

Committee: Scrutiny Committee
Title: Managing the Public Health Emergency
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Summary

1. This report sets out a brief overview of the work of the council, so far, in responding to the public health emergency. Officers will be in attendance to answer further questions.

Recommendations

2. Members are invited to comment and raise questions on this report.

Financial Implications

3. None arising from this report.

Background Papers

4. None.

Impact

- 5.

Communication/Consultation	Referred to in the report
Community Safety	This report does not address the continuing work of the council on community safety, including the focus on the shifting pattern, victims and types of crime.
Equalities	This is not addressed in this report but there is a growing body of evidence that indicates that those from BAME communities are at greater risk from the coronavirus.
Health and Safety	This is not referred to in this report specifically but the health, safety and welfare of staff has and continues to be the greatest priority for the council.

Human Rights/Legal Implications	Not referred to specifically in the report.
Sustainability	Not referred to specifically in the report.
Ward-specific impacts	None
Workforce/Workplace	Referred to in the report

Situation

6. The council began preparing for the coronavirus outbreak in January, issuing its first bulletin to all staff regarding its impacts in early February.
7. An officer group was formally established in February and began to consider and plan for the implications for council services. A public health emergency was declared on 17 March when the council moved to an incident command structure.
8. Following the first 'lockdown' announced by the Prime Minister on 23 March, over 200 staff have moved to working from home, enabling services to the residents to continue to be delivered where possible. The day centres, museum and face to face customer service points have been closed, as have the leisure centres provided on the council's behalf by 1Life.
9. The council's focus has fallen in to three broad categories:

Work of the Council:

10. Staff have adapted quickly to their new ways of working, which has the advantage of providing flexibility and greater control over the working day. Teams have pulled together well to ensure services are delivered efficiently and there has been a good sense of comradery around the council's response, with many staff redeployed into areas of greatest demand or where staff shortages were impacting on services.
11. This has not been without its challenges for staff, many of who are juggling their work with schooling or other caring responsibilities; some staff do not have a dedicated space to work and therefore find it hard to 'get away' from work at the end of the day and many have reported missing social interaction, whether that be the ad-hoc contact with colleagues ('corridor conversations') or the immediate support of colleagues and managers (perhaps after a difficult call with a customer).
12. The response of the council has been successful, in part, due to the business continuity planning senior managers had already undertaken. However, it has been the flexibility and responsiveness of staff that has made it all happen so smoothly.
13. A dashboard of covid19 PIs has been produced, which provide an overview of the work that has continued during the 30 March to 3 May period and the

weekly. It will be reported to the Governance Audit and Performance Committee.

Providing support to residents, businesses and communities

14. Attached at Enclosure 1 is an infographic providing an overview of the work of the council in supporting residents, businesses and communities. Some responsibilities are new such as supporting the shielded and vulnerable and some is more of the same such as supporting those to claim benefits or to manage changes in their circumstances.
15. Part of the challenge for the new work has been the 'moving goalposts'. Information has come from the government, at times, very quickly and then has been replaced with updated guidance or data. For example, data was provided recently of another 732 residents apparently identified as in need of shielding and therefore potentially requiring high levels of support; on checking much of this data was a duplicate of that already received such that calls were only required to check on 160 residents, in that wave of data.

Working with Partners

16. A key role for the council in responding to an emergency of this scale is to work with partners across Essex through the Essex Resilience Forum (ERF), which has established a Strategic Coordinating Group (SCG) to maintain the over view and a number of tactical coordinating groups to work through the detail together, including on shielding, testing, PPE, etc.
17. A formal review of how the ERF has responded has not yet been undertaken, although an interim review is underway, but it is generally the view that it has been extremely effective in providing a consistent response and communication to residents and businesses; the ERF SCG also provides a very useful conduit for information/messages to go up to government and for clear channels back down, that the council would not have access to otherwise.
18. From the council's perspective, the investment in training, provided through the ERF, that has been undertaken across the senior management team in incident command and emergency management over the past couple of years has proved invaluable. Several managers are able to act in the gold and silver capacity, having a clear appreciation of the roles, responsibilities and ways of working required.

Looking Forward

19. The council has an important role in supporting businesses to reopen in a manner that is safe for their staff and customers; we will also take the lead on managing public space in the 'High Street' and town centres, working with Essex County Council to consider traffic management changes necessary to facilitate social distancing.
20. There is also a key role for the council, working with partners, in supporting future economic growth. Many sectors will see a shift in demand, their ways of

working and their requirements, which may have implications for skills, assets and transport.

21. Similar to all councils, we need to give thought to how we build on some of the opportunities that have arisen during the pandemic, for example, to keep the homeless housed, to keep volunteers engaged beyond the crisis and how to help maintain the generous community spirit seen around the district.
22. The council will also need to reflect on this experience to consider its own future operating model. The council now has a greater following on social media and remote working and meetings are now part of our new ways of working. The carbon footprint arising from travelling to the London Road office to work and meet has reduced substantially. It will be important to reflect on how the opportunities that have arisen can be built upon while continuing to address things that have not or are not working so well.
23. There is clearly going to be financial challenges in future government settlements, even more than were already predicted. The opportunities referred to above may go some way to addressing the gap that had already opened up in the council's medium term financial strategy.