

APPENDIX B: COVID-19 Implications for Governance

The ways in which the Authority's governance systems have been deployed and adapted in response to the COVID 19 pandemic are set out below, aligned to the seven principles of good governance. These revised arrangements continued to be in place either up until the Authority's Annual Statement of Accounts was published or point at which the Authority determined that the position had improved to enable what effectively were specific time-limited measures to be relaxed.

Whilst the impact of COVID 19 was at times significant, the Authority adapted a pragmatic, flexible approach to ensure decision making could occur at the pace required for each situation, but with due regard to the need to maintaining robust governance and accountability together with the continued safety of its staff throughout.

The Authority will review the lessons learnt and will adapt its arrangements accordingly going forward to reflect more effective, modern ways of working, particularly by harnessing a fuller use of technology to this end wherever possible.

Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values, and respecting the rule of law

1. Our core values have been invaluable in shaping the response: -
 - (a) We will work together to achieve the best for people.
 - (b) We put people and communities at the heart of everything we do and value our employees.
 - (c) We value, trust and support each other.
 - (d) We embrace change and look for better ways to deliver services.

Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement

2. Working with strategic partners through the Local Resilience Forum on collective capacity and capability, protection from the virus, managing deaths and planning for the future.
3. Management of the crisis has been overseen at a corporate and cross-agency regional level:
 - Regional command and control arrangements have been established. These are being led by NHS England and based upon the established North East Pandemic Influenza Framework which includes coronavirus. Well established close working arrangements are in place with Public Health England (PHE) for health protection outbreaks and will continue during this outbreak.
 - County Durham and Darlington Local Resilience Forum (LRF) is also working with Northumbria LRF and Cleveland LRF to co-ordinate activities across the region to ensure effective planning across all agencies for Covid-19. Each LRF has set up a Strategic Co-ordinating Group, known as a Gold Command Group, and they are also meeting as a cross region group.
 - Our leadership team continues to meet daily (virtually) to provide direction to the Authority's response.
 - COVID-19 planning meetings have been taking place since January 2020.

4. We quickly engaged with key suppliers to support them through the crisis in line with fresh government guidance to maintain delivery of essential goods and services.

Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social, and environmental benefits

5. The Authority's vision, 'Safest People Safest Places', is highly pertinent and will drive our efforts during the recovery from the pandemic.
6. While the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak have been catastrophic, the Authority will seek to learn from the experience and look for opportunities to maintain the positive effects. These include modern ways of working and reduced travel and carbon emissions.

Determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of the intended outcomes

7. We have made, and will continue to make, the interventions necessary during the pandemic and the post-pandemic period to optimise the allocation of our resources in relation to risk and demand.

Developing the Authority's capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it

8. The Authority acted quickly to establish, and refine, governance arrangements specifically for responding to the pandemic.
9. In recent years, the Authority's extensive investment in Information Communications Technology has enabled flexible working through digital/mobile technology and supported virtual meetings between teams across the organisation.
10. Despite the difficult barriers to service delivery arising from the pandemic, we have implemented new ways of working to maintain high service levels, particularly on those areas of priority need. Examples of this include:
 - Concentrating on providing priority services including assistance to partner organisations providing help to vulnerable people.
 - Stopping all non-essential face-to-face contact and moved to only digital and telephone communication where possible.
 - Mobilising employees to work in different ways including working from home.

Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management

11. Inevitably, the pandemic has initiated many significant risks, and to manage these effectively, the Authority identified and assessed key risks caused by the

COVID-19 crisis, which are monitored by the leadership team to ensure that they are being managed effectively.

12. It is recognised that enforced swift implementation of emergency procedures increases the risk of a breakdown in internal control systems. Regular monitoring and discussion through the COVID-19 governance arrangements seek to eliminate the incidence of fraud and error.
13. The potential financial impact of the pandemic response is significant and there is no guarantee that this will be covered by government funding. Guidance on COVID-19 expenditure was promptly issued to budget managers and requisitioners, and the frequency of monitoring and reporting was escalated. The additional costs associated with COVID-19 have been captured and are reported centrally to the Home Office via the Fire Finance Network.

Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting, and audit to deliver effective accountability

14. Internal Audit have contributed to the COVID-19 governance review.
15. Arrangements have been made to accurately report the level of COVID-19 expenditure both internally and centrally to the Home Office via the Fire Finance Network.