

TEWKESBURY BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date of Meeting:	7 September 2021
Subject:	Review of COVID19 Response and Recovery
Report of:	Head of Corporate Services
Corporate Lead:	Chief Executive
Lead Member:	Lead Member for Organisational Development
Number of Appendices:	One

Executive Summary:

The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the Council has been unprecedented. This has resulted in a significant challenge, not only to respond to the various issues arising but also to initiate a recovery plan and, since the onset of the pandemic, continue to deliver our core services.

Given the nature of the challenge, there was no textbook response at hand. Through a combination of incisive decision-making, more deliberated decision-making when necessary, a 'can do' attitude and creative thinking, the Council's response has been phenomenal.

What should not be underestimated is due to how well the Council is run; there were solid foundations in place pre-COVID-19 to underpin the effectiveness of our response.

Our response has supported various stakeholders including our residents, our business community, the wider general community, partners and importantly our workforce and members. During the course of this response, many learning opportunities have been identified and subsequently deployed across our people, processes and procedures, and our technology.

The key organisational learning points are captured in the main body of the report. Service specific learning points are captured and reported within the table at Appendix 1.

Recommendation:

To CONSIDER the key organisational and service related lessons learnt arising from the Council's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Reasons for Recommendation:

It is good practice to reflect upon any emergency situation and consider the key learning points. Undertaking a 'lessons learnt' exercise was also a significant governance issue reported within the Council's 2019/20 Annual Governance Statement.

Resource Implications:

None arising directly from the report.

Legal Implications:

None arising directly from the report.,

Risk Management Implications:

If the Council does not reflect upon its response to an emergency situation then improvements will not be made to any processes or procedures to enable future responses to be more effective.

Performance Management Follow-up:

The majority of lessons learnt were deployed during the course of responding to the pandemic and are now installed into working practice.

Implications for Biodiversity:

None arising directly from this report.

1.0 INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

- 1.1** The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the Council has been unprecedented. This has resulted in a significant challenge, not only to respond to the various issues arising but also to initiate a recovery plan and, since the onset of the pandemic, continue to deliver our core services.
- 1.2** Given the nature of the challenge, there was no textbook response at hand. Through a combination of incisive decision making, more deliberated decision making when necessary, a 'can do' attitude and creative thinking, the Council's response has been phenomenal. What should not be underestimated is due to how well the Council is run, there were solid foundations in place pre-COVID-19 to underpin the effectiveness of our response and give us a 'fighting chance'.
- 1.3** Our response has supported various stakeholders including our residents, our business community, the wider general community, partners and importantly our workforce and members. During the course of this response it has resulted in many learning opportunities that have subsequently been deployed across our people, processes and procedures and our technology. The key organisational learning points are captured in the main body of the report. Service specific learning points are captured and reported within the table at Appendix 1.

2.0 PRE-COVID FRAMEWORK TO SUPPORT RESPONSE

- 2.1** In light of events, we have had to adapt and respond to a fast-moving emergency in a way that we could never envisage. As a result of our transformation work, which we have been delivering since 2014, we were fortunate that we had at least some foundation to support our response. This includes:
- Our Growth Hub, set up in 2018, has provided the foundation for our business support during the pandemic through its excellent network of business contacts and intelligence.
 - Our excellent relationship with Places for People has seen early success in the recovery of the Tewkesbury Leisure Centre. This is incredibly important for our business and for community activity and health.

- The sharing of our building – the Public Service Centre - with the likes of Police, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Children’s and Adult Services has enabled a multi-agency approach to address certain issues arising from the pandemic.
- As a collective, we have a great understanding of our communities, particularly through our ‘place’ approach and we have a strong presence within it.
- Staff are our greatest asset and the ‘can do’ culture we have (as acknowledged by the Local Government Association (LGA) Peer Review team), has shone through. Organisational changes were made which saw many members of our staff redeployed to other services.
- In attaining accreditation to the ‘Workforce Wellbeing Charter’, we already had in place the building blocks such as a mental health plan to support our organisational resilience.
- Our excellent financial management framework supported by our technically strong finance team (as recognised by the LGA peer review team) enabled the quality of financial monitoring and reporting to be maintained despite the added complexities of the financial landscape.
- Our ICT Strategy, approved pre-COVID-19, gave us the direction of travel to implement the necessary technology to support the organisation, particularly through remote working. Exemplifying our ‘can do’ attitude, it meant swathes of the strategy being delivered in a few months. It was also beneficial that Members all have the same ICT offering.
- Although re-deployed for the first few months, our new Business Transformation Team was up and running in September. It has already achieved notable successes such as the implementation of a new digital platform, a new complaints framework, a new Freedom of Information request portal, project-led the delivery of our new bulky waste system and taken our garden waste income to nearly £1m. All of this is customer centric. The team will be key to our mid-term recovery.
- A sound system of governance and decision-making processes.

3.0 KEY ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING POINTS

3.1 In responding to the challenges presented, every day of that response has provided learning opportunities. Though not an exhaustive list, the key organisational learning can be summarised as follows:

- **‘The art of the possible’** – if, prior to COVID-19, we had undertaken a desktop emergency planning exercise based upon all staff working from home, all Committee meetings to be held virtually, administering £30 million pounds of business grants and £400k of Council Tax support, undertaking 5,000 business visits etc **and** deliver our core priority services we would not have thought it possible. Out of adversity came the motivation, creativity, doggedness, goodwill etc. to deliver for the people who matter; our communities.

- **Command and control** - it became apparent very soon that, for aspects of our response, if this was delivered within individual services they would soon be overwhelmed. This led to the creation of key individual cells, adequately resourced through re-deployment of staff and with a clear remit. The main cells deployed were communications, business, community and high street recovery. Cells were also created at a county level to ensure there was a joined-up approach and we had officer representation on all those cells, which included communications, community resilience, mortality planning, health and wellbeing, health protection board, rough sleepers and recovery.

A Management Team+ group was also established comprising Corporate Management Team, cell leads and Operational Managers from each service area. This team met daily for many months and considered the national, regional and local issues as well as our own and collectively organised our response.

- **Technology** – it is stating the obvious, but technology was the critical factor to enable us to work effectively from home. There were various learning points, particularly around the prioritisation of the laptop rollout, learning from the first rollout and applying this to subsequent ones, staff and Members adapting well to the use of software such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom and general network connectivity. All of this contributed to our ability to work flexibly - we may have thought we were reasonably advanced in our flexible working pre-COVID-19 but this took it to the ultimate level. In a normal working environment, a proposal of this magnitude would have been met with a degree of scepticism. From the learning to date we can now plan for moving forward with a more balanced model and ensuring we are in the right place for delivering our services.
- **Organisational resilience** – the speed at which we resorted to home working and the longevity of the pandemic quickly identified that staff resilience differs from individual to individual and collectively within teams. Whilst the majority embraced home working, others found it more difficult either through their home set-up (not necessarily technology related) or factors like social isolation. We quickly learnt that HR policies needed refining, guidelines developed, for example some staff had guilt issues about leaving their desk or using technology for social contact and messages around taking annual leave etc. A whole raft of actions were implemented, everything from online yoga to the setting up of a culture and communications staff group to specific resilience sessions within teams.
- **Financial management** – our framework is second to none, supported by a technically strong finance team. It became apparent the team's ability to navigate the complex financial landscape, whilst undertaking business as usual work such as the closure of the accounts, would be critical to enable the Council to function on a sound financial footing. The Finance Team soon learnt that there were significant challenges to keep on top of the additional monitoring and analysis, detailed monthly returns to government, additional internal monitoring, business grant administration, a complex picture around business rates and Council Tax, the level of government funding and accounting for all the different grants we received to ensure we were maximising their value.
- **Customers** – customers have had no choice but to engage with us in other ways, and this complemented our need to work remotely. We know now that customers can and want to engage with us online, justifying even more the creation of our Business Transformation Team. Our Advice and Information Centres (AICs) closed in March 2019 and the impact on our customers has been minimal thanks to our availability online and over the phone. Our Customer Services team, who handle many of our front-facing calls, adapted quickly to remote working and the transition was seamless, meaning customers weren't affected.

- **Communications** – in any emergency, good communication - both internally and externally - is critical. We quickly learnt that the plethora of information being received from a variety of sources was overwhelming our website, hence the implementation of our COVID-19 microsite. Social media was the key communication tool, not only for our messages but to promote those of other key stakeholders. Key communication mechanisms were quickly implemented such as the Member and Parish bulletins, service position statements, virtual staff briefings etc. Our Communications team rose to the challenge and even continued to promote some of our more 'business as usual' communications throughout the period, too.
- **Recovery** – whilst in response mode, and remembering different cells and services were in different stages of response, it was important to project forward and formulate our recovery. This is detailed within our COVID-19 corporate recovery plan. Using our experience from developing and implementing our main strategic document, the Council Plan, it made sense to align the recovery plan with this. With regards to the delivery of priorities within the Council Plan, given that resources were diverted to our response and now our recovery then it was recognised we cannot do everything. This has led to a number of workstreams being deferred and these have been reported through our Council Plan and recovery plan monitoring framework.

4.0 KEY LEARNING POINTS BY SERVICE AREA

4.1 In addition to the strategic learning points, each service area was asked to capture their key learning points. These are detailed within the table at Appendix 1. From the responses, common trends include:

- **Staff responsiveness** – similar to the collective responsiveness identified organisationally, services have acknowledged how staff have adapted to new technology, undertaking new roles and individually, as well as teams, how they supported each other through challenging times.
- **Staff resilience** – whilst staff were re-deployed without fuss, a number were faced with challenging conversations, particularly those deployed to the community cell and business cell. Particularly with the former, it was quickly learnt that additional support was required for individuals operating within these cells.
- **Business Intelligence** – staff deployed to the business cell have learnt new knowledge that can be taken back to their service area. There is also a learning exercise around utilising business intelligence across service areas rather than treating it within a silo.
- **Legislation and guidance** – it became apparent very early that there was a plethora of new guidance and legislation to be interpreted, sometimes quite complex and lacking clarity. For example, legislation around virtual meetings, complex business grants guidance, health and safety advice and guidance and implementation of business rate reliefs.
- **Innovation** - to support the Council's response, many services had to think of different ways to continue effective service delivery. Examples range from the implementation of the communications microsite, virtual meetings, use of videos and photos to support planning applications, use of various external grant funding to provide additional resource, prompt switch from paper to electronic storage, development of new HR policies, online forms, virtual inductions etc. Hopefully the learning to innovate will not be lost and the work of the Business Transformation team will enhance things further.

- **Additional resource** – given the impact of the pandemic and that we are a relatively small Council, if we did not rely upon the use of temporary staff and contractors then we would have been overwhelmed. We quickly learnt that to ‘stay afloat’ additional resource was needed, used not only on direct COVID-19 related activities but to backfill staff that had been redeployed. Key areas resourced included Environmental Health, Revenues and Benefits and ICT.

5.1 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

5.2 None.

6.0 CONSULTATION

6.1 None.

7.0 RELEVANT COUNCIL POLICIES/STRATEGIES

7.1 Council Plan (2020-24) and COVID-19 Recovery Plan.

8.0 RELEVANT GOVERNMENT POLICIES

8.1 None.

9.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (Human/Property)

9.1 None arising directly from this report.

10.0 SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS (Social/Community Safety/Cultural/ Economic/ Environment)

10.1 None.

11.0 IMPACT UPON (Value For Money/Equalities/E-Government/Human Rights/Health And Safety)

11.1 None.

12.0 RELATED DECISIONS AND ANY OTHER RELEVANT FACTS

12.1 None.

Background Papers: None

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Appendices: Appendix 1 – Lessons Learnt in response to COVID-19 (by service area)