

Covid-19 Step back review – Task & Finish Group Summary of findings & recommended actions

The aim of the review is not to analyse or comment on all the decisions made up to this point but to allow debate around a number of issues that have been highlighted by the response of the Council to emerging events since February 2020.

Having reviewed the documentation provided by officers, as set out in appendices Two to Nine, the Task & Finish Group's findings can be summarised as follows:

1. The workforce responded to the crisis in an exemplary manner and the goodwill built up by years of good working relationships between management, unions and members helped the Council through unprecedented times;
2. The Council's response to the pandemic was innovative and effective, moving from a largely office based organisation to an effectively home working one within a fortnight, maintaining key services and deploying staff to new activities such as the Shielding Hub at short notice;
3. The Council's response did, however, require changes to front line service delivery, reflecting both the changing Government guidance and legislation and locally based risk assessments, for example, the temporary suspension of green bin collection, the closure of Riverside House for a face to face reception function, revised arrangements for home visits based on risk assessments, changes to the methodology used to monitor and assess noise nuisance;
4. There were significant technological challenges due to the IT estate in use at the time of national lockdown, but the work to securely overcome these challenges was commendable;
5. The move from physical to remote public Committee meetings, under regulations that are in place until 7 May 2020, due to them being broadcast live and recordings made available had a positive effect on democratic involvement;
6. However, concerns of a general fatigue across the workforce and 'wear and tear' on individual managers and staff who have been working at high levels of effort for a prolonged period are now becoming more evident;
7. The pandemic demonstrated both the strengths and weaknesses of the Council's previous emergency and business continuity planning. Previous emergency planning around SARS proved to still be relevant, communication and continuity arrangements worked well and the cross-organisation structures to which the Council is intrinsically linked, such as the Local Resilience Forum, proved effective. Despite this planning the scenario of a move out of Riverside House, without some staff being redeployed to alternative buildings had never been envisaged, requiring a range of decisions to be made within a short space of time.
8. The inclusive approach to governance in taking the urgent decisions by the Chief Executive under delegated authority, and the creation of the Leadership Co-ordinating Group to support this and use a broader range of talent across the Council should be welcomed and recognised as good practice for responding to such an emergency, recovery and eventual return to a new way of life.

Based on the above findings the Group has six recommendations as it believes that it is timely and appropriate for the following areas to be explored:

Recommendation One

A strategic review of the Council's ICT infrastructure and the hardware and software deployed to staff groups. This should include, but not be limited to, consideration of whether the ICT solutions deployed by the Council provide the greatest possible future resilience in the context of:

- the Local Government Re-organisation agenda including the commitment to closer working with Stratford District Council;
- the need for effective, secure and legislatively compliant communications with a range of external organisations; and
- the need to support effective and flexible working by staff.

Recommendation Two

A strategic review of the future shape of the Council and whether alternative models provide greater future resilience in the context of:

- the Council's post-pandemic financial situation;
- the Local Government Re-organisation agenda including the commitment to closer working with Stratford District Council;
- member aspirations on service delivery;
- any emerging trends in how the public wishes to access public services;
- maximising the Council's ability to display innovation and enterprise

Recommendation Three

A review of how the Council is training and supporting its managerial staff to operate effectively in the context of the changed working environment, including but not limited to:

- The new physical working environment for most staff;
- The use of revised technology;
- The effectiveness of the operation of teams;
- The effectiveness of internal communication to and from individual members of staff
- The effectiveness of internal communication between officers and Members
- The monitoring of, and support to, individuals to protect their health and well-being

Recommendation Four

A review of the effectiveness of the Council's external communications, focusing on, but not limited to:

- An evaluation of outcomes as opposed to outputs, analysing feedback from residents, community organisations and external bodies on the tone, content and relevance of communications;
- The potential for any increased use of councillors to promote activities and disseminate information;

- The information provided on the Council's website, particularly in regard to community organisations; and
- The effectiveness of the Council's use of social media platforms.

Recommendation Five

A review of emergency planning and the structures, internal and external to support it and whether these can be made more resilient, adaptable or effective.

Recommendation Six

A review of the Council's operational arrangements for front-line service provision through home visits, other face to face contacts and telephone and electronic means of communication focusing on, but not limited to:

- The implications on service delivery of the Local Government Re-organisation agenda, the commitment to closer working with Stratford District Council including shared heads of service and alignment of Portfolio areas;
- An assessment of any changes to service provision required by any such alignment;
- A review of priorities for service delivery in the context of the Council's post-pandemic financial situation, member aspirations and emerging trends in public aspirations;
- The impact of the Council's commitment to digital transformation;
- An assessment of any temporary or permanent health and safety considerations as a result of pandemic or post-pandemic guidance or requirements