

Covid-19 update paper

Purpose of report

For information.

Summary

This paper updates the Board on the safer and stronger communities team's Covid-19 related activity since the June Board meeting.

Recommendation

The Board note the contents of the report and the implications for the Board's 2020-21 work plan.

Action

Officers to take forward as directed.

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Covid-19 update paper

Background

1. This paper updates Board members on the team's ongoing activity in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic since the last meeting in June.
2. Across the organisation as a whole, most of the workstreams created to support our Covid-19 response work from March have now been disbanded, with staff going back to their substantive roles and ongoing activity managed through normal channels and Board processes.
3. The exception to this is the continuing test, trace and outbreak management team, which is supporting policy and sector led improvement work linked to councils outbreak plans and work around test and trace. This workstream is headed up by our Principal Policy Adviser Mark Norris and incorporates ongoing activity in relation to the shielding programme, supported by other members of the team. This highlights that, outside of the matters directly within the remit of the Board covered below, wider Covid-19 activity continues to impact the capacity of the team.

Issues

Regulatory services and licensing

4. Work on compliance and enforcement issues is the main area falling in the Board's remit of continuing work around Covid-19. As businesses have reopened, there has been a focus on the work councils are doing to ensure that businesses are complying with Covid secure guidance, and taking action where they are not. There have been challenges for councils in doing so, in particular linked to the powers and tools available to do so, and the capacity available to support this work.
5. In its sectoral guidance on business and wider reopenings following the removal of lockdown restrictions in summer, the Government highlighted the Health and the Safety at Work Act (HSWA) 1974 as the key vehicle for overseeing the implementation of Covid secure guidelines. The guidance, including on key issues such as collecting contact details in hospitality premises and social distancing measures, has to date been voluntary rather than mandatory.
6. There are challenges with using the HSWA as the main vehicle for Covid enforcement activities, as the tools under the Act are less suitable for the type of swift action to require changes or force closure of non-compliant premises that councils need. The new health protection powers for councils to issue directions to close premises and stop events set a threshold of there being a serious and imminent threat to public health, and require the approval of the local director of public health and Secretary of State. The LGA and councils have called for a more flexible set of powers that can be used more quickly, and

have suggested the Licensing Act could be used as a vehicle for addressing issues in the hospitality sector.

7. The Government has accepted the sector's argument that the collection of contact details should be mandatory, and we will be continuing to work with councils and officials to make the case for councils to have the right tools to facilitate compliance with Covid requirements.
8. We have also been highlighting the pressures on environmental health capacity arising from the pandemic, linking this to previous work by the Board to raise concerns about the future of regulatory services. With trading standards officers and other officers, environmental health officers played a leading role in enforcing the business closure regulations; as enforcing officers under the Health and Safety at Work Act they have since been heavily involved in Covid compliance work, as well as local contact tracing work, in addition to business as usual activity. The pandemic has highlighted a lack of capacity within environmental health, as well as a worrying lack of resilience in the future pipeline of future officers.
9. With our workforce team, we have been working with the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health to support the development of a register of Environmental Health officers (announced by the Prime Minister on 9 September) which councils can draw on for short term capacity, as well as looking at the longer term future of the profession. We have also developed a submission to the spending review which emphasizes the importance of a sustainable funding model for local regulatory services, which have been shown to play a critical role in protecting local communities.

Bereavement

10. At the last board meeting members discussed a paper on the impact of Covid-19 on bereavement services and asked officers to write to the appropriate departments to express our concerns. The issues highlighted in the paper have now been fed into a wider piece of work on sector learning from the pandemic. This will be used to inform conversations with government going forward.
11. The death management workstream has now been closed down, but officers have retained the network of contacts which was established as a sounding board during the early stages of the pandemic and continue to communicate regularly with relevant departments to feed in sector concerns around bereavement services, death management and registration issues.

Domestic abuse and Covid-19

12. A [joint investigation](#) by Panorama and Women's Aid, into how the nationwide shutdown in response to Covid-19 has impacted victims of domestic abuse, found someone called police for help about domestic abuse every 30 seconds in the first seven weeks of UK

17 September 2020

lockdown. The investigation found that three-quarters of victims say the lockdown has made it harder for them to escape their abusers. These devastating accounts of domestic abuse highlight the importance of all partners and organisations helping to prevent and eliminate this appalling crime. The [LGA has published a guide for councils on tackling domestic abuse](#) during the Covid-19 pandemic. Please contact Rachel.Phelps@local.gov.uk if you would be happy to discuss in further detail.

Implications for Wales

13. Work on these issues is being led separately by the WLGA.

Financial Implications

14. The policy directorate has reallocated some of its MHCLG improvement money to support ongoing Covid-19 activity in relation to test, trace and outbreak management. This may have some impact on the funds available for safer communities and other policy improvement work, although at the current time it is hoped that all the activities the team had proposed can still be funded.

Next steps

15. Officers to progress Covid-19 related activity as necessary.