

LESSONS LEARNT THROUGHOUT THE COVID RESPONSE

Executive Summary

The response to the Covid-19 pandemic across Woking has been commendable and is ongoing working with residents, businesses and public service partners to protect our communities.

This paper reflects the experience of officers working in the Borough Emergency Control Centre and the timeline from the first covid cases being presented in England at the end of January 2020 to the current situation as the new variant omicron presents new challenges to our communities and confirms arrangements for emergency response and business continuity for Woking.

Lessons learnt to date are ongoing, to be fully assessed and consulted upon when the Council and the wider community are able to return fully to business as normal.

Recommendations

The Committee is requested to:

RESOLVE That the report be received and noted.

The Committee has the authority to determine the recommendation set out above.

Background Papers:	None
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Lessons Learnt Throughout the Covid Response

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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The paper reflects the experience of officers working in the Borough Emergency Control Centre and the timeline from the first covid cases being presented in England at the end of January 2020 to the current situation as the new variant omicron presents new challenges to our communities and confirms arrangements for emergency response and business continuity for Woking.
- 1.2 The Council's emergency team became aware of Covid 19 as the disease was reported overseas and made its way to England at the end of January 2020. Historically, generic plans have been in place for a flu epidemic or similar for many years, but as we all know Covid 19 has become more significant than anyone really anticipated.
- 1.3 In the early part of February 2020, the Borough was experiencing the effects of firstly storm Ciara followed by storm Dennis. At the end of February 2020, the first Covid guidance was published and then on the 28 February 2020 the first cases were identified in Haslemere, Surrey.
- 1.4 Further versions of Covid guidance followed and the Council initially set up a working group at the beginning of March 2020 before mobilising the Borough Emergency Control Centre (BECC) in the middle of March 2020 which has been in place ever since.

2.0 Governance and Oversight

- 2.1 The Council's Chief Executive continues to lead the response to Covid 19 in consultation with the Leader of the Council.
- 2.2 Corporate Leadership Team Oversight – Initially the Head of Human Resources was leading on the response before the emergency room was activated following ongoing conversation between CLT members and business continuity officers.
- 2.3 The ongoing communication theme has been centred around a weekly meeting where decisions and updates are recorded through the publication and circulation of weekly minutes. CLT meetings also include standing agenda items for Coronavirus Update and Agile Working.
- 2.4 Team Structure – The BECC was set up on the 23rd March to manage the Council's response to the COVID-19 global pandemic. Acting as the main link with the wider Surrey Local Resilience Forum (SLRF) response through teleconferences. In addition, regular meetings with members of CLT and other colleagues allows for information to be disseminated quickly and efficiently through the Council.
- 2.5 The BECC operates on a rota basis with 2 separate officer teams resourcing the Control Room on alternating days. The 2 team approach provides resilience and allows for 24 hours a day, 7 days a week coverage with an out of hours phone number in use 01483 743315.
- 2.6 The weekly meetings have become virtual and new equipment has been installed in the Council offices such that hybrid meetings are also possible.

3.0 Business Continuity Plan & Structure

- 3.1 Corporate Risk Assessment – the corporate risk assessment continues to be updated as guidance is received to assist the safest and most effective ways of working.
- 3.2 Central email address business.continuity@woking.gov.uk - a central email address was set up for the BECC team so that staff could raise questions/ requests and allow two way communication.

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- 3.3 Redeployment of Resources – Human Resources led an initiative whereby staff from disrupted services such as car parks and Freedom Leisure were redeployed to other areas where resources were constrained.
- 3.4 As part of this initiative, volunteers were requested to assist those areas which were resource constrained. This process has been ongoing to various degrees. Most recently staff have been identified over the Christmas and new year break to assist with meals deliveries and care home staffing.
- 3.5 A longer term redeployment has involved a member of staff working full time to engage with communities and groups in Sheerwater. Working directly with the COVID-19 vaccination programme to enhance uptake of first, second and booster doses of the COVID-19 vaccination. The role includes engagement with the community to enhance compliance with COVID protective behaviours and improve the interface with healthcare.
- 3.6 Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) – at the outset there was a lack of PPE available nationally. Employees were urged to minimise physical contact due to uncertainties in obtaining required quantities of PPE. The BECC teams persisted to get the required stock and once obtained, a sufficient supply was held at all times and at no time did PPE run out. Moving forward agreed stock levels have been agreed and are maintained as part of business as usual arrangements.
- 3.7 Employee Support – There have been various initiatives such as Collaboration with Woking Mind and a series of talks which have been well received by staff.
- 3.8 Work From Home Policy – the organisation has great flexibility in terms of working from home, which is widely favoured across all teams. However, whilst staff were not forced to work from the offices, some preferred to come in, whereas others chose to work from home.
- 3.9 Staff surveys will be ongoing to help understand how employees are feeling over time and respond to any changes in opinions and proactively address issues.

4.0 Internal and External Communication

- 4.1 Staff Communications – Chief Executive briefings were initially sent by email to all staff. The briefings have since increased in frequency and take place over zoom and teams.
- 4.2 Engagement with Partners – The frequency and detail of meetings with partners has varied from the initial response to date. Meetings attended by officers from the emergency team are as follows:
 - Mondays – Testing Operational Group Meeting (Updates regarding testing site activity)
 - Tuesdays – Surrey Heartlands Vaccination Support Cell (Updates regarding vaccination sites)
 - Thursdays – Weekly – Surrey Local Resilience Forum (SLRF) – 9am (Update for all Surrey partners)
 - Weekly – CLT/BECC 10am (Woking BECC meeting to coordinate response)
 - Monthly – Covid Managers Network (Surrey Borough and Districts)
- 4.3 In addition, on most Thursdays the SLRF run training days to cover various emergency scenarios.

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5.0 Business Systems And IT

- 5.1 Agile Working – certain challenges were experienced in getting staff set up for working from home. This was largely due to shortages of IT equipment and the need to confirm what staff were entitled to. However, the IT team have worked hard to resolve these challenges.
- 5.2 IT Infrastructure – IT infrastructure has significantly developed from the introduction of zoom meetings to the current implementation of Microsoft Office 365.

6.0 Critical Services and Activities

- 6.1 Supporting Vulnerable Residents – at an early stage the Council identified 2,275 of the most vulnerable residents. Contact was made with all of these residents to ensure that they were safe, and that they had sufficient support in place throughout the lock-down. The need for support has reduced during the pandemic and in most cases this support is now provided through mainstream agencies or no longer required
- 6.2 Brockhill – Staff at Brockhill have managed a number of scenarios including full “lock down” on more than one occasion to ensure residents and staff are as safe as possible.
- 6.3 The Independent Support team continue to play an important role with our NVH sheltered schemes and those tenants in general needs property as appropriate.
- 6.4 Meals on Wheels – This was deemed a critical service from the outset and volunteers have been called upon at various times to ensure the service was not disrupted.
- 6.5 All our Health and Wellbeing Services continued in residents homes throughout the pandemic responding in particular to hospital discharges working with our Alliance partners. Remaining in particular demand throughout were the Handyperson Service fitting grab rails, bannister rails and providing key safes and the Careline team installing a variety of alarms.
- 6.6 Housing Services – staff have responded to Government direction to assist rough sleepers requiring emergency accommodation whilst continuing to deliver other services through the pandemic.

7.0 Stakeholders and Supply Chain

- 7.1 Suppliers – the Council continues to ensure prompt payments to suppliers. This has allowed the Council to support suppliers and strengthened relationships going forward.
- 7.2 Local Surrey Network – the network has been heavily utilised during the pandemic, e.g. Surrey Helpline, which has proven to be very useful.
- 7.3 Procurement of Key Supplies – initially PPE and hand sanitiser were procured and distributed by separate teams but this is now part of business as usual undertaken by the Building Services team.

8.0 Public & Media Relations

- 8.1 Local Newspaper – to ensure that messages went out as widely as possible an initiative to partner up with a local newspaper was formed. This communication channel took consideration of the vulnerable and elderly, who might not always have access to other social media channels.
- 8.2 Social Media Channels - the Communications Team have continued to send out national and Surrey focussed messaging to inform and advise residents appropriately. Most recently messaging has promoted vaccine and booster take up.

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9.0 Volunteers

- 9.1 Volunteering has taken many forms during the pandemic. Since the outbreak, our volunteering team has been overwhelmed with hundreds of pledges of support from local volunteers. Most recently feedback from the vaccination centres has been very positive as new volunteers are directed to assist the initiative meeting the current demand.
- 9.2 A register of volunteers continues to be maintained with an online volunteering form and email volunteer@woking.gov.uk
- 9.3 The BECC team continue to engage with local residents' groups on specific issues and to assist in sending out Covid messaging to residents.

10.0 Lessons Learnt Throughout the Covid Response

- 10.1 The Covid Response is so far reaching that it is difficult to identify every issue. A formal debrief process for Covid 19 will be carried out in the future to capture learning in a structured way. However, the below provides a good flavour of lessons learnt to date:-
- **Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)** – consistent with many other partners this was a significant issue at times due to concerns with keeping everyone as safe as possible. The learning has involved increased stock levels being agreed and business as usual for ordering and distribution.
 - **Borough Emergency Control Centre** – it is routine to open an emergency room which has enabled the Council to remain proactive throughout the pandemic as well as being flexible to deal with more traditional challenges. The learning has involved the experience of operating the room for such a prolonged period and the use of virtual meeting tools and strengthened relations with partners.
 - **Agile Working** – plans had been in place for sometime to upgrade ICT systems to facilitate more flexible working patterns. Recent experiences have accelerated these plans.
 - **Partnership Working** – the Covid response has brought partners together repeatedly to tackle a common cause. Lots of this work is ongoing such as enforcement of regulations and track and trace, but other examples include surge testing where a challenge was presented at short notice requiring agencies to work together at pace. The required learning is to maintain and build on these strong working relationships in the future.
 - **Flexible working** – many lessons learned during escalation periods within the pandemic, for example when case numbers are high causing lockdown, numerous meetings with partners, but also colleagues having to self isolate and during the 3 surge test operations that were carried out which required extensive resource in a short period and quick mobilisation or standing up and standing down of service.
 - **Volunteer Engagement** – the availability of volunteers has been an ongoing strength which is of great credit to the local residents concerned.

11.0 Corporate Strategy

- 11.1 The learning from this report will support delivery of a number of corporate objectives, most notably effective use of resources, engaging our communities and a strong economy.

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12.0 Implications

Finance and Risk

- 12.1 The report has covered more generally the experience of the Council through Covid 19 and lessons learned at this time.
- 12.2 The financial position will continue to be reported through the Medium Term Financial Strategy and separate reports as Government support is confirmed.

Equalities and Human Resources

- 12.3 Council's employees continue to respond well to the challenges presented by COVID 19.
- 1.1 Agile working continues to develop alongside new tools to support efficient working practices.

Legal

- 1.2 The Council will continue to observe the different regulations that emerge, either as part of our own business practice or in applying regulations to local businesses and residents as appropriate.

13.0 Engagement and Consultation

- 13.1 The Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee was consulted in the preparation of this report.

REPORT ENDS