

# North Somerset Council

## REPORT TO THE HEALTH AND WELLBEING BOARD

**DATE OF MEETING: 29 JUNE 2022**

**SUBJECT OF REPORT: COVID-19**

**TOWN OR PARISH: ALL**

**OFFICER/MEMBER PRESENTING: DR ANDREW CROSS, CONSULTANT IN PUBLIC HEALTH**

**KEY DECISION: NO**

**REASON: TO SET OUT COVID-19 WORK WITHIN THE NORTH SOMERSET COUNCIL PUBLIC HEALTH TEAM**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Members of the Health and Wellbeing Board are asked to note the contents of this paper and be aware that a North Somerset Living Safely with Covid Plan is in development. The Plan will be presented for sign off at the October Board meeting.

### 1. SUMMARY OF REPORT

The risk from Covid-19 has not gone away but has reduced, allowing changes to national policy that mean fewer restrictions on daily life. Further peaks of infection are possible.

This report outlines continuing work by the North Somerset Council Public Health Team to respond to the pandemic. This includes supporting outbreak management in high risk settings, providing advice to professionals and the general public, and planning ahead to manage the ongoing risk from Covid as we do for other infectious diseases.

### 2. POLICY

Policy relating to Covid-19 has changed rapidly throughout the pandemic. In February 2022 the national Contain Framework was replaced by COVID-19 Response: Living with COVID-19 Plan. This initiated a national de-escalation of Covid specific measures such as testing and contact tracing and a move towards normalising the management of Covid alongside other respiratory infections. National Covid-specific infection prevention and management guidance remains in place for high-risk settings including healthcare facilities and adult social care settings.

The [North Somerset Local Outbreak Management Plan](#) (March 2021) set the local strategy for the Covid response. It has since been superseded by the National Living with COVID-19 Plan and there is no requirement to replace it, however, work is underway to define the local approach (see below).

### **3. DETAILS**

#### **3.1. Situation update**

Changes to Covid-19 testing means that we are less able to track the number of infections locally than we could at the beginning of 2022. However, testing remains in place for some settings and surveillance testing continues. Based on these measures, the numbers of infections locally currently are low when compared to the previous peaks we have seen.

However, confirmed cases in North Somerset were slightly higher in June 2022 than they were in May 2022 and we could see further peaks of infection. Recent national evidence suggests that Omicron variants BA4 and BA5 are becoming more prevalent (local data is not available). Current assessments are that these variants are more infectious but no more clinically severe than previous omicron variants.

Since vaccination became available, the clinical risk from infection has reduced in those that have received the jab. It is likely that circulation of infection has also boosted natural immunity levels. While the risk has not gone away completely, Covid-related harms as measured by hospitalisation and severe illness are currently low. This will continue to be monitored as infection rates change.

Local data continues to be updated on the [NSC Data Dashboard](#).

#### **3.2. Public health guidance**

Public health guidance continues to be updated and it is recommended that people refer to the government website (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/people-with-symptoms-of-a-respiratory-infection-including-covid-19>) to ensure they are following the latest advice.

At the time of writing:

- routine testing is no longer required for most people – however there is additional guidance for those working in health and social care settings.
- those with symptoms of a respiratory infection do not need to take a test but are encouraged to stay at home and away from other people while they are unwell, particularly avoiding those who are at higher risk of serious illness from Covid-19
- those that do take a test and are positive are advised to try to stay at home and avoid contact with other people while they are considered infectious.

#### **3.2. Covid Outbreak Team in North Somerset Council**

The NSC Covid Contact Tracing Team played an important role in advising local people with Covid. This team was stood down in March 2022 after the legal requirement to self-isolate was removed. This has significantly reduced the number of people working specifically on Covid within the public health team.

From 1st April 2022 – 10th June 2022, the Covid Outbreak Team consisted of a COVID-19 manager, a part time health protection practitioner, three assistant practitioners and a business support officer. This team was dedicated to reducing outbreaks in high-risk settings, including schools and care homes.

From 13th June 2022, the team consists of a COVID-19 manager, a part time health protection practitioner, one assistant practitioner and a business support officer. The focus of work related to COVID-19 includes continuing to reduce outbreaks in high-risk settings, managing COVID enquiries and supporting the Covid vaccination programme. As responsive work has decreased, the team are taking on a more strategic role, planning ahead for any future response that may be required and have also expanded their remit to support other areas relevant to health protection, including addressing the needs of asylum seekers and refugees.

### **3.3 Looking back**

The Covid Outbreak Team have participated in a number of local and regional lookback exercises and will produce a summary of learning for the North Somerset Health Protection Assurance Group in 2022/23.

The team will also respond to any relevant call for evidence connected to the upcoming national UK COVID-19 Inquiry.

### **3.4 Looking ahead**

The Covid Outbreak Team will continue to work throughout 2022/23 to support the pandemic response, with priority remaining on answering queries about changing guidance, supporting outbreak management in high-risk settings and supporting the Covid vaccination programme. They are currently drafting a local framework to set out the longer-term approach to Covid-19 in North Somerset focusing on prevention, protection, treatment and preparedness/response to emerging threats. This will include action plans for each of those areas. This North Somerset Living Safely with Covid Plan will be brought to the October 2022 Health and Wellbeing Board meeting for review and sign off.

The pandemic has meant that local authorities have taken on a broader, more responsive health protection role in response to Covid-19. Expanding the local authority role more permanently has been suggested as it brings benefits in utilising local contacts and knowledge in response to threats. However, any permanent changes are unsustainable unless the local authority role is redefined in statute and new responsibilities are supported by appropriate funding. A permanent health protection lead officer is to be recruited into NSC Public Health Team in the coming months and they will help refresh our whole local approach to health protection in the context of evolving national structures and learning from the pandemic.

## **4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

The Covid Outbreak Team is funded from the Contain Outbreak Management Funding (COMF). COMF is grant funding for the Local Authority response to Covid and any unspent grant at the end of 2022/23 has to be returned to central Government.

The new permanent Health Protection Officer role will be funded from the Public Health Grant. This new role follows a restructuring within the team and replaces part of a previous post.

## **5. LEGAL POWERS AND IMPLICATIONS**

The Government has revoked remaining Covid legal restrictions in England, including the requirement for people with Covid to self-isolate and The Health Protection (Coronavirus,

Restrictions) (England) (No. 3) Regulations. The local authority continues to hold more general pre-existing public health powers for the management of infectious diseases.

## **6. CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

None considered.

## **7. RISK MANAGEMENT**

Day to day work of the Covid Outbreak Team is overseen by the lead public health consultant for health protection within NSC (or DPH/consultant deputy when unavailable). The team advises on Covid outbreak management in local settings and will escalate to specialist Consultants in Communicable Disease Control within the South West Health Protection Team if a situation is deemed higher risk. They may provide comments on risk assessments within settings but ownership of the risk remains with the individual managing that setting in most circumstances.

## **8. EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

The Covid Outbreak Team champion and follow corporate guidance and policies relating to accessibility.

COVID-19 has worsened pre-existing socio-economic and health inequalities across the country. All Public Health programmes within the council relating to Covid (and linked programmes within the NHS, notably the vaccination programme) have targeted areas that experience health inequalities and proactively engaged those at greatest risk of poorer health outcomes to address them and will continue to do so.

## **9. CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS**

Covid continues to be a significant area of work for the Public Health Team, and certain other elements of the council. The approach adopted minimises impact on normal business.

## **10. OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

N/A

## **AUTHOR**

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## **APPENDICES**

None

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

None