



SCRUTINY COMMISSION – 14 SEPTEMBER 2020

COVID 19 RECOVERY UPDATE – CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S DEPARTMENT

REPORT OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide the Commission with a detailed update on progress made within the Chief Executive's Department in implementing its interim recovery plans following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, and to set out initial proposals for longer term recovery planning and strategic change in accordance with the Council's Recovery Strategy.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

2. The County Council's Covid-19 Recovery Strategy (2020-21) sets out the key principles, governance structures and phases upon which recovery of the Council's functions and services will be based. This will help ensure a joined-up, consistent and well-informed approach throughout the recovery process, which will ultimately feed into future departmental service and business planning.
3. Interim recovery plans continue to support the Council's functions and services. Full recovery plans are now prepared and these are being kept under review to respond to changing circumstances.
4. The Cabinet considered reports regarding the impact of the coronavirus pandemic at its meetings in March, April, May and June. These have covered issues such as the impact of the virus across Leicestershire, the Council's plans to respond, joint working with partners, and the financial implications for the Authority. Regular briefings have also been provided to all members of the Council.

Background

5. In March 2020 the country went into lockdown to control the spread of Covid-19 and ensure the rise in infection rates were minimised to protect the NHS services' ability to respond to the health needs of the population. This has had a substantial impact on people and services.

6. In response to the pandemic, and in accordance with legislative changes and Government guidance for local authorities, Council services have been reviewed and amended to enable continued service delivery. In particular, critical services were prioritised along with those services that are essential to support the most vulnerable.

Services and other Key issues

7. Set out below is how the various sections making up the Chief Executive's Department have responded.

Strategy and Business Intelligence

8. The Strategy and Business Intelligence service leads for the Council on the following service areas. In each area staff have been deployed to support the Council's response to Covid19 and to prepare for recovery. All staff across these services have been working from home since the Covid-19 lockdown began.
 - (i) Business intelligence (BI)
9. BI provides the Council with the insight, evidence and performance information it needs to function effectively and efficiently.
10. Whilst significant parts of the service have continued delivering 'business as usual' activity there has been substantial demand for evidence, analysis and data to support the Council and the Local Resilience Forum's (LRF) response to Covid19. This has included the timely analysis of data relating to Covid19 incidence, mortality, hotspot mapping and outbreak response in the County in support of the Director of Public Health.
11. The Service has designed and analysed many new surveys including a staff skills survey to inform the redeployment of staff, staff wellbeing surveys, staff availability trackers in support of frontline services and surveys of funeral directors, care providers and volunteers.
12. The lockdown maps and postcode checker were implemented by the BI Service under tight time pressures. The service also managed the shielding programme data flows and tracked school attendance during the lockdown, especially amongst the vulnerable cohorts. In addition, the BI service is working with the Leicester and Leicestershire Local Enterprise Partnership (LLEP) on compiling evidence to underpin economic recovery. There have been some challenges in working from home given the more specialised IT requirements for BI work, but these have been overcome to some extent with the support of IT Services. There are ongoing discussions with IT to continue to improve the remote working arrangements, especially when working with large and complex datasets. The Head of BI is chairing the LRF's Multi Agency Information Cell for recovery.

(ii) Policy, Communities and Equalities and Diversity

13. This unit is responsible for leading and co-ordinating the preparation and implementation of the Strategic Plan; supporting engagement with communities and the implementation of the Communities Strategy; and supporting the Council's commitment to equality, diversity and human rights.
14. The Service has played a leading role in the LRF's work on 'community, volunteering, faith and engagement' (CVFE) with the Head of Service chairing the LRF's CVFE Cell. The Service has overseen the LRF's work to provide food and other support to those shielding and has supported and helped organise the contribution of volunteers to the pandemic response. The Service has led work to understand and address the impact of Covid19 on BAME groups. It has also worked closely with the Head of Transformation to ensure the Council's Recovery Strategy and Plan are closely aligned to the Council's Strategic Plan. The Service also designed and administered the Council's Covid19 Community Fund which distributed £1.5m to community groups across the County within a very short period. The Service is now managing the transition of the CVFE cell to recovery, and a draft community recovery cell and sub-cell structure has been produced pending sign off by the LRF.

(iii) Economic Development and Growth

15. The Unit is responsible for overseeing the effective delivery of growth across Leicestershire, securing the Council's strategic and departmental outcomes and managing financial risk to the Council arising from growth and large scale projects.
16. The Growth Unit is coordinating a Council wide input to supporting economic recovery as well as working with the LRF, LLEP and partners in the subregion. Activity is focused on short term interventions for town centres and businesses, as well as longer term commitments to delivering infrastructure for places and communities and supporting skills and employment initiatives designed to support those affected by the pandemic.
17. The Service is designing and administering a £750k business recovery fund utilising repurposed funding from the Business Rate Pool. The Service continues to work with stakeholders to ensure housing growth is supported by appropriate infrastructure and that the financial impacts and associated risks of growth on the Council are well managed.

(iv) Resilience

18. The Council hosts the Resilience Service which supports partnership and Council work to prepare for, manage and respond to emergencies, maintain business continuity, and secure recovery from emergency incidents
19. Following a lengthy period during 2019 supporting preparations for a potential no-deal EU Exit the Resilience Service has been fully occupied supporting the LRF and Council response to Covid19, as well as preparing for and responding

to, as necessary, other incidents. The Service has supported the LRF's Strategic Co-ordination Group and Strategic Recovery Co-ordination Group which have been overseeing response and recovery respectively, in addition to the tactical groups a large number of topic-specific cells which have set up as part of the response and recovery structures. It has also supported the Council's Resilience Planning Group and associated business continuity and recovery work. Capacity is being increased to ensure preparations for the forthcoming winter are robust, including to take account of the likelihood of two or more concurrent events happening (e.g. Covid19, seasonal influenza, EU Exit, cyber attack, flooding, snow etc).

Planning, Historic and Natural Environment

20. The Planning, Historic and Natural Environment Service area has continued to operate at nearly normal capacity during the Covid-19 pandemic. Updates for each of the four service areas are provided below:
 - (i) Planning
 21. The County Planning function deals with minerals and waste planning applications, planning applications submitted by or on behalf of the County Council; preparation of the minerals and waste local plan, site monitoring and enforcement.
 22. The Service has responded positively to the challenges faced by the pandemic. All staff have been working remotely since March and technology has already been in place to allow planning applications to be received and processed in the normal way. There has been some minor disruption to site monitoring, mainly due to problems gaining access to quarry and waste sites as a result of social distancing restrictions, but these have eased over recent weeks.
 23. In terms of income, planning application fees are behind what would be expected for this time of year. We suspect this is because applicants and consultants have not been able to prepare planning applications due to staff being unavailable or because site access has been difficult. It is possible that some site operators are taking a more cautious approach to investment at this stage. The situation will be kept under review, but it is likely that fee income will be at least 25% (£50,000) below budget at year end.
 - (ii) Planning Obligations:
 24. This is a new team that has been set up following a recent restructure of the service. A new Team Manager has been appointed and he began his role this month. Additional staff will be recruited over the coming months.
 25. The new Planning Obligations Team will co-ordinate all matters relating to developer contributions and S106 agreements. This includes liaising with district councils in relation to policies and individual planning applications. The team ensures that contributions are recovered and that money is spent in accordance with planning permissions.

26. The Covid-19 pandemic has slowed down some of the recruitment activity for the new team. However, day to day processing of casework has been unaffected. Initial concerns that house builders would be unable to pay their S106 contributions on time have so far not materialised and the team has had some significant successes in recovering historic debt over recent weeks. The impact of the pandemic on developer contributions will continue to be closely monitored.

(iii) Heritage

27. The new heritage team provides advice to district planning authorities in relation to archaeology and historic buildings matters. This work is provided under informal service level agreements with most of the County's districts. Workload during the Covid-19 has remained fairly constant and while there has been some impact upon staff being able to carry out detailed site visits, the overall impact on service provision has been minimal.

(iv) Ecology

28. The ecology team provides advice on biodiversity to most of the district planning authorities to assist them with assessing planning applications. As with the heritage team, this work is provided under informal service level agreements. Workload in this area has remained stable during the pandemic and been largely unaffected. The team has managed to recruit two new Planning Ecologists during recent months, which will help with keeping on top of workloads.

Regulatory Services

Regulatory Services comprises of 3 critical services as detailed below:

(i) Trading Standards

29. Since lockdown the Trading Standards Service has remained operational and it continues to experience high demand for its existing services, with additional enforcement responsibilities brought about by the pandemic.

30. On 18 July 2020, The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) (No. 3) Regulations 2020 provided upper tier local authorities new powers to respond to a serious and imminent threat to public health and to prevent coronavirus transmission. These Regulations include powers to:

- restrict access to, or close, individual premises
- prohibit certain events (or types of event) from taking place
- restrict access to, or close, public outdoor places (or types of outdoor public places)

31. This new function is high profile for the Trading Standards Service requiring collaboration with a range of resilience forum partners and support from

colleagues in Legal Services. Consequently, other areas of trading standards enforcement work have ceased or reduced in output.

32. Officers continue to support the Council's procurement process to reduce the risk of obtaining non-compliant PPE intended for use by Council employees or other stakeholders. Again, these are additional functions brought about by Covid 19.
33. National data continues to show a significant increase in telephone, internet and doorstep scams since the start of the pandemic. This overall increase in consumer fraud will continue to place additional burdens on the service.

(ii) Registration Services

34. The backlog of birth registrations is reducing as with death registrations. Notices of marriage, civil partnership formations and wedding ceremonies are all now taking place. However, there will be an overall reduction in income due to the postponement of all services during lockdown, apart from death registrations. The financial position on income will be better understood in the third quarter of this financial year. All registration offices have now reopened to service users, by appointment only. The team are currently working towards the reintroduction of citizenship ceremonies and the service will initially offer an affirmation/short ceremony by the Superintendent Registrar, probably in groups of ten attendees.

(iii) The North Leicestershire and Rutland Coroner's Service

35. Coroners staff continued to provide a service throughout the pandemic. Inquests are underway although there are social distancing challenges to resolve around jury inquests and there may be a need to relocate these hearings to a larger court room, which inevitably will bring in additional costs.

Legal Services

36. The section provides comprehensive in-house legal advice supporting staff across the Council in the performance of their functions and responsibilities. Governance and member decision-making are also supported.
37. The bulk of Legal Services staff rapidly moved to homeworking at the early stages of the Covid 19 lockdown. Business support staff remained at County Hall to facilitate essential support services that cannot be undertaken remotely.
38. The key priority was to ensure, as far as possible, a "business as usual" approach in accordance with revised arrangements put in place externally e.g. by the Courts, so the Council's statutory functions in relation to vulnerable people could be supported. The need to ensure staff wellbeing was recognised and supported. No Legal staff were furloughed.
39. Significant additional Covid19 legal work arose (and continues to arise) in a number of areas. In particular:

- concerning the need for existing Council contracts to be renegotiated to incorporate more appropriate terms for the particular service/product being supplied to the Council to protect the Council's position;
 - increases in Court of Protection works as a result of the number of adults - often in a residential care - who were considered vulnerable owing to mental capacity and other issues who needed to be subject of a court order for their own safety.
40. This increased work was such that it could not be absorbed within existing staff numbers and accordingly two successful bids were made to fund additional temporary staff for the adult social care and contracts teams. There is now an increase in the legal work affecting vulnerable children arising from family pressures as a result of the Covid 19 lockdown. Work is underway on finalising a business case to support the engagement of temporary staff to manage this.
41. While all members have received details in the regular briefings provided by the Chief Executive which has included legal work that has been undertaken, the following examples of specific Covid 19 legal work is highlighted:

Contractual	Dealing with a wide variety of contractual issues related to the non-performance of contractual obligations arising from the pandemic, in particular in relation to construction projects.
Education	Advising over 100 Leicestershire schools on a wide variety of Covid related matters. Developing systems and procedures for remote conduct of school admission appeals.
Property and Environment	Dealing with the property issues for the establishment of Covid testing sites on County Council land. The processing of the legal requirements for traffic control measures funded through Covid 19 funding from the Government.
Employment	Advising on employment issues arising from the pandemic including redeployment of staff and furlough arrangements.
Litigation	Dealing with remote and hybrid court hearings and dealing with threatened judicial reviews due to alleged failures to deliver services.
Adult Social Care	The emergency Covid 19 temporary legislation (in force for 2 years) included provisions amending certain sections of the Care Act 2014, in relation to statutory requirements being relaxed from duties to powers explained by detailed statutory guidance which required legal advice within short timescales. The Adults and Communities department has been concerned about the impact of lockdown on vulnerable adults, resulting in increased applications to the Court of Protection.

	In addition, there has been a significant increase in the number of referrals being made to the adult safeguarding board, which requires ongoing legal advice and support.
Child Care	At the start of lockdown all care proceedings in the family courts were paused and hearings rescheduled due to the impact of the social distancing measures on court space. These courts had to change in the main to remote hearings which had a significant impact on the workloads within the childcare team. Emergency secondary legislation changed adoption processes, fostering and children's homes regulations. This was complex and required detailed advice to the Children & Family Services Department and ongoing legal support. As well as the increased instructions being received as a result of the impact of lockdown, the return of children to school after several months absence is also likely to result in an increase in child protection referrals from those schools.
General	Advising on a range of legal issues related to health and safety including PPE issues, risk assessments and social distancing requirements. Developing legal procedures for the enforcement of the new local lockdown regulations. Advising in relation to data sharing agreements to secure testing information. Advising on grant terms for assistance to local community groups. Acting as legal advisors to the Recovery Programme group.

Democratic and Member Services and Civics

42. The majority of services provided by both service areas have continued on-line during this period with limited disruption as detailed below. The bulk of staff began homeworking in late March and early April with attendance at County Hall limited to two or three staff needed to provide IT support for meetings and webcasting on an ad hoc basis. This arrangement is likely to continue going forward.

(i) Council meetings.

43. New Government Regulations relating to meetings has meant that all meetings of the Cabinet, Scrutiny, and Regulatory bodies have been able to go ahead despite the lockdown and County Hall having to be closed. At the outset, these meetings were held via Skype which had limited functionality meaning that meetings were largely audio based. Following consultation with Group Leaders a decision was made to move to Microsoft (MS) Teams. With support from IT colleagues and consultants, Trustmarque, MS Teams was successfully introduced in July. The full Council meeting was successfully conducted with all members, apart from the Chairman, joining remotely on-line. All formal

meetings are now webcast live via Youtube and public access to meetings has also therefore continued.

44. Democratic Services have continued to provide support to partnership bodies such as ESPO and the Combined Fire Authority on a traded basis using the same on-line approach.

(ii) Resilience.

45. Democratic Services staff have provided support to the County Council's Resilience arrangements servicing meetings of the Crisis Management Team led by the Chief Executive. In addition, staff facilitated the weekly All Member Briefings held every Tuesday which provided an update on departmental issues as they developed during the pandemic.

(iii) Member Services and Civic Duties.

46. Member Services have largely continued as normal. The Council's Civics work has been affected by Covid 19, as a large number of planned events for the Chairman and Lord Lieutenant had to be cancelled. Nevertheless, staff have worked to ensure, where possible, significant events were moved on-line. Details of some of these key events include:

a) VE Day 75

- A dedicated webpage was produced to mark VE Day that went live at the beginning of May. The webpage included historical information about why we mark VE Day and ideas on how to celebrate the 75th Anniversary from home, adhering to social distancing guidelines. See the webpage [here](#).
- The Lord-Lieutenant of Leicestershire and Chairman of the County Council recorded video messages that were posted on the webpage. The Civic Affairs team also worked with Leicester Cathedral to help put together an online service to mark the event.
- The Lieutenancy Twitter and Linked In accounts posted special VE themed tweets all week leading up to Friday, 8th May, including video messages, images from VE Day in 1945 and extracts of King George VI's speech.
- During this period, there were 572 visits to the webpage, the Cathedral service received 387 views and the Twitter account received 22, 288 VE related posts.

b) Armed Forces Day

- The usual Armed Forces Day Service and Parade was cancelled, and all content was moved online. However, the Civic Affairs team promoted the national #SaluteOurForces campaign to build a local 'virtual' parade on Flickr. The idea was to ask people to send in a photo of themselves saluting with #SaluteOurForces, and the Civic Office uploaded them. The campaign was really successful and saw salutes from LCFC players, Leicester Tigers players, the local Universities, County Council

employees, primary schools and the National Space Centre as can be viewed here.

- Another dedicated webpage was put together with video messages from the Lord-Lieutenant and Station Commander of RAF Wittering (view link). The webpage also shared stories from local serving Armed Forces personnel and a video of last year's parade through Leicester City Centre.
- Armed Forces Flag Raising was cancelled at County Hall; instead, the LCC webpage paid tribute to all veterans who have raised the flag over the past 5 years. The Armed Forces Flag was still raised over County Hall for the week.
- During the period, the website received 654 views, Flickr received 1,306 views, Linked In 3,437 views and Twitter posts were viewed 74,031 times

c) VJ Day

- The Civic Team put together another a webpage dedicated to VJ Day 75 commemorations (view link) and put together an informative VJ 75 brochure that was emailed out to all key contacts.
- The material included some moving tributes from relatives of Far East Prisoner of War Survivors and a public plea for help with compiling a single roll of honour for all from Leicester and Leicestershire who were killed in WWII.
- The Civic Office collaborated with Leicester City Council and Leicester Cathedral on a virtual service, which included a contribution from HRH The Duke of Gloucester. As part of the virtual Cathedral service His Royal Highness read an extract from the speech given by HM King George VI on the occasion of Victory over Japan.
- The Lieutenancy Twitter account posted VJ Day tweets for the week leading up to 15th August, including case studies of local Far East Prisoners of War (FEPOW) survivors, images from the time and an extract from King George VI's speech.
- The webpage received 618 views, the Cathedral Service 274 views, the Council Twitter account received 19,471 comments and Linked In received 2,864 views.

Recovery

47. The **Strategy and Business Intelligence Service** has adjusted quickly to a situation whereby all staff are working from home. Essential business as usual activity (for instance much business intelligence activity, and the work of the Growth Unit) has continued but large parts of the service have redirected their resources, skills and expertise to supporting Covid19 work on health and economic intelligence, support for the shielded and other vulnerable people, economic recovery, and leading and supporting the LRF's response structure and key response and recovery workstreams.
48. The **Planning, Historic and Natural Environment Service** has continued to work 'business as usual' during the pandemic, with staff working remotely and being able to use technology to access documents, contact applicants and other stakeholders, view sites, prepare reports and to take part in meetings. In

terms of recovery, this current way of working has become the new normal and teething problems have eased now that some of the technology problems have been resolved. Managers have adapted the way they support colleague and staff have, in the main, become accustomed to working flexibly. The situation is being kept under review to preserve staff wellbeing, performance and service-user satisfaction.

49. **Legal Services** through its education and employment team has been providing advice to HR and Transformation Unit colleagues to ensure that Corporate strategy complies with the Council's statutory responsibilities as an employer.
50. In common with the rest of the Council it has been necessary to work with colleagues in Corporate resources to equip the service with the requisite IT facilities to enable homeworking.
51. As we move into the Autumn and Winter seasons with home working now fully embedded a rota system is now in place to assist staff whose home working situation and/or facilities impact on productive working e.g. poor IT connectivity so that they can attend at County Hall using the designated recovery desks.
52. The **Democratic and Members Services** teams and their work is flexible enough to allow home working though there is a need for some sort of rota to have a limited presence in the office to undertake certain activities and support those staff working from home. As the new ways of working have been so successful our focus in Phase 2 will be for a 'new normal' that embraces virtual meetings for private meetings and for formal meetings and briefings so far as possible.
53. This 'new normal' will be incorporated into the planned review of the Constitution and the advice notes and protocols for members/the public in readiness for the next Council.
54. As the MS Teams platform is constantly evolving the Section will look at the upgrades available to improve the experience of members and the public of meetings. With IT colleagues it is intended to explore a facility which will allow for webcasting without a physical presence in County Hall. Linked to virtual meetings the aim would be to continue a paperless or at least 'paper light' approach.
55. **Regulatory Services** has continued to work throughout this crisis period and the demands on the service have been significant. There has been a need to prioritise certain activity and this has only been possible through the support and flexibility of staff. As we move to recovery the demands on the service are likely to increase and there will be a need to stand up some of those business as usual services that have reduced during this period. As with other Sections of the Department the need to manage staff wellbeing and morale as well as ensuring IT systems are operating effectively will be key.

Lessons learnt and strategic change proposals

56. The key priorities for the Department will be:
- a) A fundamental review of the Departmental Business Plan having regard to the four recovery themes in the corporate recovery strategy (new ways of working, financial sustainability, digital value and environment and net carbon neutrality);
 - b) ensuring staff well-being recognising the various pressures arising from time to time associated with home working;
 - c) a review of business continuity plans recognising these were not always sufficiently detailed or up to date to cope with this type of rare and ongoing event. The Department is now more prepared and capable, at short notice, to operate flexibly and in a different way;
 - d) ensuring all the necessary IT kit is available to staff and any issues can be speedily rectified. This will require the Department to invest in upgrading existing IT and Case Management systems as well as new investments to ensure it operates as effectively as possible.

Resource Implications

57. The additional Covid-19 temporary posts previously mentioned are funded for 12 months. Legal services management will review caseloads in the run-up to the expiry of the funding to determine the need for this funding to continue for a longer period.
58. There will be a need to provide additional IT facilities to support homeworking e.g. Licences to support MS Team meetings the, case bundling software required for court work and a new case management system. Where possible the Department would seek to manage these within existing budgets through compensatory savings.
59. Work to manage the cost implications of COVID-19 pandemic within the authority's overall financial envelope is underway and several measures have been implemented including:
- Implementation of non-essential spend controls in relation to recruitment; procurement and external expenditure;
 - Utilisation of external grant funding and increased income to reduce the funding gap; and
 - Limiting the approval of new projects to essential requirements and/or delivery of cost reductions.

Equalities and Human Rights Implications

60. There are no equality and human rights implications arising from this report.

Background Papers

None.

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

This report has been emailed to all members of the County Council.

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List of Appendices

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