
COVID-19 LESSONS LEARNED AND UPDATE REPORT

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This is the third report to the Committee setting out lessons learned and updates regarding the Council's response to the COVID 19 pandemic; following the first report on 1 September 2020 and the second on 5 January 2021.

2 LOCKDOWN AND THE GOVERNMENT'S COVID ROADMAP

- 2.1 Throughout the winter months the COVID-19 prevalence across Essex had been extremely serious. Around Christmas 2020, the rates in the district were amongst the highest in the country with 1085 cases per 100,000 population. In response to a significant growing demand on hospitals and health and social care services across Essex, and particularly Mid and South Essex due to COVID-19, on 29 December 2020 the Essex Resilience Forum (ERF) declared a 'major incident' – enabling the County to seek further support from Government to address the pressures which threatened to overwhelm local hospitals.
- 2.2 By mid-January 2021 the vaccination programme across Essex had begun in earnest with thousands of people vaccinated through 5 hospital vaccination and 34 GP surgeries – the Puzey Practice in Rochford being one of the earliest of these. The approval of the Oxford University/AstraZeneca vaccine enabled the programme to accelerate with new vaccination centres opening across Essex. By the end of January 2021, the downward trajectory of infection was marked – in the district our case levels were down to 260 cases per 100,000 population. However, hospital occupancy remained high and excess numbers of deaths continued to be reported. During February 2021 case rates were dropping in all areas across Essex, putting the county below the regional average; although it should be remembered that our peak of community infection came ahead of other parts of the region and the country.
- 2.3 The Megacentre, Rayleigh became a Lateral Flow Testing site on 5 January 2021, testing asymptomatic residents with the rapid tests which deliver results in 30 minutes. The site operated first by appointment but later also allowing walk in testing. The site was subsequently stood down as the provision of LFT kits for home testing was made more widely available through local collection points or via online ordering to be replaced with the wider availability of LFT kits for home testing. The success of this operation is wholly down to the community efforts of the Megacentre and its volunteers and the Council is extremely grateful for their efforts. The Council's relationship with the Megacentre enabled us to facilitate the site with ECC and create this important facility at a time when infections were at their highest in the District.
- 2.4 The Mill Arts & Events Centre became a vaccination centre on 12 February 2021 and an agreement is in place between the NHS and Fusion Lifestyle initially until 30 June 2021. Discussions are ongoing about further occupation

of this site by the NHS which will be made available, if required. The Centre is one of 13 such sites in the County and is currently administering both the Oxford University/AstraZeneca and Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines.

- 2.5 The Government published its COVID-19 Response - Spring 2021, known as the “COVID Roadmap” on 22 February 2021. Step 1 1 - 8 and 29 March saw the first lifting of restrictions, with schools and other educational establishments reopening and the lifting of lockdown. Steps 2 and 3 have followed on 12 April and 17 May respectively. At the time of writing the fourth and final stage of unlocking due on 21 June 2021 has been postponed to 19 July 2021.

3 IMPACT ON COUNCIL BUSINESS

- 3.1 On 16 February 2021 a further 1.7m people were advised to shield by the Government. The Council continued to be part of the county wide Operation Shield procedures and in recognition of the different assets and needs of each of our communities, ECC funding was allocated to each second tier authority to support those newly identified clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) people. The Council was allocated £48,000. A local CEV spend plan was put together to build on the Rochford District Community Hub work, so the Council’s partner organisations: MegaCentre, RRAVS, Citizens Advice, Hopeworx and the wider Church network could continue working together to collectively form a package of identification guidance and support, predominantly through the voluntary sector and church networks. The money was spent on assessing over 500 CEV residents and families, with community partners providing a range of welfare advice and support, including fuel poverty grants and food packages.
- 3.2 Lessons learned from the first lockdown certainly assisted the Rochford District Community Hub in the second lockdown period. It had not been fully stood down in the interregnum between the two, but demand had significantly reduced. However, the networks were strong and remained in place so that Operation Shield could continue to be supported. ECC continues to look at all Community Hubs as the vehicle to offer support locally to contain the further spread of COVID-19 enabling residents to self-isolate as required and to access the support and advice they require. The Rochford District Community Hub therefore continues with partners to develop current offers of support and reports its work to the Joint Rochford and Castle Point Health & Wellbeing Board.
- 3.3 Following the publication of the Government’s roadmap, a cross directorate officer co-ordination group was set up to understand which places, premises, and events within the Council’s service areas present the greatest risk at each stage of the Government roadmap, allowing the Council to put in place a consistent and joined up approach, where needed. We have applied the lessons learned from this time last year, for example, when pressure on our waste collection and street scene services increased significantly due to higher demand from people accessing local green spaces and have applied

additional crews to hotspots across the district to mitigate this. Demand, however, continues to outstrip our abilities to respond as quickly as we would like and, for example, we have seen increased levels of inappropriate bin use e.g. filled with household or commercial waste rather than litter. The Council has successfully enforced against offenders and will continue to do so.

3.4 Increasing pressure on services arising from increased demand has become a hallmark of living with COVID-19. For example:

- The number of approaches to the Council’s Housing Options service. We are expecting an increase following the removal of the rental eviction moratorium on 1 June 2021:

2020-21	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Total number of approaches / contacts	281	350	389	456	375	383	416	326	345	375	466	406

- Unprecedented numbers of new claims for Housing Benefit / Council Tax support. This is now returning to “normal” levels (55 in April 21 and 52 in May 21). We are, however, expecting a further surge in numbers after the furlough scheme and the self-employed income support grants finish (currently end September 2021)

Received	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	total
2019/20	57	71	51	63	78	61	62	77	52	85	66	90	813
2020/21	222	464	96	82	81	71	91	93	55	64	50	53	1,422

3.5 In September 2020, the Government introduced a new £500 lump sum ‘Test and Trace Support Payment’ for people on low incomes required to self-isolate, who could not work during their self-isolation period. There are two schemes: The main scheme is for those people receiving qualifying state benefits and the discretionary scheme for those who do not. The scheme was due to end on 31 January 2021, but it was extended to 30 June 2021 and there is provision to further extend this. Take up for these payments was high up to January 2021 but has now reduced dramatically. Essex County Council provided additional funding to second tier councils in December 2020 to boost the discretionary payments and try to achieve greater inclusion. The district received national coverage for having one of the lowest refusal rates for self-isolation support payments <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-56043487>. This was partly due to the Council’s intelligent online application form which was designed to filter out those who were unlikely to be eligible. This design applied learning from earlier grant schemes and more than 70%

of applicants were deemed eligible. To date the Council has paid out 129 main scheme and 217 discretionary scheme payments.

- 3.6 The Government also introduced a COVID-19 Council Tax Hardship Fund for 2020/21 with the intention being to assist the most financially vulnerable. A maximum sum of £150 was awarded to the Council Tax accounts of all those existing working age claimants of Council Tax Support and any new working age claimants for 2020/21. This required a major software change and as a result the Council was not able to make the awards until August 2020. We received a grant of £336,968 and to date we have awarded £330,313 to 2253 claimants. The remainder of the funding is being used for any new claims or adjustments to Council Tax Support that are backdated into 2020/21. This was additional work for the team, having to test the software, write a policy, advertise and then implement the changes which meant re-billing approximately 1700 working age Council Tax Support Claimants. The Council also suspended any recovery action for these customers until the relief was awarded.
- 3.7 Since the last report there have been no further meetings of the Council's Office Outbreak Response Group although the Acting Managing Director continued to be part of the Essex Resilience Forum's Strategic Co-ordinating Group ("SCG"). The SCG now meets monthly by exception and focus has moved to recovery, with representative members of the SCG meeting to co-ordinate responses to recovery and to ensure consistency, Tactical Co-ordinating Groups have been meeting.
- 3.8 The Council's Environmental Health and Licensing Teams have been active members of the ERF's Compliance and Enforcement Tactical Co-ordinating Group. The group has been very beneficial to both members of the Licensing team and the Environmental Health team. As part of the regular conference calls, officers discuss changes in legislation and the group's interpretation of the law, problem premises within each of the districts and planned upcoming activity of note. This also allowed the teams to discuss the larger corporate premises and the individual premises with their unique approach to the Coronavirus Regulations. By working together and discussing the issues, teams were able to apply a standard approach across the county.
- 3.9 The Council's Environmental Health Team also continues to support the countywide Test & Trace and containment response to COVID-19. This support consists of making contact with people identified as having COVID-19 and then tracing their movement and contacts. This has allowed the identification and quick reaction to emerging local outbreaks in the district. At the peak of the pandemic the department was receiving in excess of 100 cases a day with the highest being 134 cases needing tracing in one day. The Council managed to successfully resolve all cases in a timely fashion helping to contain the spread of the virus amongst our residents. The department's knowledge of the district, experience of infectious disease investigations and good working relationship with business has proven invaluable in quickly containing local outbreaks. Initially there was a move

from ECC to deal with some of the early outbreaks by itself, but it quickly became clear that as second tier authorities have the necessary legal powers and local knowledge that they were better placed to trace and contain outbreaks more quickly. A strong working partnership is now in place resulting in prompt contacts.

- 3.10 The occurrence of variants of concern mean that no-one can be complacent about COVID-19. The Council has enabled a second Mobile Testing Unit to the rear of Clements Hall Leisure Centre which operates 7 days a week, in addition to the unit which is available on Mondays at Rayleigh Leisure Centre. Conversations continue with partners to ensure we have sufficient testing capacity to meet current needs plus building additional capacity to carry out surge testing if required.
- 3.11 The Council's Emergency Planning Officer has reviewed our Local Outbreak Response Plan to cover all our activities associated with testing and vaccination, including the steps that we would need to take if we were asked to undertake surge testing in response to an identified variant of concern. The establishment of surge testing sites will be dictated by the Director of Public Health and the Council would be asked to assist through the provision of a site. In practice it would give us that capacity if required.
- 3.12 The Council's offices at South Street continue to operate on a COVID-SECURE basis with bookable desks for staff to use. The prevailing public health advice remains to work from home if you can, but officers have the opportunity to use the South Street offices when working at home is not possible. This hybrid approach mirrors the approach the Council would take to the proposed new offices at the Freight House and provides an opportunity for learning ahead of the proposed move. The proposals include flexible workstations and breakout spaces for both focused and collaborative work.
- 3.13 From 1 June 2021, the South Street Customer Reception has reinstated face to face services to our customers on an appointment basis. Once all restrictions are relaxed post 19 July, the Customer Reception will re-open to the general public. The Civic Suite in Rayleigh remains closed with Civic meetings currently being held at Sweyne Park School, as detailed further below in this report.

4 BUSINESS GRANTS

- 4.1 The Council's Business Rates team distributed c.£23.6m in grants to businesses during 2020/21 under various government schemes. Further grants were announced in the Chancellor's budget from 1 April 2021. The Restart Grant Scheme provides a one-off payment of up to £6,000 to non-essential retail businesses and up to £18,000 for those in the hospitality, accommodation, leisure, personal care and gym businesses. The scheme is designed to support businesses that are predominantly reliant on delivering in person services for the general public. The scheme closes to new applications

on 30 June 2021. To date the Council has paid out £3,286,699 in Restart Grants to 428 businesses.

- 4.2 In addition, the Chancellor extended the 100% Business Rates relief for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses and children's nurseries for a further 3 months until the end of June 2021. From 1 July 2021 the relief will reduce to 66% until 31 March 2022.
- 4.3 In June 2020, the Council ran a Discretionary Business Grant scheme which provided financial support to businesses affected by Covid-19 who were not eligible to receive business rates related grants. Through this Discretionary Business Grant, and a top-up scheme, the Council distributed £902,500. The Government has subsequently also made further discretionary funding available for Councils to distribute to local businesses through the Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG). The Council's Economic Development team have distributed ARG funding through 3 rounds to date. These grants are primarily aimed at the hardest hit businesses and those unable to access alternative funding.
- 4.4 The first round of ARG targeted businesses in the supply chain of closed businesses, events facilitators/performers, closed businesses outside of the rating system (e.g. individual stallholders at Rayleigh Lanes) and other businesses affected by restrictions but not legally forced to close. This round paid out £163,400 to 115 businesses. The second round of ARG targeted a similar cohort of businesses but also included for the first time home and mobile businesses (such as taxi drivers and mobile beauticians). This round paid out £1,209,492 to 452 businesses.
- 4.5 Lessons learned meant that when the third round of ARG became available the Council was able to respond to the challenge by providing additional support to those businesses who were only able to reopen upon the lifting of restrictions in May 2021, including vendors of food/drink, indoor entertainment venues and halls, and accommodation businesses. This round is aiming to distribute around £1m to over 100 businesses.
- 4.6 Separate to the ARG, ECC made funding available to support necessary adaptations to business premises in the form of the Essex Business Adaptation Fund (EBAF). £53,000 was distributed by the Economic Development team to 38 businesses under this scheme.
- 4.7 In total, the Council will have distributed around £30m of grant funding to local businesses since the start of the pandemic.

5 OFFICER WELFARE

- 5.1 As reported in the 5 January 2021 report to the Committee, the Council has undertaken a survey of its staff. There was a good response rate of over 70%. The survey was split in to 3 parts: Wellbeing, Engagement and Occupational Stress.

- Wellbeing - There was a high level of awareness of 7 of the 8 main forms of wellbeing support offered to staff – between 82% and 95%. The outlier (Parental Leave) had a lower level of awareness (53%), which is to be expected as it is a statutory entitlement which is only available to working parents. The two most beneficial forms of support during the pandemic have been 'Support from line manager' (52%) and 'Agile approach to working hours' (42%). Staff made some suggestions for additional forms of support, and these are being explored by HR, Health and Safety, and the Leadership Team.
- Engagement – Staff were highly positive about the Corporate Updates via Zoom and the weekly emails they receive from the Acting Managing Director. There was a good response to the weekly Assistant Director blogs and some suggestions for how to make these more accessible to those who do not regularly access the intranet. In summary staff told us that they had noticed a marked improvement in engagement in the last six months and as a result felt a stronger sense of community and belonging to 'Team Rochford'. More than half of staff felt that the Leadership Team had it 'about right'. There was evidence that 1:1 meetings (60%) and Team Meetings (62%) are happening across the Council, despite the challenges of remote working. As this is not yet consistent in all areas Managers are being supported to work towards 100% compliance in this area; through HR workshops and support from their Assistant Directors. There were 48 general suggestions made for other forms of engagement and these are being explored by the relevant officers.
- Occupational Stress - The vast majority of departments across the authority flagged as having high levels of work intensity and large volumes of work, with some concern expressed regarding the ability to take regular breaks. Nationally, stress, depression or anxiety account for 55% of all working days lost due to work-related ill health. At the Council, the pandemic has undoubtedly caused increased pressures, with issues around IT capacity and available resource within teams contributing to the impact on officers.

- 5.2 However, systems are in place to support employees. In addition to line manager support and the agile working hours mentioned above, the Council's 'Managing Occupational Stress' Policy provides guidance on recognising signs and symptoms, tips on prevention, as well as highlighting the physical and psychological effects. The Council has trained mental health first aiders and further support mechanisms such as the Employee Assistance Programme which provides dedicated counselling. Prior to the pandemic, the Council delivered stress management training for employees, and we are currently providing Resilience and Positive Psychology Workshops to staff.
- 5.3 The Council's stress risk assessment template follows the Health and Safety Executive's management standards for tackling work-related stress. This provides a structured framework and is designed to help managers start the potentially difficult conversations with their employees, while looking closely at

known factors such as demands, control, support, relationships, role and change in order to help resolve the difficulties they are experiencing.

- 5.4 The Acting Managing Director presented the results to the employees via two Zoom corporate update meetings. There was a high level of attendance at the updates and good feedback about the levels of engagement within the Council, the new Staff Development Programme and the supportive environment that officers create for each other. There were queries raised about the Council's Flexi Scheme and the Acting Managing Director reassured officers that this was being addressed and clarity would soon be offered on this matter and how it could complement new, more agile, ways of working.

6 OFFICER AND MEMBER TRAINING

- 6.1 Following Member feedback that they required skills development and training to assist them in working in a digital environment, it has been arranged with the Standards Committee that a programme of training will be developed for members in conjunction with Microsoft training for staff. A skills gap questionnaire has been sent to all Members to ensure that the training is relevant to their needs.
- 6.2 The Staff Development Programme launched in March 2021 with the purpose of developing officers in the skills required to operate in a more agile, digital first culture. This is a key part of the Connect Transformation Programme to ensure our residents receive their services in modern and responsive ways. The impact of the pandemic on many officers has been significant and therefore resilience workshops became a high priority and have been well received.
- 6.3 Members previously approved a 12-month extra resource in HR to support the development and initial implementation of the Connect programme which has delivered the intended results. Between March and May 2021 a total of 18 workshops were delivered (9 by external trainers and 9 by the HR team) with excellent evaluation results which show a high correlation between the intended learning outcomes and the actual benefits felt. Additional workshops are planned over the coming months, including management development modules and Microsoft training. From the Autumn the programme will continue but at a slower pace as it embeds in to 'business as usual' for the HR team.

7 PUBLIC MEETINGS

Venue Hire

- 7.1 The Coronavirus Act 2020 and the Flexibility Regulations were introduced in Parliament on 19 March 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and received royal assent on 25 March 2020. The Flexibility Regulations came into force on 4 April 2020 and provided local authorities with the flexibility to

hold remote meetings during the pandemic until midnight on 6 May 2021. The Government confirmed on 25 March 2021 that the Flexibility Regulations would cease to apply with effect from 7 May 2021 at which point councils should revert to holding physical, rather than remote, meetings. A legal challenge (Hertfordshire County Council & Ors v Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government 2021) was determined on 28 April 2021 and confirmed that council meetings would have to be held in person with effect from 7 May 2021.

- 7.2 The Government at the same time emphasised that physical Council meetings must be consistent with public health guidance regarding health, hygiene and social distancing. This has presented the Council with significant challenges, given that the size and fixed layout of the chamber means that it is impossible to COVID SECURE. Work was conducted to identify venues that would be suitable for holding physical Council meetings and to be able to accommodate such meetings in accordance with public health guidance on health, hygiene and social distancing.
- 7.3 A range of other venue options were explored, which proved to be a challenging exercise as staff at many venues were working remotely; there was often no telephone contact and responses to emails was often not timely and emails had to be repeated more than once. Swayne Park School was chosen as offering the best level of accommodation for the cost. The school is able to accommodate the Council's meeting dates for 2021/22 and has projection equipment and a portable hearing loop that can be used for meetings although the Council provides its own sound equipment. The school lays out the room for all meetings with tables and chairs, as directed, and in accordance with social distancing measures. The cost of hiring the hall per meeting is £200 totalling £6,600 per annum. The school is able to securely store the Council's audio visual and other equipment at no additional cost.
- 7.4 Officers also considered the following:
- Clements Hall Main Sports Hall
 - Apton Hall
 - Rayleigh Club
 - Megacentre
 - Rayleigh Leisure Centre
 - King Edmund School
 - Greensward Academy
 - Fitzwimarc School

- Hullbridge Community Centre
- Rawreth Village Hall
- Great Wakering Community Centre
- Hawthorn Centre
- Hawkwell Village Hall
- Rochford Parish Council
- Rayleigh Town Council
- Hockley Parish Council
- Mill Arts and Events Centre
- Saxon Hall
- Castle Point Borough Council
- Southend Borough Council

7.5 In practice whilst the meetings are open to the public to attend, the Council must control and manage attendance numbers in accordance with the COVID-19 restrictions in place. There is no option for the Council to hold a hybrid meeting being a mixture of a physical meeting and remote meeting. As things stand, all of the Council's public meetings will be held in Sweyne Park School unless otherwise stated on the agenda. The Council, under the current Government guidelines, must maintain social distancing measures and ensure that meetings are carried out in a COVID SECURE environment. Full risk assessments and careful planning have been carried out to ensure that all public meetings are operated in a safe environment. The Democratic Services team will continue to review the arrangements and options for venues especially as restrictions are lifted post 19 July.

Audio Equipment

- 7.6 The Council has had to purchase new equipment to ensure that public meetings can be heard and recorded. This proved a difficult exercise as a number of companies providing this service have not survived the pandemic and have either ceased trading or have merged with other companies, which has led to less competition and increased costs.
- 7.7 A number of different options were explored, ranging from hiring delegate microphones for each attendee, with web streaming; however, this option was the most expensive, with initial quotes received from 3 companies, the cheapest of which was £4,038.00 per meeting hire, totalling £133,254 per annum. Excluding webcasting from the quotations and hiring out delegate

microphones for all attendees at meetings with audio recording was also explored, with the cheapest quotation received at a cost of £2,405 per meeting, totalling £79,365.00 pa. The cheapest quotation for purchasing the equipment was £35,305.97. However, it was considered that this was not a viable option at the current time in the light of the planned relocation of Council accommodation to the Freight House, which will require the purchase of new audio-visual equipment.

- 7.8 The Council has purchased 4 radio microphones and 2 lapel microphones, plus floor standing and table top microphone stands, an audio recording system, amplification equipment, 4 speakers and stands and all necessary leads/connectors, batteries and disks and flight deck to control sound, hearing loop and audio recording. In addition, a 2-year Ofcom licence had to be purchased for use of the radio microphones. The total purchase cost was £4,400.00.

8 RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 There is a risk that if the Council fails to learn lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic it will not be well placed to deal with any future emergency situations. A programme of Real Time Learning has been running, looking at the experience of dealing with the pandemic and applying it to the way we work now. For example, reviewing how we deal with our communications and the implications of increased working from home for our Business Continuity plans.
- 8.2 In addition, there is an opportunity to apply learning from the pandemic more generally to improve future operating practices across the Council in maximising the efficiency and cost effectiveness of service delivery e.g. through the acceleration of flexible working practices and increased digitalisation.

9 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 In July 2020, the Council made a commitment to work towards becoming carbon neutral by 2030 for its own operations. The Council is also committed to supporting local residents and businesses reduce their own carbon footprint. There are no immediate implications for that commitment arising from this report, but this will be kept under review.

10 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 The financial impact of COVID-19 has been an evolving picture throughout 2020/21 and this uncertainty will continue into 2021/22. Managing the 2020/21 budget was significantly more challenging than usual, due to the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 on the Council's finances, staff, residents, and the local economy.

- 10.2 The Council incurred unplanned expenditure across several areas, including support for leisure services and increased waste and litter collection costs, as well as losses across most income lines, most notably in relation to car parking. In total in the financial year 2020/21 just over £1m of additional expenditure was incurred and £1.1m of income (excluding Council Tax and Business Rates) was lost. The Government provided £1.1m of general grant funding and just under £0.5m of specific grant funding as well as c.£0.6m through the income compensation scheme, meaning that these pressures could largely be contained in the short-term.
- 10.3 For 2021/22 and beyond the position is uncertain, but it is expected that ongoing pressures will exceed the Council's general COVID-19 grant allocation of £0.34m. The income compensation scheme will also continue for the first quarter of 2021/22. A COVID-19 smoothing reserve has been created to help mitigate the ongoing impact and the position will continue to be closely monitored and reported to Members and the Government.

11 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 The Council continues to monitor and adhere to any further Government guidance and regulations.

12 PARISH IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1 The regulations on Council meetings also applies to all Parish Councils.

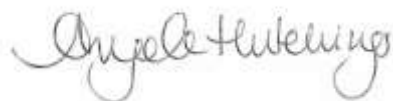
13 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 13.1 An Equality Impact Assessment has not been completed as no decision is being made

14 RECOMMENDATION

- 14.1 It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES**

To note this report.



Acting Managing Director

Background Papers:-

None.

For further information please contact Angela Hutchings on:-

Phone: 01702 318169

Email: Angela.hutchings@rochford.gov.uk

If you would like this report in large print, Braille or another language please contact 01702 318111.