

## **REPORT OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY BOARD COVID-19 PANDEMIC COMMAND RESPONSE TOPIC GROUP**

### **BACKGROUND**

At its meeting on 13 October 2020, Overview & Scrutiny Board commissioned a number of Topic Groups to review the impact of the COVID pandemic and the Council's response to it.

The terms of review for this Topic Group was the Council's response to the COVID pandemic; specifically, the emergency planning arrangements and communication strategy.

The Group established a timetable to review relevant documents and to meet virtually with members of staff and public section partner agencies.

The membership of the Topic Group consisted of Councillors Keith Darvill (Chairman), Ray Morgon, Christine Smith and Linda Hawthorn.

The Group met on four occasions and has now concluded its review; identifying recommendations and findings which are detailed in this report.

### **THE SCOPE OF THE REVIEW**

Overview & Scrutiny Board recognised that the scope of the pandemic was such that commissioning a single Topic Group to assess its impact and the preparedness of the Council in responding to it was unrealistic. It therefore established three separate Topic Groups charged with exploring specific areas of interest.

The focus for this Topic Group concerned the Council's emergency planning arrangements and the operation of its Command Structure. It therefore concentrated on the following key areas:

1. Review the Council's influenza-pandemic plan and develop an understanding of the Council's Command structure. Challenge and review planning assumptions contained within the plan (was the response proportionate to the risk);
2. Understand and explore the relationship between the Command structure and the Borough Resilience Forum;
  - a. With reference to the Community Resilience Development Framework, was there sufficient support for individuals identified at being of greatest risk? How are we doing it and what worked well/not so well (lessons learnt)
  - b. Promotion of the pandemic plans/Command responses into Member organisations from the business and voluntary sector. How was it communicated and were there any areas for improvement?

- c. Was the Resilience Plan tested pre-Covid? If so, what were the improvements gleaned from it?
3. Communication roles between Command, the Resilience Forum and elected Members. How the council communicated government guidance on responding to the pandemic and impacts on service provision.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The Group agreed that the list of people to be interviewed would comprise the following members of staff -

Andrew Blake-Herbert	Chief Executive and Strategic Gold Command
Dr Mark Ansell	Director for Public Health and Tactical Silver Command
Robert South	Director for Children's Services
Trevor Cook	Assistant Director for Education, Learning & Achievement
Gareth Nicholson	Assistant Director for Customer and Communications
Trevor Meers	Corporate & Community Resilience Manager
Lilly Pannifer	Emergency Planning Officer

The Topic Group also met with a pool of representatives from the Borough Resilience Forum. The Topic Group recognised the pressures faced by wider cohort of representatives and delayed matters until the pressure of the third lockdown was beginning to ease. This delayed the reporting of the Topic Group's findings however Members considered it necessary to delay until this aspect of the review had been completed.

A Member survey would be conducted to establish the extent of understanding and awareness of the authority's emergency planning powers.

From the outset, Topic Group Members appreciated the scale of the pandemic and the impact its longevity was having on the operation of Council services. Members quickly established that conducting a review mid-pandemic would have its limitations, not only the availability of key contributors but also the fluid nature of the evolving emergency response to it. Members therefore focussed on specific areas where tangible differences could be made which would not impede the ability of those charged with emergency planning powers to undertake their statutory duties.

## **TIMETABLE FOR REVIEW**

Members were hoping to complete the review within as short a timescale as possible. It was recognised however that it would be a challenge given the ongoing nature of the pandemic and the impact of changing restrictions on the availability of key contributors.

Members were however grateful for the commitment of staff to the review, many of whom were integral to the pandemic effort and prioritised the review above other competing matters.

## **THE REVIEW**

The notes of the meetings and discussion are listed as background papers. Set out under the heading **RECOMMENDATIONS / CONCLUSIONS** are the key issues that emerged from the scrutiny.

## **MEETINGS**

The Topic Group met virtually on four occasions.

The first session that took place reviewed the Council's emergency plan arrangements for responding to a pandemic. The associated emergency plans are restricted documents and not available for public consumption. Accordingly, the notes of that meeting are restricted also.

At the second meeting, the Topic Group received a detailed presentation from the Assistant Director for Customer and Communications, setting out the Council's strategy for communicating its response to the pandemic.

At the third meeting, the Topic Group met virtually with senior officers involved in the Council's Command structure. The session focused on the implementation of the emergency plans and the operational impact the pandemic on the Council's operations and its response to it.

At its final meeting, the Topic Group met with representatives from the Borough's Resilience Forum to better understand how public sector bodies had co-operated to respond to the pressures exerted by the pandemic.

The Topic Group also observed a virtual meeting of the Council's Tactical Silver Group, the notes from which are exempt from public disclosure. Attendance at the virtual meeting was to assist Topic Group members in their understanding of how the Council was responding to the pandemic. It was not a meeting commissioned by the Topic Group and Members took no active part in the meeting.

## **REVIEW OF PAPERS / DOCUMENT SUBMISSIONS**

The Topic Group has carefully reviewed the documents and presentations provided to it as part of the scrutiny, many of which are exempt from public disclosure. The notes from meetings undertaken as part of the review have also been adapted such as not to reveal exempt information.

## **FINDINGS**

### **1. Influenza-type Pandemic emergency planning and the operation of the Command Structure**

- The rapid transition into an emergency planning situation and the mobilisation of the associated pandemic plans and Command Structure demonstrated to the Topic Group that emergency planning was firmly embedded practice in the Council. This was demonstrated by examples such as the rapid rollout of the smart working from home initiative, the scaling up of Operational Bronze Command Response Groups, and the shielding call response effort.
- Testing of emergency plans is undertaken as a routine practice. The current emergency plans were tested in April 2019. This reinforces the above statement that emergency planning arrangements are well established amongst the officer cohort.
- The redeployment of staff to support frontline services was critical in supporting the pandemic relief effort, particularly in areas such as shielding calls, test and trace, and the Operations Hub.
- Staff working from home and the rapid rollout of laptops as part of the smart working programme had contributed in part to a reduction in staff absenteeism rates.
- Feedback from a councillor survey established that understanding amongst the cohort around emergency planning and the Council's civil contingencies responsibilities was limited.
- The scale and longevity of the pandemic has exceeded all previous pandemic planning scenarios. For example, lockdown restrictions had not previously featured in any pandemic planning. Emergency plans have therefore been modified throughout key stages of the pandemic, however the core of the Command Structure and the governance framework which supports it has remained intact and effective.
- Government changes in local and national restrictions have often come at such short notice that the ability for council services to respond, adapt and implement has been a considerable challenge. The most notable example has been in schools where the landscape through the course of the pandemic has changed considerably. The Topic Group had confidence in the communication channels that existed to ensure that messages were clearly communicated between the council, schools and parents, the relationship between the latter two being particularly important. Topic Group Members were however concerned at the volume of short notice changes introduced by the Government and the disruptive impact this had on parents, pupils and school staff.
- The Topic Group recognised the effort and commitment of the Chief Executive and his senior management colleagues in ensuring openness and transparency in COVID-related during decision-making

through the pandemic. This was reflected in the results of the Member survey. The Topic Group is however concerned by the timeliness of decision-making and that many of the executive decisions produced were retrospective and therefore added little in the way of added value for Members.

- The results from the Member survey indicated a mix response when the question was posed as to whether civil contingencies responsibilities were understood amongst the cohort.
- Concern about long term impact for staff mental wellbeing with the extended period of remote working and the long working hours experienced by some. Recognised the pastoral support available to staff, coupled with frequent internal communications on how best to cope through the pandemic.
- Concern that there was insufficient reporting of how the pandemic had impacted on business as usual activities and how that was being monitored.
- The long term impact of the pandemic on the Council's finances and how it would meet the costs in future years.
- Reflection on how the emergency plans stood up to the pandemic and what has worked well and what needs to change for future such emergencies is essential and should incorporate input from Members.

## **2. Understand and explore the relationship between the Command structure and the Borough Resilience Forum**

- The importance of collaborative working across public sector agencies in order to break down a silo mentality for the benefit of the public.
- The critical role the Council's Emergency Planning team play in supporting other public sector organisations.
- That the bodies which comprise the Forum often cover a much wider geographical area. The extent of the pandemic has put those resources under considerable strain.
- External communication messages by public sector organisations needs to be monitored by the Forum. There were concerns about consistency of messaging and ensuring that there were targeted comms which focussed on matters of local relevance.
- The frequency in changes to legislation afforded limited opportunity for organisations to make operational changes resulting in confusion around matters such as enforcement and best practice.

**3. Communication roles between Command, the public and elected Members. How the council communicated government guidance on responding to the pandemic and impacts on service provision.**

- The Topic Group were impressed with the effectiveness of the “DoingMyBit” campaign, noting that it received national recognition through a Bronze Award in the Public Service Communications Excellence Awards 2020
- The creation of a Bronze Command Sub-Group dedicated solely to communications was important in co-ordinating and delivering key messages and service updates.
- The importance and effectiveness of social media as a proactive communication tool for the dissemination of Government guidance and legislation. The Council’s website was important for providing accurate and up-to-date information on changes to Council services.
- The Topic Group noted with interest the introduction of targeted advertising campaign through mobile Ad-vans and billboards, however they were unsure as to the effectiveness of such methods. There was a wider concern about how communication campaigns were evaluated for the effectiveness and how it could inform future campaign strategies.
- More traditional communication methods such as a borough-wide letter drop remained in order to ensure coverage for more hard to reach sections of the community who did not have access to technology.
- There was a correlation between targeted campaigns such as mass testing with subsequent uptake in the number of tests being administered.
- Noted with interest the diverse age range of visitor numbers through the Council’s various social media channels, with Facebook being particularly popular.
- Almost a quarter of all households in the borough are signed up to receive the Living bulletin email.
- The importance of updated internal communications for staff. Particularly support and wellbeing given remote working and isolation experienced by some.
- As community leaders there is little opportunity for Members to report issues of local importance to the Council other than through the same channels as residents, or indeed for Members to undertake that role on behalf of the Council.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS / CONCLUSIONS**

- 1. On behalf of the members of the Topic Group and the Overview & Scrutiny Board, to thank all Council staff, public and voluntary sector bodies and for their dedication and commitment in responding to the pandemic.**
- 2. The Topic Group was assured that emergency planning and awareness and understanding of the Council's emergency plans, including the Influenza Pandemic and Excess Deaths Plans, were firmly established practices amongst those who had responsibility for such matters.**

**That the Council had tested its emergency plans less than 12 months prior to the pandemic stood it in good stead for the impending pandemic. The preparedness was exemplified by the continuation of key council services such as waste collection, registration services, and children and adult social care services. That also extended to the support offered to public sector partners through the Resilience Forum and the excellent work undertaken by the Emergency Planning Team.**

**Furthermore, the mobilisation of the smart working programme enabling staff to work remotely and the redeployment of staff unable to work from home to support critical initiatives such as shielding calls for the vulnerable and the operation of the distribution hub exemplified the Council's preparedness for the pandemic.**

**There was however concern regarding the impact of the pandemic on business as usual activities and how such matters were being formally reported and monitored by Members.**

**The establishment of a dedicated Bronze Communications Group was effective in co-ordinating messaging to the public and other key stakeholders such as businesses and voluntary groups. There was clear and consistent messaging for the most part in respect of impact on local services, public health messages around testing and vaccination and support that was available through initiatives such as business grants and rate relief. Where there was inconsistent messaging (eg. parking charges), it caused confusion to the public and Councillors alike.**

**The Topic Group is concerned about the impact to the Council's finances and will monitor closely the strategy to offset the significant loss of income incurred over the past 12 months.**

- 3. Where The Topic Group considered improvements could be made to emergency planning and the response to the pandemic was in respect of the role of Elected Members. The intention here is to**

recognise that civil contingencies responsibilities rest largely with professional officers who are trained and experienced in responding to emergencies. Members do however play a key role as community leaders. It is the view of the Topic Group that their resource and expertise has not been utilised to its fullest extent. The following recommendations are therefore proposed:

- a. That Members receive annual mandatory training on the Council's Civil Contingencies responsibilities and emergency plans, including as part of the Member induction process.
- b. That guidance be issued to Members on their roles and responsibilities during a local or national emergency.
- c. That the governance arrangements around decision-making using civil contingencies powers and the issuing of special urgency decisions be explained with a report presented to a future meeting of the Council's Governance Committee.
- d. Support the continuation of All Member Briefings in the event of a local or national emergency.
- e. That consideration be given to establishing a dedicated communication channel for Members to inform the Council of live issues experienced in local communities during an emergency.
- f. That Overview & Scrutiny and the wider Council membership be involved in any lessons learnt initiatives as part of the pandemic plan review, including a review of the Council's emergency plans.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The Topic Group Members wish to place on record their thanks for the very positive approach displayed by members of staff during the course of this review.

### **Background Papers**

Topic Group meetings notes:

19 October 2020

5 November 2020

12 November 2020

24 February 2021



