

Response and Recovery Panel

Wychavon District Council

9th November 2020

1. Summary of the Response and Recovery Panel approach with Wychavon

The Local Government Association is hugely grateful to Wychavon District Council for being amongst the first local authorities to undertake a Response and Recovery Panel. This tool has been developed to aid councils in their work relating to the COVID-19 crisis and its many and varied impacts.

The panel ran for two hours on the afternoon of Monday 9th November 2020 and considered the way in which Covid-19 has impacted Wychavon and the council; the approach to the response undertaken by the council and partners; and thinking and planning around the recovery.

The session involved the council's Leader and Chief Executive plus a number of other senior officers and was facilitated by:

- Gareth Edmundson, Chief Executive of Cheltenham Borough Council
- Councillor Duncan McGinty, Leader of Sedgemoor District Council

They were supported by Chris Bowron from the Local Government Association.

Response and Recovery Panels are focused on enabling councils to take stock of, and reflect upon, the period since the current crisis first impacted and to look at the challenges that lie ahead as the local authority seeks to lead the local and organisational recovery. Such panels are tailored to meet individual councils' needs and are designed to complement and add value to a council's own mechanisms for identifying areas of good practice, learning and improvement. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of the council's plans and activities.

In what is an unprecedented environment, where everybody is learning through experience and precedents are few, peers are using the experience and knowledge they have gained in recent months and drawing on the information presented to them to prompt reflection and discussion amongst the senior political and managerial leadership of the host council.

This letter provides a summary of the peer team's feedback in the light of the discussions during the panel sessions. In providing this to the council, we have done so simply as fellow local government officers and elected members. By its nature, the panel provides a brief and only partial snapshot of a very complex, intense and unique set of happenings in relation to response and emerging plans regarding recovery.

2. Feedback

Based on what we have heard and read, the council can be seen to have delivered a comprehensive and effective response to the Covid-19 crisis, including:

- Co-ordinating the community and voluntary sector response
- Processing business-related grants on behalf of Government
- Leading the county-wide approach to protecting the homeless
- Processing self-isolation support payments from Government
- Supporting local food banks through the passporting of funding
- Establishing a dedicated Coronavirus information page on its website

- Providing free car parking to support both key workers across partner organisations and the local economy
- Creating the 'Covid-19 Memory Bank Project'
- Organising free outdoor cinema events

With measures and approaches such as these and an over-arching drive to protect and support residents and businesses and provide as much certainty and clarity for them as possible, the council's senior figures politically and managerially have demonstrated clear leadership during the testing and unprecedented times that the last eight months represent.

The council's approach to its finances over many years has established a real financial strength. This is reflected in both the authority having been recognised in a report (commissioned from Grant Thornton by The Society of District Council Treasurers) as the most financially resilient district council nationally and no threat emerging, certainly over the short term, to its financial sustainability. The financial position of the authority has been a key aspect in enabling it to demonstrate a confident response to the crisis. The council has also reassured itself, through a review exercise, that its ambitions outlined in the Corporate Strategy can be maintained in terms of the resources required to deliver them. There is, however, no complacency on the part of the authority in relation to its financial position, with it being mindful of the risks over the medium term should the crisis and its impacts, particularly in relation to income streams, be sustained over a prolonged period.

Amongst all its other financial and societal considerations, the council is reflecting upon how its leisure trust emerges from, and adapts to, the market changes brought about by the crisis. A position has been adopted in which the council, over the short term, is providing financial support to the trust but this is not a sustainable option over a longer period. The council is not unique in facing this challenge and is monitoring the position, and the stance of Government, nationally but recognises it is likely to be incumbent upon the trust and the council to devise jointly a future strategy to safeguard both the viability of the trust and the delivery of public sector leisure provision in the district.

Whilst the council has satisfied itself that its Corporate Strategy ambitions remain achievable, it also recognises that key aspects it is committed to, such as improving outcomes for children eligible for free school meals and reducing the average level of household residual waste, have become more challenging due to the impacts of the crisis. Recognising that the immediate attentions of the council are focused on the response phase required by the second national lockdown, we simply pose the question at this stage – as something for the authority to start reflecting upon – of how such increased challenges will be responded to?

During the panel discussion we gleaned emerging key facts and figures such as the local unemployment rate having trebled since March; the number of children eligible for free school meals having risen from 1,478 last year to 1,825 now; and local high streets bucking the national trend around footfall to a certain extent, potentially in part due to the proliferation of independent shops within Wychavon town centres. We also learnt of the difficulties the council has experienced in trying to obtain from others the information necessary for there to be a clear understanding of the extent of furloughing. These types of information don't seem to be readily available to people within the council or amongst partner organisations in a format where it is all drawn together and which can quickly and easily be updated and disseminated.

Establishing such a mechanism would aid shared understanding within the council and amongst partners and stakeholders of the impacts of the crisis across the district. It would also serve to enable partnerships to adapt and respond to the complex challenges emanating from the crisis that will start to impact in the coming months in a potentially very major way. This can be extended further when reflecting upon how wider considerations, such as the potential Devolution White

Paper; the Planning White Paper; and EU exit and transition are being woven into the thinking within the council and with partner organisations around the plans and ambitions for Wychavon.

Effective communication and engagement with a wide range of stakeholders has been delivered by the council during the crisis, with new means devised to reflect circumstances. These include an E-bulletin for businesses; an equivalent bulletin for local residents; a residents' survey; the Coronavirus information page on the council's website; increased information flows to elected members; extra measures to keep council staff informed, including an increased frequency of staff briefings; and formal and informal measures adopted within council staff teams to aid interaction and communication. At a time when the sources of information relating to the crisis have been innumerable, whilst also not necessarily being comprehensive or easy to navigate, and the situation has been extremely dynamic, the council has firmly established itself in the eyes of local people as a trusted source of useful and clear information and guidance. The Coronavirus information page on the council's website has been a key element within this.

During the panel session, the managerial leadership reflected the importance of maintaining a 'sense of organisational belonging' in a context of large numbers of council staff working from home. In exploring this issue, it became apparent that the risk of a potential diminution in the feeling of belonging amongst staff was one perceived to exist by the Corporate Management Team rather than having been identified through consultation or engagement mechanisms such as a staff survey. On the back of this perceived risk, staff are being enabled and encouraged to spend time in work, with around 25 per cent of people present in the council offices at any one point in time. Given what this requires and asks of both staff and the council, we would encourage the authority to undertake a regular analysis of people's mood and attitude around it in order to ensure the adopted approaches are in line with their needs and desires and are serving to strengthen, and not diminish, the relationship between employee and employer.

We learnt of the employee assistance programme that the council provides staff with access to, including support for emotional and mental wellbeing, and such provision is to be commended. A related question that we pose is how levels of people's wellbeing and resilience and the uptake and effectiveness of support mechanisms are understood? We would also encourage the council to consider whether elected members would welcome access to the support provision for staff being extended to them also?

Linked to these issues of measuring staff attitudes; concerns for the sense of belonging; monitoring levels of welfare and wellbeing; and significantly changed ways of working, we wonder whether staff communications activity can be extended in terms of two-way engagement, making them more interactive and aiding the joint understanding of, and development of solutions to, emerging challenges and issues. We also wonder, with the Covid-19 crisis having led to an expediting of the council's ambitions around digital usage by both customers and staff, how ambitions around organisational and cultural change are evolving further in the light of the crisis?

The council reflected upon elected members (many of whom were new to the council less than a year prior to the commencement of the crisis) having become more acutely aware of their role during the course of recent months, with them being very much on the 'frontline' engaging their communities and shaping and influencing response activity. A very clear example of this is that of councillors' insights and knowledge being called upon by the authority to inform decision-making around the allocation of Government funding support for local businesses. Elected members have been supported in their activities by the council, as demonstrated by the provision of a £500 emergency ward budget for each councillor to allocate to organisations supporting the vulnerable plus a further £500 under the Community Recovery Fund to pump-prime ward-based initiatives.

Service delivery has been maintained across all core services, including waste collection and recycling – with this being an achievement that should not be underestimated. In line with Government requirements, certain facilities have had to close but the council has been keen to re-open them as soon as it was allowed to do so, with examples including play areas, public toilets and leisure centres. Adaptations have been necessary for face to face customer services, including the closure of Community Contact Centres and a linked move to increased digital delivery. A system of face to face appointments was established for those cases that genuinely could not be dealt with through other means of contact. The recent residents' survey indicated satisfaction levels with council services during the pandemic ranging from 71% to 95%.

Overall, the council has taken a practical and pragmatic approach to its response and recovery activity that has delivered results. This is most amply demonstrated by the work to support the re-opening of high streets, guided by the Town Centres Advisory Panel comprising business representatives, community activists and elected members, which has included:

- On-going engagement between council staff and landlords to understand issues and jointly identify solutions
- Free car parking in line with key criteria and parameters
- Measures to aid the flow and movement of people in public places to reduce the risk of transmission
- Sharing good practice across businesses
- Promoting outdoor attractions in town centres
- Enabling increased availability of outdoor eating
- Increased council staff visibility as both a reassurance and a deterrent
- Provision of hand sanitisers
- Encouraging cycling

A partnership/county-wide response has been used where this has been judged as the most effective approach. The most obvious example of this is that of the council's leadership of a strong and successful approach to managing homelessness across Worcestershire. This has seen the number of homeless within Wychavon reduce from 39 at the outset of the crisis to four now, with the council continuing to maintain its offer of support and assistance to those that are opting to remain living on the street. Another example is the council deciding for itself to provide free car parking for key workers from partner organisations such as the NHS and Worcestershire County Council social care.

3. Next steps

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership of the council will wish to reflect on this feedback. The council is encouraged to enter the findings into the public domain in due course.

Under the umbrella of LGA sector-led improvement, there is an on-going offer of support to councils and we would be happy to discuss potential areas of additional support, advice and guidance. Helen Murray (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA) and her e-mail address is helen.murray@local.gov.uk