

Response and Recovery Panel

Telford and Wrekin Council

15th July 2020

1. Overview of the approach to the Response and Recovery Panel with Telford and Wrekin

The Local Government Association (LGA) is hugely grateful to Telford and Wrekin Council for being the first local authority to undertake a Response and Recovery Panel. This tool, along with a sister model entitled 'Remote Peer Support', have been developed to aid councils in their work relating to the Covid-19 crisis and its many and varied impacts.

The panel ran for several hours across the course of Wednesday 15th July 2020 and involved a number of different sessions dedicated to the following themes:

- Understanding of the local place and priority setting
- Leadership and communications
- Communities
- Local economy
- Environment
- Support for the care sector – children and adults

Around 15 Cabinet members and senior officers from the council were involved and the sessions were facilitated by the following peers:

- Nick Carter, Chief Executive of West Berkshire Council
- Councillor Chris Read, Leader of Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council

They were supported by Chris Bowron, James Millington and Penny Galvin from the LGA. The input to the preparations for, and delivery of, the panel by Jon Power, the council's Organisational Delivery and Development Manager, were very much appreciated by all involved.

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 both the local and organisational recoveries. 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 knowledge is continuously emerging and everybody is learning through experience, peers are applying their perspectives to the information presented to them and, through this, prompting reflection and discussion on the part of 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 course of 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 both to response activity and emerging plans regarding recovery.

2. Feedback

Council ambition and narrative

Everybody that we spoke to during the course of the panel sessions demonstrated a long-standing pride in Telford and Wrekin both as a place and as a council and this has been reinforced through the way the authority and borough have responded to the Covid-19 crisis and are shaping up for the recovery and reset.

In leading the response and the recovery, the council is delivering on its organisational vision to 'Protect, Care and Invest to create a better borough'. Core themes that ran through the panel sessions are integral to this, including the strength of relationships the council has developed with partners; investment the authority has made over time in physical assets and maintaining and enhancing the environment, enabling community capacity and developing business support mechanisms; and focusing the time and effort necessary to ensure the council as an organisation is functioning in the right way. The core business of the council feels strong, including around both adults and children's social care and environmental services.

A strong underlying narrative comes across from the senior leadership of the authority – one of a 'Co-operative Council' that is competent, caring and pragmatic; an organisation that is keen to learn and develop; and an authority that has seen a huge amount delivered through its communities as a result of adopting an enabling approach. The council has committed people who take ownership of issues as part of a culture where people embrace responsibility and decision-making sits comfortably with them.

Challenges around health inequalities and tackling disadvantage in a 'borough of contrasts' feature at the top of the agenda and the fact that these issues are being reinforced by the Covid-19 crisis have taken the council's commitment to impacting in communities to a new level, including an increased resolve to break negative cycles that have become established and to intervene where necessary. Issues of loneliness and social isolation have come to the fore more in recent months and the council is keen to ensure measures it has adopted in that time, such as 'keeping in touch' calls, are sustained and built upon.

Delivery and community impact

The council has demonstrated a strong response to the Covid-19 crisis and people have worked incredibly hard. The current crisis follows on directly from the very testing flooding issues experienced in the borough in February and the capacity this absorbed within the council, amongst partner organisations and in communities. The efforts of all involved, both officers and councillors, has been hugely appreciated by the Leader and Chief Executive and they have sought to demonstrate their understanding of the importance of saying 'thank you'. Council staff have redeployed willingly, and even with relish, into new and very different roles and councillors have evolved their role and approach to act as community facilitators. Officers and elected members have worked well together and the sense of 'team' at the Cabinet and Corporate Management Team level has been built further through what has happened, with genuine co-production in order to innovate and push boundaries.

There has been impressive delivery by the council, both independently and with and through others, and it is making a difference. The authority has taken an approach of 'doing the right thing'

for its communities, applying Government initiatives where they exist – adapting them as necessary to ensure they deliver what is required – and stepping in where they don't. Examples include:

- Extending the national approach to shielding by establishing 'Operation Guardian', which has expanded the reach from 5,500 identified as the most medically vulnerable to 18,000 people deemed as vulnerable in a wider sense – involving engagement with people in more than one-third of all properties across the borough. The council is committed to sustaining this support beyond the duration of the national programme, and until at least the end of August, given people's apprehension and desire for reassurance.
- The council has approached the distribution of business support grant on a very proactive basis, operating three rounds of bidding and, having distributed the maximum amount feasible under the established criteria, now lobbying Government to be able to release the remaining amount which exceeds £5m.
- In advance of Government acting in relation to free school meals, the council took its own initiative and, with help from community organisations, council staff and elected members, delivered 52,000 meals to households within the first two weeks of the lockdown. The council has also established its own meal vouchers scheme and has applied this throughout school holidays.
- The council has provided additional funding to support food banks and invested in support delivered through the voluntary and community sector around mental health, domestic violence and homelessness.
- Acting within the umbrella of the Local Resilience Forum, the authority resorted to sourcing personal protective equipment (PPE) directly. Such equipment was made available to care homes when needed and to schools in readiness for wider re-opening.

Enabling communities

There has clearly been a lot of good work going on with, and through, community-based organisations such as Community Trusts, Town and Parish Councils and the Inter-Faith Council, both prior to and during the course of the crisis. This includes the provision of breakfast clubs, activity packs and the meal deliveries. In the first week of the crisis, the council requested volunteers and successfully mobilised them all very quickly. It has learnt through this of the potential of, and need to enable, individuals who wish to engage in volunteering but without being affiliated to an organisation or forum. Volunteers have been kept informed through a weekly newsletter and the council has heard from some of those who put themselves forward about the benefits they have derived as individuals, including around their well-being and mental health.

The council has traditionally adopted a pump-priming approach to enabling community capacity, reflected for example in £2,000 start-up grants for prospective community initiatives and £10,000 support grants where such initiatives have proved viable. This is badged by the authority as acting as a catalyst and then 'getting out of the way' and it is proving very beneficial but this still represents a significant commitment from the council, with an annual £1m budget set aside for the purpose.

Council finance and future direction

More generally in relation to council finance, the authority has sought to not let the issue of funding act as a barrier in a context of it seeking to do the right thing. At the same time, it has been mindful of the question of financial sustainability and the uncertainty around funding for the local government sector. The senior leadership has been engaged in thinking about how to mitigate the

impact of different levels of potential shortfall that may emerge. Working with the information available currently, the council is developing a mid-year service and financial planning strategy which it is intended will be presented to Cabinet in October. This will see the council's overall vision and high levels of ambition being maintained but outline the context of the crisis and its wide-ranging implications; the impacts this may have on things the authority has traditionally done; the ways in which different approaches may need to be adopted; and how resources may need to shift to reflect changing priorities.

Partnership working and relationships

The council has worked hard in recent years to establish strong relationships with partners and the Covid-19 crisis is seen to have moved these up a level. People in the panel sessions reflected on the way in which environmental services contract partners had really stepped up and delivered, not just in the way they have worked with the council but also how they have worked with one another. The health system is seen to have worked well, with people particularly citing the approach to discharging people from hospital to care homes, which is seen to have been both rigorous in terms of testing prior to entry (ahead of Government advice) and timely.

The council has sought to support residential and nursing home viability and sustainability, which was an issue previously but one that has been exacerbated by the crisis. The social care uplift was applied quickly, PPE was provided by the council as necessary and additional staff for homes to call upon were sourced. All of the schools in the borough have remained open since the lockdown for vulnerable children and those of key workers, including on bank holidays, and the council has scrutinised schools' risk assessments to provide extra reassurance. To support home learning, the council has gone beyond the Government offer around laptops in order to address gaps around digital access, with direct dialogue with school heads in order to identify greatest need. All vulnerable children have been tracked, with at least one phone call to them every day and face to face support being maintained as much as possible.

The Outbreak Management Plan for the borough is in place and is already evolving, for example around the way in which communications need to operate. It is felt that the strength of relationships with care homes, schools and local businesses will stand things in good stead around 'test and trace' and the Inter-Faith Council is playing a key role in getting the message out about the importance of testing. The council cites strong relationships with the Department for Work and Pensions locally and the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), which will be beneficial as the economic consequences of the crisis start to impact more fully and the economic recovery activity gathers pace.

Increased engagement by the council at the West Midlands level, facilitated by the crisis, and the reputation it is carving out for itself around its work both generally and related to the crisis provides the authority with a sense that it is starting to be seen in a different light within the region. It has a good story to tell, is demonstrating a strong desire to learn and is showing an increasing confidence.

Something that the council was already cognisant of and planning around prior to the crisis concerns partnership relationships working well bilaterally but there being a need to enhance the way in which partnership interactions and activity operate on a more collective basis. The Health and Well Being Board was cited as an example in this respect, in terms of having scope to progress.

Communications and engagement

The council's approach to communications during the crisis has been very impressive. A strong social media presence with very high levels of reach has been established. Within this, creativity

has been shown in the production of videos that convey impactful and helpful messages, reflecting the council's objective of providing reassurance and hope to communities; demonstrating that it is on the side of local people; and being seen as a trusted source of information. The 'Stay Safe, Be Kind' video reflects well the overall approach of the council to its communications – providing reassurance (that places are safe to visit); encouraging people to support the local economy; and reinforcing the importance of people acting responsibly.

Recognising the importance of looking beyond social media to more traditional ways of conveying messages to people, the council sends a weekly e-mail to 75,000 residents who have requested it and which shows high levels of it being read; the Leader has twice during the crisis written a letter to every household and business; and a weekly e-mail goes from the Leader to all councillors, Town and Parish Councils and local Members of Parliament. The 'keeping in touch' calls initiative has acted as a further communication mechanism for the council, offering two-way engagement.

In a context of the governance arrangements within the council having had to differ from the norm during the course of the crisis, the Leader has sought to maintain openness and transparency through prompt communication to all councillors of the 'Strong Leader' decisions he has taken. People reflected that internal communications with staff have strengthened too, reflected in the 'Ask Me Anything' sessions delivered by the Leader and Chief Executive and which have regularly engaged hundreds of staff at any one time.

The council is looking to undertake a borough survey later this summer, aimed at understanding people's Covid-19 experiences, how they perceive the impact and what they want to see happen with the recovery. This will provide rich information around what is seen to be of the greatest importance, both at the locality level and thematically, and the council is looking to share the findings with voluntary and community sector partners, including Town and Parish Councils, in order that they can design local initiatives in response. The borough survey initiative reflects a desire by the council to supplement its conveying of messages by extending its two-way engagement and moving beyond the 1,100 strong residents' panel that it has had in place for a while.

Crisis recovery

The council has established its 'Recovery, Reform, Reset' strategy containing six themes:

- Community and care
- Children and education
- Health and welfare
- Economy and housing
- Environmental and infrastructure
- Finance, legal and HR

The matrix style approach of the strategy has been designed deliberately to cut across traditional organisational boundaries both internally and externally. The plan was described to us as intentionally "pacey and ambitious" but with an acceptance that progress will be made at varied rates across the different elements. Through the plan, the council is demonstrating its leadership of place and, through 'Reset and Reform' is seeking to cement or establish new approaches and ensure any return to what went before is through conscious choice rather than by default and a 'race back to normality'. As examples, there is a strong desire to retain the new ways of working that have been established with Town and Parish Councils in recent months and to continue to ease levels of bureaucracy in the organisation as far as possible in order to enable things to happen faster.

Themes that we talked through during the panel discussions that come under the umbrella of recovery included:

- Local people discovering their borough and valuing the open spaces that it provides
- Embracing the opportunities around approaches to travel, exploring what can be delivered through the £2.6m Active Travel funding from Government to better connect work, shops and homes, including through enhanced cycle routes, and exploring demand-responsive transport facilities through the local transport provider
- Southwater shopping centre showing the fourth best recovery nationally in terms of footfall – which is seen to reflect the strength of its offer – but the high streets across the seven district centres showing a slower uptake
- The anticipated surge in demand in children’s social care and mental health amongst both adults and children

The council recognises that it is still too early to test out the ‘Reset and Reform’ elements of the plan. There is a lot of planned activity and a great deal of ambition in these spheres and there may be merit in seeking to probe them through either a further panel in the autumn or the council’s corporate peer challenge planned for November. With more than sixty priorities in the overall strategy, we would encourage the council to think through whether aspects of this could become established more as ‘business as usual’ and form part of a revised corporate plan, being considered for later in the year, and what would best remain sitting separately in a dedicated strategy. We also wondered the extent to which the authority could seek to tie its social value policy and ambitions into the recovery strategy and activity more closely.

Local economy

The local economy has been strong in recent years and the council has taken a very proactive approach to maintain and enhance this during that time, reflected in the £50m ‘Telford Growth Deal’; the ‘Telford Land Deal’ with the Government and LEP; initiatives to attract inward investment; and ‘wraparound’ business support for existing and potential employers.

As a result of the Covid-19 crisis, 29 per cent of the workforce in the local area are currently furloughed; 25 per cent of companies are indicating likely job losses; and Universal Credit claims are increasing and concentrated in the most disadvantaged parts of the borough. The council recognises that the challenge of delivering the ‘levelling-up’ agenda has been multiplied many times over as a result and is also cognisant of the need to diversify the local economy. It retains its ambition, however, as seen with the Growth Deal and the £25m Town Deal, which emphasises the digital and connectivity agenda and the creation of ‘Station Quarter’ to boost housing, education and skills. The Board that has been established to oversee the Town Deal comprises the LEP, MPs, business, elected members and Telford College.

Very practical measures have been adopted in response to the crisis, including a grants scheme around empty high street properties and their refurbishment; funding for businesses to diversify, including establishing an on-line presence; a ‘shop local’ campaign; business start-up funding to support a likely trend, seen in previous recessions, of people setting up by themselves; linking up companies who are being forced to shed staff with others who are looking to recruit; the re-launch of the ‘Job Box’ scheme, including making it mobile, to match people to employment opportunities; and the ‘Better Homes for All’ programme aimed at enhancing housing quality, delivering environmental benefit and boosting jobs and the economy. These initiatives are already having an impact but the scale of the challenge to come will demand both more from them and a range of additional measures.

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. With the corporate peer challenge the council had commissioned for March 2020 having had to be postponed due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis, we wish to reaffirm our commitment to delivering this piece of work in due course. The council is clear in its commitment to the same and the intention is for the peer challenge to proceed in November 2020, assuming the circumstances allow.

The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a range of issues and we would be happy to discuss this. Helen Murray (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the LGA. Her e-mail address is helen.murray@local.gov.uk