
COVID-19 LESSONS LEARNED

Committee: Finance & Assets Committee

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[X70]

1.0 **ISSUE**

1.1 To receive a report on the strategic response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.0 **RECOMMENDATION(S)**

2.1 Members are requested to note the contents of this report.

3.0 **BACKGROUND/OPTIONS**

3.1 In responding to the pandemic the Council needed to develop new ways of working to support local communities and businesses and ensure that services continued to be delivered whilst safeguarding staff and local residents. The national lockdowns required the rapid establishment of local support systems, remote working arrangements and application of flexible governance and internal control arrangements.

3.2 The restrictions have been lifted and the Council has incorporated Covid risks and activities in its normal business.

3.3 In February 2022 Internal Audit concluded a review of the Council's initial response to the pandemic and its response during the recovery period. Please note that there is overlap between the initial response phase and the recovery phase.

3.4 It should be noted that the purpose of this report is not to identify the individual actions and activities undertaken during the pandemic but to review the strategic response and lessons learned.

3.5 Finance & Assets Committee are receiving this report because it was this committee appointed by Council to establish the COVID-19 Working Party.

3.6 **Initial Response**

3.6.1 Discussions were held with the Internal Auditors and documentation was provided to support the affirmations made during these discussions. Internal Audit confirmed that there was clear evidence to support that appropriate governance and decision making structures were put in place as part of the

initial response to the pandemic and was consistent with the Council's business continuity plans.

3.6.2 The pandemic has highlighted the need to ensure that Business Continuity Plans remain up to date. This is done annually and is managed by the Health & Safety Officer. Further to this, the templates that were produced; action log and service change pro-formas, are now further developed and incorporated into the Emergency Plan.

3.7 Recovery Response

3.7.1 Discussions were held with the Internal Auditors and documentation was provided to support the affirmations made during these discussions. Internal Audit confirmed that the arrangements in place and actions taken were sound. The Council continued to make changes to services to reflect the changing nature of the pandemic. Clear logs were kept and communication was provided to elected Members.

3.7.2 Internal Audit noted that the arrangements and associated recovery actions were broadly consistent with other councils. [Internal Audit is outsourced and this statement was made from their other Local Authority clients.]

3.8 Governance and decision making

3.8.1 In the early stages of the pandemic the local response was led by the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Local Resilience Forum (CPLRF). Officers attended CPLRF meetings, reviewed business continuity plans and introduced basic precautions. As case numbers rose and national restrictions were introduced the Corporate Management Team (CMT) closed the Council Offices and gave instruction for staff to work from home. Services that could not work from home were required to work in full compliance with COVID guidelines.

3.8.2 Several officer working groups were stood up; Business Continuity Group; led by the Chief Executive, Community Group; led by the Director Commercial, Business Grant Group; led by Director Community (then Infrastructure Manager) and the Remote Meetings Group; led by Director Legal & Monitoring Officer (then Legal Services Manager & Monitoring Officer).

3.8.3 The Business Continuity Group focused on issues such as service changes, staff availability, remote working, communications and service resilience. Individual Service Managers were given authority to decide (in consultation with the Director and/or Chief Executive) how best to respond to the pandemic for their service areas. This included decisions on suspension or continuation of services, responding to new legislation and maintaining local infection control arrangements.

3.8.4 The Community Group focused on assisting with the Community Response. This group worked with multiple agencies which included Cambridgeshire County Council, Parish Councils, the third sector and other community groups

that were stood up to respond to the pandemic. This group transitioned into the Recovery Group and continued to support external community groups and the vaccination programme. Terms of reference were set up to ensure the group had a clear purpose and focus.

3.8.5 The Business Grant Group focused on ensuring the Council distributed the various Business Grants provided by government. Initially government did not give clear instructions on the evidence base that the Council needed to collect before distributing grants. Approximately 4,975 grants were distributed with a value of approximately £28.12m.

3.8.5.1 Government focus was on getting the money paid as quickly as possible, however, the Council still needed to satisfy itself that claims were not fraudulent. By January 2021 there was much more clarity around the checks the Council was required to undertake before issuing grants. It would have been helpful that these instructions were given from the outset. That being said, because the Council exercised caution from the beginning and carried out its own checks, many of the later introduced requirements were already done and this limited the opportunity for fraudulent/inappropriate payments. Terms of reference were set up to ensure the group had a clear purpose and focus.

3.8.6 The Remote Meeting Group focused on ensuring that the Council could continue to hold meetings lawfully remotely. The Council was one of the first in the country and certainly in Cambridgeshire to hold a remote planning committee meeting. The Council continued to hold lawful remote Council/Committee meetings until the enabling legislation expired. Terms of reference were set up to ensure the group had a clear purpose and focus.

3.8.7 Council appointed a COVID-19 Member Working Group which received updates on the work being carried out and also requested information to enable the consideration of recommendations to the Finance & Assets Committee. Terms of reference were approved by the Finance & Assets Committee. Minutes from the meeting were provided to the Finance & Assets Committee for noting and recommendations from the working group were presented to the Committee for decision.

3.9 Roles and responsibilities

3.9.1 Roles and responsibilities were clearly established throughout the pandemic. With the exception of the Officer Working Groups referenced above, the roles of responsibilities of Members and Officers remained fully aligned with normal service responsibilities. There was no need for redeployment of staff at any stage of the pandemic.

3.10 Performance management and financial impact

3.10.1 Service Managers were required to prepare weekly proforma documents for CMT setting out details of key activities, service status, workforce details,

current risks and challenges, mitigations, financial impact and communication activities.

3.10.2 Formal service planning was suspended during the pandemic and this has since been reinstated and service delivery plans for 2022/23 were approved by the respective committees in March 2022. There were several updates provided to Council and Committees to keep elected Members informed of key changes. Additionally elected Members received regular briefing notes from CMT that provided updates and changes on service delivery. This included reports from the Finance Manager & Section 151 Officer on the impact of the pandemic on the Council's financial position.

4.0 ARGUMENTS/CONCLUSIONS

4.1 The hard work and dedication of Members and Officers ensured that the Council provided a high quality service to the residents and businesses within East Cambridgeshire. It should also be noted that the success of the community response and recovery should also be attributed to the amazing support delivered by various Community Groups within East Cambridgeshire as without their amazing efforts and initiatives the Council would have needed to play a much more active role in community response and recovery.

4.2 The Council were fortunate in that it did not have the severe homelessness and rough sleeper issues that were faced by other Local Authorities across the country. This enabled the Housing & Community Advice Service to focus on the wider community.

4.3 During the first few weeks of the pandemic it was important to ensure that the Council could continue to operate as many services as possible. This meant ensuring that staff could work remotely and that clear plans were in place to achieve this and make provision for increased requirement to respond to the pandemic.

4.4 In the event that the Council has to respond to an emergency of this nature in the future it will be important to develop a communications plan from the outset.

4.5 One of the biggest challenges in the pandemic was ensuring that businesses received the grants they were entitled to. In the early stages of the pandemic the Council lagged behind other Local Authorities. There were two main contributing factors to this delay; data held and managed by Anglia Revenues Partnership (ARP) and putting in place robust checks to reduce the risk of false and/or fraudulent payments. Whilst there was a delay in making payments to businesses there is no evidence to suggest that businesses collapsed as a result of this delay.

4.6 In the event that such an event reoccurs the Council will employ dedicated resources from the outset to administer the various grants. Additionally Officer will work with ARP to ensure that the data they hold is up-to-date and more readily available without delay.

4.7 Remote working has delivered some efficiencies and environmental benefits without increasing risks in respect of service delivery and internal controls. Development of the revised Remote Working Policy and the operation of a rota system means the efficiencies and flexibilities of home working are retained whilst also being able to maintain face-to-face services and effective staff management.

4.8 **What we gained**

- Stronger internal and external relationships
- Use of remote meetings; reduces time and travel
- Refreshed remote working policy
- Strengthened business continuity plans

4.9 **What we need to learn from or enhance**

- Stronger communication plans
- Reliance on data from other organisations/partners
- Standardised reporting

4.10 It is also worth noting that data sharing between organisations improved during the pandemic. It would be useful if this continues as it enables the Council to better serve the community.

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS/EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT/CARBON IMPACT ASSESSMENT

5.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report.

5.2 Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) not required.

5.3 Carbon Impact Assessment (CIA) not required.

6.0 APPENDICES

6.1 None.

Background Documents

None

Location

The Grange,
Ely

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