade unions and Advice Services Groups. He highlighted the importance of the financial package. He raised further concerns with regard to the potential de-escalation of regular services within the Health service and suggested that Council investigate possible options for an injection of funds into the Health Service. He relayed worries expressed by teachers and classroom assistants surrounding the lack of guidance supplied to them and urged Council to act upon this.

In response, the CE clarified that in relation to the Health Service, he had been relaying comments made by a representative for the Western Health and Social Service Trust at a recent multi-agency meeting. He advised that essence of what she had said was that some services may need to be stood down as a result in the recent rise in cases and that the recovery plan to re-instate services which had recently been stood down may need to be halted.

In response to a question from Alderman Guy, the CE advised that he had not heard of any plans for the government to provide any type of payment to individuals who could not due to self-isolation. He advised he would inform Members if any information was received in reference to this.

In response to a further question from Alderman Guy, the Director of Business and Culture advised that concerns surrounding the operation of a funfair in Ebrington Square had been relayed to the Executive Office, who had neither confirmed or denied plans to hold a funfair during Halloween.

Councillor Gallagher expressed worry regarding the accelerated rate of growth in the number of cases of Covid in the District. He stated that some of the messaging from the Stormont Executive was negative and dividing in nature and that he felt Council should support the public in a positive way during the pandemic by showing independent non-political leadership.

In response, the CE advised that engagement with community groups would accelerate. He advised that communication would take place with the DEA Chairs, the Neighbourhood Renewal Groups and all the Local Community Groups. He also advised that the local Resilience Forum Groups would be contacted in the next few days.

Alderman Warke expressed concern at the growing number of Covid cases within the district, he asked for clarification on the requirement for staff within shops to wear face facemasks. He referred to a 5-point plan, which had been put into action in Liverpool, Leeds and Newcastle and suggested that the Mayor write to those Councils to arrange a joint approach in lobbying the Government for a larger financial package.

In response, the Head of Health and Community Wellbeing advised that on evidence he had received, he felt there was a high level of compliance with facemask wearing within the retail sector. He informed that Council had been providing advice to businesses on social distancing and hygiene and that they would continue to reinforce these messages to businesses.

The Mayor advised that he had written to the Chancellor, asking for an extension to the Furlough Scheme. He also advised that he had written to the other 10 Councils asking them to join him in this request and that a copy of this would be forwarded to the Executive. He commented that he felt the majority of content within the 5 point plans of Liverpool, Leeds and Newcastle would not relate to Councils in Northern Ireland.

Alderman Warke responded that whilst some of the content would not be relevant he felt there were elements of this that Council should be considering. He congratulated the Mayor on the excellent Leadership that he was showing during this trying time.

Councillor Edwards also praised the Mayor and questioned the possibility of a testing centre in the Castlederg area; he advised he had previously emailed the CE regarding this.

The CE advised that he had responded to Councillor Edwards email to say he would relay his comments to the Public Health Agency and that he was not aware of any plans for a testing centre in Castlederg. He commented that the mobile testing unit which had been situated in Sion Mills was now located in Templemore Sports Complex and this had been done according to the developing needs of the situation.

Councillor McCloskey echoed comments commending the Mayor and requesting additional financial support from the Government. She informed Members that she had submitted a Freedom of Information request to the Executive Office requesting the Risk Assessment on the use of facemasks, she advise that she had not received a response and highlighted the need for a risk assessment before a whole population was mandated to wear facemasks.

The CE reassured Members that there was no enforcement in terms of mask wearing within the District and undertook to review advice in relation to Council staff if any adverse risk assessments on the wearing of facemasks was made available.

The Mayor concluded by thanking the Officer team for the information.

The meeting ended at 3.30pm.