

Review Committee – 5 January 2021

Minutes of the meeting of the **Review Committee** held on **5 January 2021** when there were present:-

Chairman: Cllr J C Burton
Vice-Chairman: Cllr D J Sperring

Cllr R R Dray	Cllr R Milne
Cllr Mrs J R Gooding	Cllr Mrs C A Pavelin
Cllr N J Hookway	Cllr Mrs L Shaw
Cllr M Hoy	Cllr P J Shaw
Cllr Mrs J E McPherson	Cllr M G Wilkinson
Cllr Mrs C M Mason	

VISITING MEMBERS

Cllrs D L Belton; D S Efde; Mrs C E Roe; C M Stanley; A L Williams and S E Wootton.

OFFICERS PRESENT

A Hutchings	- Acting Managing Director
M Harwood-White	- Assistant Director, Assets & Commercial
M Hotten	- Assistant Director, Place & Environment
A Law	- Assistant Director, Legal & Democratic
N Lucas	- Assistant Director, Resources
L Moss	- Assistant Director, People & Communities
D Tribe	- Assistant Director, Transformation & Customer
S Worthington	- Principal Democratic & Corporate Services Officer
L Morris	- Democratic Services Officer

1 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 1 December 2020 were approved as a correct record and would be signed in due course by the Chairman.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllrs J C Burton, R R Dray, R Milne and D J Sperring each declared a non-pecuniary interest in item 7 of the agenda relating to the Key Decisions Document and specifically the item relating to the former Crown Hill public conveniences by virtue of membership of Rayleigh Town Council. Cllr R R Dray was, in addition, acquainted with a member of the public who was interested in leasing the premises.

3 COVID 19 LESSONS LEARNED REPORT

(Note: Cllr N J Hookway declared a non-pecuniary interest in this item by virtue of having a business which was the subject of government grants during COVID.)

The Committee considered the report of the Acting Managing Director addressing lessons learned from the pandemic.

Members expressed thanks to Council officers for all their hard work during the pandemic under challenging circumstances.

In response to a Member query as to the status of the report appendices, the Acting Managing Director confirmed that none of the information included was confidential in nature despite an erroneous watermark which would be removed.

Officers advised, in response to a Member question relating to hybrid mail referenced in paragraph 3.4 of the report, that hybrid mail was a small scale solution the Council had used previously. During the pandemic this solution had been used more widely with, e.g., letters composed in Microsoft Word being sent to a third party who had then organised printing and postage of the correspondence to all necessary recipients; this had the additional benefit of resulting in savings to the Council in respect of staffing, postage, printing and stationery costs anticipated to be in excess of £10,000.

Responding to a Member query about telephones, officers confirmed that a new soft phone system, RingCentral, was in the process of being rolled out to officers. This project had been brought forward during the pandemic and staff had now received training. Those who had the software installed on their devices were able to make calls but were not yet able to receive calls. The current telephone numbers needed to be migrated over to the RingCentral system and this was not without challenge; it was anticipated that the system would go live around the end of January. This should yield savings of around £20,000 over the period of a 2-year framework, which could also be extended for a further 2 years.

In response to a question relating to paragraph 3.27 of the report and whether all laptops had been delivered or whether more were needed, officers advised that all Members had been offered RDC laptops and those who had indicated they wanted them had been provided with the devices. There had been problems in the early days of the pandemic with delays in delivery of ordered laptops, particularly with officers also needing them at short notice in order to work remotely. It was emphasised that if there were any Members who had not previously indicated they needed a laptop who now would like one they should advise the Assistant Director, Transformation & Customer or IT and these would be provided. It was noted that Cllr Wilkinson would like a laptop to be provided.

A Member made the observation that, in respect of paragraph 3 of the report relating to the printing of documents, at the beginning of the pandemic when there were around 3 Group Leader meetings per week the point was made to the then Managing Director and Council Leader that rather than planning notification letters being posted to residents, these were posted up outside the application premises at a time when the country was being told to stay at home.

The Managing Director did not, at any time when questioned about this, indicate that this was only temporary until third party printing could be set up, but rather indicated that notification letters would not be printed and sent out during the pandemic; this was not, however, reflected in the report.

A Member emphasised that emergency planning had been an area of concern for some Members. Reference was made to paragraph 3.6 of the report which states that the top national risk is pandemic influenza. The point was made that the current COVID-19 pandemic was not very different to pandemic influenza for which the national government response would also be lockdown. The question was asked as to what emergency planning was in place therefore for pandemic influenza. The point was made that if adequate emergency planning provision had been in place for pandemic influenza, this should have worked seamlessly for COVID-19. Reference was made to paragraph 3.18 of the report which states that ...'it became clear that the council's switchboard hardware and software was incompatible with remote use' and the question was raised as to how the council got to that point. The point was also made that although paragraph 4.2 detailed what had worked well during the pandemic there lacked detail around what had not worked; it was important that admissions of failure were also made in order for important lessons to be learned for the future.

Another concern was raised in respect of officer and Member welfare. The point was made that a Councillor who had attended an on site meeting of Investment Board in March was suffering the effects of Coronavirus; however, the Member claimed that no-one who had attended the meeting was notified of this. He asked that it be Council policy in future that in any pandemic situations all such instances be reported to Members and officers who might be directly affected.

In response to the point raised about emergency planning the Acting Managing Director emphasised that the national risk register cascades across the whole of the UK response, through the Essex Resilience Forum to the District Council as part of our responsibilities under the Civil Contingencies Act. When pandemic influenza has been on the risk register previously it has been in the context of SARS and avian flu, both of which are epidemiologically different viruses to COVID 19 and the impacts were primarily linked to the health sector. The Council's corporate risk register deals with risk mitigation in the event of staffing resources being negatively impacted by seasonal flu. The scale and speed of COVID 19, including its mutations, is unprecedented and the fact that it is not localised, but rather global, effectively means that all the rules have been re-written. The Council was prepared, insofar as the infrastructure was in place to support a sub-regional and national response through the UK government response and the Resilience Forum. Nobody understood the impact of this pandemic in March/April 2020 and, arguably, we are still learning today. We have business continuity plans in place for managing pinches and fluctuations in staff and resource management. We did not have a plan in place for the complete decant of the Council offices in less than 10 days, which is what had to happen when the first national lockdown was introduced. In response to an additional point made by another Member that business

continuity plans should include provision for working from home, she emphasised that the Council's business continuity plan did provide for working from home but for the decant of an office, not all of the Council's offices and its business operations in both Rochford and Rayleigh.

She further stressed that she was unaware of the instance of Coronavirus infection referred to, but at the beginning of the national lockdown, reporting and contact tracing was not in place at that point. What we were doing at that stage – and what we continue to do – is to respond to information provided by government and colleagues in Public Health England through the Essex Resilience Forum in order to deliver a co-ordinated response across the whole of greater Essex. In respect of the point made about planning consultation letters referred to in paragraph 3.1 of the report, she reiterated that the arrangements in place at the beginning of the pandemic do not currently exist now, hence the use of the word "temporary".

In response to a Member question as to whether last minute advice and guidance from government impacted on how well prepared the Council was in dealing with the pandemic, the Acting Managing Director confirmed that emergency planning has historically been linked to business continuity, thus dealing with temporary losses of staff and/or resources usually associated with, e.g., natural disasters such as flooding, or an IT outage or an incident at the airport that would have a sudden, unexpected and tangible impact that was temporary in nature. Emergency planning puts things in place in recovery mode to deal with a particular situation and then put things back to normal as quickly as possible. What is so different with COVID 19 is that we are 9 months on and still not at the end of it. The emergency has continued and has fluctuated as things come and go. As a nation we are still learning as the epidemiology and science develops and as we understand more about how the disease is transmitted and how people respond to it and the impacts in terms of individual health and traits among particular demographics. At the beginning of the pandemic we were all just washing our hands because that was what we were told to do; we were following government guidance and there was a lot of misinformation that information that couldn't be corroborated and lots of opinion; and the news was full of pictures from China and Italy which didn't seem to resonate in this country. A strategic co-ordinating group was set up by the Chief Constable with partners from across the entire system and we began to plan our response to this emerging threat. We have tacked alongside government guidance and challenged and also escalated when necessary, but this is always going to be reactive to a certain extent.

In response to a Member question about why the Great Wakering amenity vehicle had not been reinstated, officers advised that this had been stopped initially as it was difficult to run it while maintaining social distancing and it was stopped as a result of a risk assessment conducted by Suez concluding that it was too high risk to continue. Different ways of providing the service and different suppliers were all explored but ultimately the risk was still too high – Basildon and Tendring Councils reached the same conclusions with similar services they had run prior to COVID-19,

Officers confirmed, in response to a Member concern that although Members could get by with Office 365 there was still a need for training, that Member IT training that would cover the use of O365 that had been scheduled prior to the first COVID-19 lockdown would be revisited by the Assistant Director, Transformation and Customer, as well as identifying continuing support.

Officers advised, in response to a Member query about the distribution of business grants for November/December 2020, that the Council continued to pay out government business grants and had done so steadily for November and December in the same way as it had done since such grants were first introduced. It was, however, emphasised that the complexity and number of different grant schemes had increased; there were several different schemes currently in operation including a scheme for businesses that were open but affected by the additional restrictions; the closed scheme for businesses that had to close completely and an additional restrictions grant that was more discretionary and further schemes have just been announced in the last day or so which the Council will also be seeking to pay out to businesses.

In response to a Member question as to whether the RDC Outbreak Response Team had met, as detailed on page 6.17 of the report, the Acting Managing Director confirmed that this had met, with the latest meeting having taken place earlier today. It was linked to the Essex Resilience Forum; however, it was not incepted during the national restrictions in November because there was no increased need to do so at that time, during 'firebreak' restrictions. The Outbreak Response Team also convened following the Tier 4 announcement in November.

Responding to a supplementary question as to whether Members had been advised of the Outbreak Response Team meeting, the Acting Managing Director confirmed that an action log was kept of items discussed by the Team although minutes were not kept. Members are notified of the outcomes of meetings including, e.g., redeployment; this was driven by the actions determined at the meetings. Concern was raised by the Member that, given the high rates of transmission within Essex, Members should have been advised of the convening of these outbreak meetings, had not had sight of the redeployment plan or been aware of Environmental Health being the single point of contact for track and trace, testing arrangements for the Mega Centre in Rayleigh or the Council's South Street offices; insufficient information was being provided to Members to ascertain whether the Outbreak plan was being followed or not. The Acting Managing Director advised that the Essex Resilience Forum was currently meeting daily. Information arising from these meetings was official sensitive and could therefore not be shared more widely. It had been agreed that the primary communication channel was via the Chairman of the Essex Chiefs and Leaders meeting – Leader of Tendring District Council - who accordingly disseminates information to Members that is permitted to be shared; the PFCC briefs Members of Parliament direct. She confirmed that the testing conducted at the Mega Centre was lateral flow tests as part of an ECC pilot scheme. This was distinct from the PCR home test kits

which RDC was in the process of setting up for distribution from South Street within the next few days once a go live date had been confirmed by the County Council. Communications on this would come out as soon as the Council was in a position to be able to share them.

She further confirmed that the Council was following the outbreak response plan; the meeting earlier today had discussed testing as one of the key strands. She briefs the Executive every week - sometimes more than once a week - and also sends out a briefing to Members and the public every Friday. In response to a further point raised by the Member relating to paragraph 17 on page 6.19 of the report around the role of elected Members in the event of a local outbreak, she stressed that the Essex Resilience Forum expected all member organisations to give a consistent communications message; RDC was tied into the Essex Communications Group. All information and assets are cascaded through the whole of the system identically – from the Police, Fire Service, Health Service/NHS, ECC ensuring that by such unified approach everyone gets the same information. She reiterated that she had shared all the information that she was able to share at this stage that was not official sensitive. There would be more opportunities for elected Members to take on the community leadership role, in terms of promulgating key messages around social distancing/adherence to rules and acting as community ambassadors in respect of roll out of the vaccination programme.

Responding to a further Member question relating to business grants and specifically around discretionary grant funding for businesses without business addresses, officers stated that the open scheme which was aimed at businesses affected by lockdown but not forced to close down contained a discretionary element to the scheme. An additional restrictions grant was also launched simultaneously. Every effort was made by the Council to disseminate information about the various business grant schemes as widely as possible at the earliest opportunity. There had been another government announcement today about grants based on business ratings, information for which would be published over the next few days. It was noted that the Economic Development Team would be asked to make contact with the Member outside the meeting to assist further with his enquiries.

A Member referred to paragraphs 3.21 and 3.22 of the report and commended RDC officers for going the extra mile and being flexible in terms of redeployment during the pandemic, working anti-social hours and volunteering for, e.g., the community hub. In response to her question as to whether Members would be invited to assist with the distribution of home testing kits from the South Street offices once that was ready to be launched, the Acting Managing Director emphasised that she welcomed Members volunteering to assist with this. It was anticipated that 5000 PCR testing kits would be delivered to the South Street offices for distribution to residents.

In response to a further Member question around staff surveys and how it was possible to ascertain what areas needed support if such surveys were anonymous, the Acting Managing Director advised that the two staff pulse

surveys had been designed to be short and sharp and the first one had had very high response rates. They had been anonymous to encourage staff to be frank in their responses. She was sensitive to organisation fatigue and issues relating to mental health and isolation as staff continued to adjust to the difficult conditions under which they are operating. The design of the next pulse survey was being worked on with a view to allowing opportunities to identify those needing support. The Council continued to signpost staff to Mental Health First Aiders and the Employee Assistance Programme and to make pastoral calls to staff and continue to monitor them closely and get the message across that 'it's okay to not be okay'. In the latest lockdown we have large numbers of staff who are having to cope with children undertaking remote learning at home, we have revised our list of critical workers who are entitled to send their children into school where those schools are open and are issuing letters of support to facilitate that.

Another Member emphasised the importance of further update reports being transparent and objective and including details of things that had been done well, things that might have been done badly, as well as things that could be further improved so that lessons really could be learned.

In response to a Member question as to whether residents living in the west of the district would have to travel to the South Street offices to collect COVID home testing kits, the Acting Managing Director clarified that this initiative was linked to the 11-18 year group for school testing. There was a mobile testing unit already based at Rayleigh Leisure Centre for the testing of school age children. The South Street initiative was designed to supplement this with PCR swab home testing kits as all slots were fully taken up at Rayleigh Leisure Centre. Opportunities for other sites across the district were also being explored; however, the Council was dependent on the kits being supplied to it. In response to a comment from a Member around schools also having home testing kits, it was emphasised that those kits were lateral flow tests for staff and vulnerable children and the children of critical workers, which was different to the PCR swab kits.

Resolved

That the report be noted. (AMD)

(Note: Cllrs M Hoy, N J Hookway and Mrs C M Mason wished it to be recorded that they noted the report, with reservations.)

4 KEY DECISIONS DOCUMENT

In response to a concern raised and a question around the timing of the report on the disposal of the former redundant Crown Hill public conveniences, the Assistant director, Assets & Commercial advised that he would be meeting with the Portfolio Holder to discuss progress; the report date would be revised accordingly.

5 WORK PLAN

The Assistant Director, Place & Environment confirmed, in response to a Member question about the scheduling of a further meeting of the Working Group on the management of public spaces, that he was in discussion with the Chairman of the Working Group on this matter and a meeting would be convened as soon as practicable.

The meeting closed at 9.04 pm.

Chairman

Date

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