
COVID-19: INITIAL LESSONS LEARNED

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report is a summary of the key learning that the Council has drawn from its experiences of managing the COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020 to July 2020.
- 1.2 This report updates Review Committee on the lessons learned and how those lessons have been incorporated into the Council's planning for any future local outbreak of COVID-19. The Council continues to learn from its experiences and will continue to keep its responses under review as the local and national response to the pandemic evolves.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 On 11 March 2020 the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a pandemic, pointing to the over 118,000 cases of the coronavirus illness in over 110 countries and territories around the world and the sustained risk of further global spread. On 23 March 2020 this culminated in the Prime Minister announcing a complete lockdown of the UK as the Government began to enforce measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
- 2.2 The Essex Resilience Forum is the county's emergency planning body under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. It is a multi-agency partnership, made up of local councils, emergency services, health providers, the voluntary sector and many more organisations - working together to plan and prepare for a multi-agency response to a major emergency. Throughout this emergency, the ERF has instituted a Strategic Co-ordinating Group ("SCG") to oversee and direct operations required to prepare, mitigate and manage the impact of COVID-19 of which the Council's Strategic Director has been part.
- 2.3 Since the beginning of this crisis the Council has responded to the requirements of Government and its advisers to manage the impacts of the pandemic within the district against a backdrop of continued financial pressure. When the crisis struck the Council was agile in its response. We moved at pace, used an innovative approach and worked flexibly to support our communities and keep services running.
- 2.4 In July 2020, officers (via their Assistant Directors) and elected Members were invited to contribute their views in a lessons learned exercise. The high-level findings of that exercise are set out in paragraph 4 below.

3 WHAT THE COUNCIL DID

Communications

- 3.1 From the beginning of the crisis the Council realised that it needed to be a trusted source of information for its residents. Information was being released

by Government on an almost hourly basis and that information was detailed, complicated and frightening. It became clear early on that it was not always clear what was fact and what was speculation or even mistruth; for example, misinformation about 5G and criminals taking advantage of the situation by inventing new scams. It was important to give the Government advice clearly and without embellishment so that residents could be informed and be confident about the advice that they were receiving. We issued daily briefing statements using all the channels available to us. Very often these briefing notes were picked up by local news media. These briefing notes have reduced in frequency over time, but they still hold true to the simplicity of providing updated information, straight from Government.

- 3.2 The Council quickly created a specific page of its website and signposted that page from a highly visible banner the website's home page. This created a dedicated repository of useful information which was updated as guidance changed and provided a one stop "go to" reference page for residents.

Agile Working

- 3.3 Anticipating the requirement for lockdown before the national announcement was made, the Council moved its staff from its offices at South Street, Rochford and the Civic Suite, Rayleigh; taking virtually the whole 175 strong workforce into a remote working environment. Only a small cohort of approximately a dozen people physically remained on site because it was not possible for them to work remotely. The office was closed to the public and we worked with our partners RRAVS, CA and OACS to relocate them also.
- 3.4 The Council was midway through its project to migrate its applications to the Azure cloud and at the beginning 95% of employees were equipped with the technology to ensure that they could work remotely. The remaining 5% were completed at pace to ensure everyone who could be migrated was migrated to the cloud. Laptops were distributed to staff and to Members. Mobile telephones were also distributed to employees who needed them. We also arranged for specialist furniture to be transported to those who needed adaptations in order to do their job. Service areas deployed business continuity plans with the primary objective to ensure, for far as possible, that the Council would be able to continue to deliver services and that staff could be redeployed where relevant, to assist front line service provision or to respond to the additional requirements of the crisis. It is important to remember that at the same time as adjusting to a new way of delivering Council services, our employees themselves were adjusting to the impending pandemic threat in their own lives, including juggling childcare, home schooling, bereavement and other personal pressures.
- 3.5 Against that backdrop the Council continued to strive to provide the best front-line services possible to its residents even when the business continuity workaround was sub-optimal. For example, when the reception was shut, we were unable to use the switchboard and telephony hardware as the age of the equipment meant that it was incompatible with remote working. The problem

affected Customer Services Agents' direct dial numbers so they have had to use mobiles and these have been the numbers advertised. All other staff were able to divert their direct dial numbers to their mobiles. The Customer Services Agents also increased the availability of the web chat facility, often through extended contact hours. However, the challenge of working without a switchboard meant that a decision was taken to bring forward the planned procurement of a new telephony solution as an early project under the Connect Programme. Another example is the development of a new online licensing applications for new taxi drivers and chauffeurs, providing them with information on how to be COVID secure.

Continued Service Delivery

3.6 As part of our commitment to continued delivery of "business as usual" the Council's workforce achieved the following:

- Maintained regularity of waste collection services despite 15% increase in volume of waste presented for collection, especially when ECC's household recycling centres were closed to the public
- Maintained street cleansing and open spaces maintenance despite increased an estimated doubling of usage and littering.
- Kept our parks, wood and the country park open for visitors; although car parks were closed at the height of the pandemic in accordance with Government guidance to discourage visitors from afar when the advice was to exercise within walking distance. As soon as it was safe to re-open the car parks, we did on the 13 May 2020.
- Play Spaces were closed on the 23 March 2020 closed, with risk assessments and suitable mitigation undertaken for each play area, allowing them to re-open on 7 July 2020.
- Various legal agreements and leases were completed during the lockdown period. The lease on the Kings Head was completed giving additional capacity for temporary accommodation.

Additional Service Delivery

3.7 Continuing to offer our services during a global pandemic was not enough, however. In addition, the Government made several additional demands of local government which it required the Council to deliver at pace. These were:

- To support the upper tier local authority Essex County Council (ECC) to reach out to and assist those defined as "clinically extremely vulnerable" who had been advised to "shield" by the NHS. This was a total of 62,089 people in Essex who were registered with Government as needing to take extra precautions during the height of the pandemic, specifically not to leave their homes.

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- Whilst ECC was responsible for distribution of free food parcels, medicine deliveries and basic care from the National Shielding Service; 1 in 10 of all registered residents asked for other help with basic needs i.e. people who did not have friends or family to support and were nevertheless vulnerable and needed additional support for things like shopping, collecting prescriptions, dog walking and simply befriending. The Rochford District Community Hub was mobilised in response by the Council working in partnership with the MegaCentre, churches, local food banks, Rayleigh, Rochford and District Association for Voluntary Service (RRAVS) and over 250 local volunteers from across the district, who all signed up to support the local community where they can. There was a dedicated helpline which was open 7 days a week. At the height of its demand the Hub was supporting 200 calls per week. The Hub has been scaled back now as demand has decreased and the Government has paused shielding, but the Hub remains poised to be stood up again if needed and represents a fantastic cross sector community achievement.
 - Moved 10 rough sleepers from the street to temporary accommodation.
 - Environmental Health Officers protected the district's businesses and their customers by providing advice and support at the beginning of the crisis when many businesses were ordered to be closed. As restrictions have begun to be eased, the Environmental Health Team continues to work with businesses to ensure that they are COVID secure in accordance with the law and relevant guidelines and that they can continue to operate safely. This has been particularly successful for licensed premises, where licensing officers have also provided essential support both to businesses and to the police in ensuring COVID secure compliance.
 - Environmental Health Officers continue to be in the front line for the NHS Test & Trace service as part of ECC's Local Outbreak Control Plan. (ECC is the upper tier authority with responsibility for Test & Trace pursuant to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) (No.3) Regulations 2020.) They are the single points of contact for ECC/PHE for the reporting updates, trends and data. They are operating on a 24/7 shift rota to manage notifications of any local outbreaks. In the event of a local outbreak in which ECC requires the assistance of the EHOs they will work under direction from the Director of Public Health and other authorised bodies under the legislation.
 - Distributed £17,555,000 of grants to 1514 local businesses (in tranches of £10,000 and £25,000) eligible under the Government's Small Business Grants Fund and Retail, Hospitality & Leisure Grants Fund.
 - Distributed £757,500 of grants to 149 other businesses (in tranches of £2500 - £10,000) who were not eligible for other Government schemes under the Government's Discretionary Grants Fund.

- Implemented the necessary standing orders and technology to enable the Council's public meetings to be held remotely.
- Applied for the Returning High Streets Safely Fund; working with the Chambers of Trade and voluntary sector partners to create a brand, a website and public safety signage to promote safe use of our town centres and high streets.
- Created a new pavement licensing policy to make it easier for premises to use outside space and make their businesses COVID secure.
- Were the first local authority in Essex to set up new virtual arrangement for new vehicle licensing applicants.
- Review of our Emergency Plans to enable us to respond safely to an incident during Covid19, in particular where people would need to be accommodated following evacuation.
- Supported the operation of a Mobile Testing Unit at Rayleigh Leisure Centre to conduct up to 2,500 tests per week.
- Provided free car parking for NHS staff and carers and relaxed enforcement for all users at the height of the pandemic. Enforcement recommenced on 1 June 2020.

4 FINANCIAL IMPACT

- 4.1 In common with most local authorities, the pandemic is expected to have a significant impact on the Council's financial position, both in 2020-21 and future years, although the full impact is not yet clear and will depend on how quickly the wider economy recovers.
- 4.2 An early briefing note setting out the expected impacts and risks of COVID-19 on the Council's financial position was shared with Members in May, and the position continues to be closely monitored, with a more detailed update to be provided to Executive in September.
- 4.3 Income losses, particularly from car parking, are likely to cause the most material pressures for the Council in 2020-21. In addition, some one-off costs, most notably to support the continued provision of leisure services in the district, will be incurred. The Council has received just over £1m of grant funding from Government to mitigate these pressures, with the promise of additional government support to offset income losses later in the year. The Council will seek to mitigate any residual losses through in-year savings as far as possible but has a sufficient level of reserves to draw on if required as a last resort.
- 4.4 The Council already faced a challenging situation to balance the budget from 2021-22 onwards, so the impact of COVID-19 on future years budgets will be

considered carefully as part of the Council's MTFs process. In particular any reductions in Council Tax and Business Rates collected during 2020-21 will impact on the Collection Fund position for the Council's 2021-22 budget, although Government has indicated that it will allow any losses to be spread over three years to help smooth this pressure. There is also a possibility that some of the income losses/cost pressures experienced in 2020-21 could have a "long-tail", with impacts still being felt into 2021-22 and beyond. This will continue to be closely monitored over the financial year, with assumptions being updated for budget setting as appropriate. Members are likely to have to take difficult decisions to ensure the financial sustainability of the Council in the medium term, unless significant additional ongoing resources are agreed for local authorities in the multi-year budget settlement, expected to be announced following the Comprehensive Spending Review in the autumn.

- 4.5 The Council has worked with the District Council's Network and other sectoral bodies to lobby Government for appropriate funding to ensure all COVID-19 losses are fully compensated. It has provided detailed estimates of all its pressures to MHCLG each month to inform the governmental analysis of the impact of the pandemic on local government finances.

5 LESSONS LEARNED

- 5.1 A request for feedback on the Council's performance was made in June. Feedback was captured from all Assistant Directors and their workforce. Nineteen elected Members also submitted responses to the request for feedback. The limited number of responses from elected Members makes it difficult to qualify whether opinions strong expressed are widely supported and so responses must be read in that light. It is important to recognise that feedback was sought to highlight opportunities for the Council to learn as an organisation and not to ascribe blame or fault at the door of any individual. The consensus of the feedback is included within this report, but the raw data is not. This is because by its nature, it is impossible to redact or anonymise.
- 5.2 Feedback was qualitative, rather than quantitative, and asked the following questions:
- What went well?
 - What could have been done better?
 - What should have been done differently?
- 5.3 A fourth question was also asked – "who/what deserves special recognition?" in order to identify the individuals or organisation which people feel deserves particular praise. This information cannot be anonymised and so has not been included in this report.

What went well?

5.4 The purpose of this question is to elicit those things of which respondents felt most proud.

5.5 Communications, in particular cross party working, the Rochford District Community Hub and the Council's response to supporting businesses were generally seen as successes by those members who fed back:

"The work to set up the community hub went very well, it had officers, community leaders and members from different parties working together which greatly helped. The support from all parties was welcome in ensuring that a valuable service could be delivered to our residents and that it did not become a political football to be kicked around. Officers worked in different roles to support this which was good to see. A brand new service in the district was set up with over 300 checked volunteers, with a helpline that was staffed 7 days a week, with volunteers covering the whole district supported by local community champions from all parties in each area."

"The excellent signage in our high streets and shop windows, so quickly done when instruction to open was received from Government. Well done!"

5.6 Officer responses also acknowledged the achievements of the Community Hub but, unsurprisingly, were also proud of their ability to maintain continuity of service delivery and moving to remote working. They especially identified delivery of new initiatives and the overall culture of pulling together as a team.

"Trust in staff was genuine and has been rewarded in positive behaviours and good survey feedback. Most officers just got on with the task in hand. Not a single person refused to be redeployed when asked."

What could have been done better?

5.7 This question is intended to capture those things where respondents generally agreed with what was done but have suggestions as to how it could have been improved.

5.8 Member responses expressed some concern about delays in setting up the Community Hub especially where it appeared that some communities had mobilised more quickly; concern that the Council was being reactive to Government missives rather than proactive and should have shown greater community leadership. Concerns were also raised regarding the shortcomings of the mobile telephone solution to the remote operation of the Council's switchboard function. In particular inability of residents to get through to officers or confusion arising from the multiple dial options. Finally, there were multiple concerns about the robustness of the Council's emergency planning and business continuity processes, including expectations of officers and the preparedness of the Council to deal with the pandemic. There was a clear requirement for the Council to improve its emergency planning response.

- 5.9 Officer responses tended to focus on the operational response to the emergency and the efficacy of deploying business continuity plans in the face of a global pandemic. They raised questions as to whether their business continuity plans (which would normally be used for short periods of time e.g. during an IT outage) were fit for purpose in the face of COVID-19. They also reflected on the ongoing risks surrounding those service areas which had not been able to work remotely and especially those where there was reliance on paper processes and manual handling.

What should have been done differently?

- 5.10 This question should tease out the issues about which respondents felt the strongest e.g. because they disagree with what was done.
- 5.11 In the Member responses, pace and pro-activity were the clear headings of feedback here. There was a strong feeling that the Council should have done more and more quickly “*without waiting for instructions from a higher authority*”. The responses did not particularise what might have been done but there was a reflection that the Council should have shown greater community leadership.
- 5.12 Officers reflected on the relative lack of resilience within a small organisation and the sustainability of short-term workarounds to what will clearly be a longer-term problem. They identified better synergies between emergency plans, communications and strategic leadership as areas for improvement.

6 NEXT STEPS

- 6.1 The Council is working on its Workplace Restoration Plan which will enable the South Street reception to open to the public for booked appointments on 1st September 2020. Priority staff will be able to return and all communal areas of South Street will be COVID secure. Throughout September there will be a staggered opening of the larger team areas, with changes to layout. From 1st October 2020 the reconfigured offices will be open to staff to use rooms and desks which they have pre-booked. The Civic Suite remains closed to the public and RRAVS, CA and OACS are not receiving members of the public currently. This will be kept under review.
- 6.2 The Council has reviewed its business continuity plans in the light of its experiences to date. A COVID-19 Local Outbreak Response Plan has been put in place and is intended to operate as a whole Council business continuity plan in the event that there is an increase in cases of COVID-19 in the district and as part of the Council’s reasonable worst-case scenario planning as we approach the winter flu season.
- 6.3 The Council has also reviewed its Connect Programme in the light of experiences to date and a report was presented to Executive on 8th July 2020. One of the key objectives of the Connect Programme is to achieve flexible working. Whilst the working from home scenario that our employees are

currently experiencing is not the one that we would have planned, it does highlight the opportunities that Connect can achieve culturally and also identify those impediments which we need to address in order to successfully optimise flexible working.

- 6.4 Feedback given will continue to be reviewed in the spirit in which it was given, so that the Council can continue to evolve its response to the ongoing pandemic. The Council has initiated a programme of real time learning to maintain an ongoing assessment of our service delivery during COVID-19 and to enable application of what we learn from our experiences. This will be on the agenda for the Leadership Team meetings on a monthly basis, linked to the Covid19 Service Area Risk Register updates.

7 RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 COVID-19 has not been created as a specific risk in the Corporate Risk Register but is acknowledged as a risk that could impact across the range of all corporate operations. Accordingly, all corporate risks have been re-assessed for impact. These were included in the Review of the Council's Risk Management Framework and Corporate Risk Register that was presented to the Audit Committee on 28th July 2020. The impact of COVID-19 was identified as an area that could impact on corporate governance going forward in the 2019/20 Annual Governance Statement. An outline of the risks and the approach to be followed on 2020/21 going forward is detailed in Section 5 of the Statement. A draft version, which can be changed up to the date of signing off the final accounts for 2019/20, was presented to the Audit Committee on 28th July 2020.

8 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 This report does not have any direct resource implications. Any actions agreed as a result of the lessons learned will need to be appropriately costed and agreed before implementation.
- 8.2 The wider financial risks facing the Council as a result of Covid-19 are set out at Section 4.

9 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 There are none arising directly out of this report. The Council will continue to monitor government guidance and amendments in legislation to make the necessary changes where needed.

10 PARISH IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 There are none arising directly out of this report.

11 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

11.1 An Equality Impact Assessment has not been completed as no decision is being made.

12 RECOMMENDATION

12.1 It is proposed that the Committee **RESOLVES**

That the report be noted.



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Background Papers: -

None.

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