

Cheltenham Borough Council

Cabinet - 1 March 2022

Summary of the Council's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic – March 2020 to February 2022

Accountable member:	Cllr Rowena Hay, Leader of the Council
Accountable officer:	Darren Knight, Executive Director - People & Change
Ward(s) affected:	All
Key/Significant Decision:	No
Executive summary:	<p>Unique challenges require a unique response. Covid-19 has tested Cheltenham's communities, economy and way of life in a way that hasn't been seen since the Second World War. Since the start of the pandemic the Council has played a key role to maintain services, protect communities, support businesses and lead recovery efforts.</p> <p>Between March 2020 and February 2022, there have been many Council led initiatives nationally recognised that have shown innovation and creativity as part of the Council's response to the pandemic.</p> <p>It's important to also recognise that the Council does not work in isolation but has developed well established partnerships over many years across local government, community and business and without these relationships many of the successes outlined in this report could not have been achieved.</p> <p>Two years since the start of the pandemic means now is a suitable time to formally review the Council's response to the pandemic including what went well, outcomes, lessons learned and what could have been done differently? This report and the supporting document sets out the answers to those questions and provides a centralised record for future reference and learning.</p>
Recommendations:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cabinet to review the Council's response to the pandemic• Approve the external publication of Appendix 1: 'The Council's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic'

Financial implication	There are no financial implications as a result of this report. Contact officer: Gemma Bell, gemma.bell@cheltenham.gov.uk
Legal implications	There are no legal implications as a result of this report. Contact officer: Howard Norris, Interim Monitoring Officer, howard.norris@cheltenham.gov.uk
HR implications (including learning and organisational development)	There are no HR implications as a result of this report. Contact officer: clare.jones@publicagroup.uk
Key risks	None
Corporate and community plan Implications	None
Environmental and climate change implications	None
Property/Asset Implications	There are no property implications as a result of this report. Contact officer: Gemma.Bell@cheltenham.gov.uk

1. Background

- 1.1 The purpose of this report and Appendix 1 is to set out the Council's response to the Covid-19 crisis and consider the outcomes and lessons learned; including what went well and what could have been done differently.
- 1.2 In March 2022, it will be two years since the start of the pandemic and there has been a lot of work undertaken by the Council and its partners to maintain services, protect communities and support businesses. Whilst there have been various forms of review of the work undertaken by the Council, it is now felt it would be an appropriate opportunity to capture, review and publish a summary of the Council's response to the pandemic into one document for future reference and learning.
- 1.3 It is recognised as good governance for organisations to review their effectiveness when responding to an emergency response situation. This report and supporting document (appendix 1) covers several themes with evidence and examples for the period March 2020 to February 2022.
- 1.4 Review themes in this report include:
 - Business Continuity
 - Emergency Response - protecting communities and supporting businesses
 - Recovery
 - What would be done differently
 - Lessons learned
 - Partnerships
 - Performance Management

2. Business Continuity:

- 2.1 In March 2020, in advance of anticipated emergency Government legislation it was necessary for the Council to make temporary arrangements for continuity of decision-making, so far as is permissible, by temporary changes to the Council's Constitution, which put in place alternative decision-making processes for the Council to provide a mechanism to ensure continuity in decision making by the authority, so far as it is permissible within current legislation. This made necessary changes to the Council's Constitution to enable decision-making to continue. These changes were promptly restored in May 2020 with our first virtual Cabinet meeting, which was subsequently followed by virtual full Council and committee meetings over the following months.
- 2.2 To support the emergency response and recovery efforts, the Council needed a solid foundation. The business continuity response, mobilised in March 2020, included setting up a dedicated Covid-19 business continuity working group and from this a dedicated health, safety & employee working group was established. Before the start of the pandemic, the Council had invested in new technology as part of its wider modernisation agenda, which enabled the Council to move at pace to increase home and virtual working. All internal and external communications were centralised and the Executive Leadership Team met daily to ensure effective and consistent co-ordination, decision making and prioritisation with weekly liaison with Cabinet members.
- 2.3 Business continuity examples include:
 - By April 2020, we had become a virtual Council ahead of schedule
 - Over 90% of staff working from home, making full use of the new technology that had been introduced pre-Covid-19, as part of the Council's modernisation agenda
 - From May 2020 seamlessly moving to virtual Cabinet, Council and committee meetings, ensuring full political decision-making was rapidly restored following March's lockdown

- During the height of the pandemic our Building Control Service introduced 'virtual' inspections with the aid of video apps, allowing site operations to continue where necessary under the restrictions whilst ensuring wherever possible building standards were satisfied. The proactive service has secured future engagement within the construction sector and this type of 'availability' is vitally important to the customer. As a result, we were able to continue to secure significant building control contracts.
- Continued to improve recycling rates, which increased from 51.23% at the end of 2019/20 to 53.98% at the end of September 2020, due to our strong partnership with our waste partnership UBICO.

2.4 The wellbeing of our employees was paramount and support in 2020 included:

- Executive Leadership Team (ELT) hosting regular all-employee video conferences
- Weekly staff text message and e-briefings
- ELT personally made just under 100 check-in calls to members of staff
- Wellbeing group established
- Additional equipment and support for working from home
- Managing remote training

2.5 2020 Employee home working survey:

- 92% of staff felt they had the technology to stay connected and do all aspects of their current role effectively
- 87% of staff were having either daily, twice a week or weekly contact with their line manager
- 94% of staff felt they were supported and had enough contact with their team/line manager and could raise any issues with them

3. **Emergency Response - protecting communities and supporting businesses:**

3.1 The Council is a member of Gloucestershire Local Resilience Forum (LRF). The LRF is made up from organisations from across the public sector who work together on the response to Coronavirus (COVID-19), as well as focusing on plans to help the residents, businesses and communities across Gloucestershire to recover from the wider effects of the pandemic.

3.2 The Council, with support from various partner organisations, led a number of initiatives to protect communities and ensure rapid support for businesses. A brief summary of this is listed below:

3.3 **Protecting Communities:** At the height of the pandemic, to ensure the most vulnerable were supported, we rapidly established a community 'help-hub', working with Gloucestershire County Council, supported by Cheltenham Borough Homes (CBH) and The Cheltenham Trust (TCT). Twenty five employees were re-deployed to support hundreds of vulnerable residents to ensure they had the essentials of food, their prescriptions, as well as to hear a friendly voice. With TCT, we also established an additional innovative food service to provide more support to local people. With our well-established community connections and councillor insight, we quickly gathered intelligence from across the town, swiftly realising that local food banks were struggling to meet demand. Therefore, the Mayor's Foodbank fund was established and raised thousands of pounds.

3.4 Covid-19 presented challenges in tackling rough sleeping, undeterred, our Housing Options Team ensured that by:

- August 2020 we had made 125 placements into hotels for rough sleepers and
- By September 2020 we had eliminated our need for hotel accommodation altogether

3.5 The team made early assessment of individuals' support requirements so their needs could be met and appropriate pathways into housing understood. Vacancies within Accommodation Based

Support were created by direct matching into social housing for those ready to move-on. Accomplished by utilising the private rented sector and some were able to return to family and friends. Despite challenges, the majority of placements had positive outcomes. This collaboration across districts and the County Council, saw a quick response across boundaries, reflecting our strong partnership arrangements before COVID.

- 3.6** This crisis gave us the opportunity to review our partnerships and build stronger collaborative arrangements for the future. We're looking to lead a new county-wide Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Programme Management Group, looking at:
- Joint bidding opportunities
 - Implementation, monitoring and review of a jointly-commissioned homelessness and rough sleeping service.
- 3.7** **Rapid Business Support:** Recognising the worry businesses would have due to loss of income, we used the Council's cash balances to ensure grant payments were able to get off to a rapid start. We were the first Council in the UK to commence grant payments and didn't allow technology constraints to slow us down and were awarded a Community & Business Champion Award by Punchline magazine.
- 3.8** **Discretionary Business Grant Scheme:** Realising the money each Council was given by Government wouldn't be enough to meet demand and to remove the risk of a 'postcode lottery', we proactively brought several District Councils together, with advice from the LEP and local BIDs, we created a scheme that would not only ensure consistency of criteria but ensure maximum impact. This would normally take several months to complete, but this was developed in three weeks. Due to the thinking put into the scheme, we were able to add a fifth category in addition to those set by BEIS to enable more businesses to qualify.
- 3.9** Our Revenue & Benefits team have continued to rapidly establish grant schemes to ensure support gets to those businesses in need. In December, 2021, another scheme was rapidly established with a new round of the Council's discretionary business grant scheme live, offering financial support to Cheltenham pubs, clubs bars restaurants and travel businesses. Since the start of the pandemic, the Council has rapidly paid 10,637 of grants totalling £48,686,982.

4. Recovery:

- 4.1** With the importance of setting out our commitment to lead recovery, we were one if not the first Council in the UK to publish its recovery strategy, including a number of leading initiatives to support economic growth. The strategy, aimed at putting jobs and investment at the heart of recovery, was approved by Cabinet on 14 May 2020 and informed the Covid-19 recovery budget. On 30 June the Government followed our lead and announced a "New Deal" to put jobs and infrastructure at the centre of the government's economic growth strategy. The Royal Town Planning Institute's (RTPI) CEO referenced the Council's recovery approach on BBC Radio 4.
- 4.2** **Golden Valley Development:** May 2020 came in with a bang with the launch of our campaign to become the UK's Cyber Capital. At a time when most authorities were stepping back from major investment programmes due to the huge market uncertainty, Cheltenham stepped into the driving seat to lead the region's economic recovery, giving momentum to the nation's mission to be a global leader in cyber and scientific super power. In the darkest moments of the first lockdown, the Golden Valley Development's 'Home of Cyber Central UK' launch had a hugely positive impact, and it's now one of the UK's most exciting development projects. In 2021, we announced Henry Boot Developments and Factory as our preferred development partners. In December, 2021, the Golden Valley Development was named in the Cabinet Office's new National Cyber Strategy.
- 4.3** **Minster Exchange:** With renewed commitment to make Cheltenham the 'Cyber Capital of the

UK', we were keen to expedite investment to expand the cyber ecosystem. Our rapidly completed business case for the Minster Exchange was the number one 'shovel ready' project identified by the LEP via the national 'Getting Building Fund'. This £5.2m flagship scheme in the heart of Cheltenham town centre, will move forward quicker than planned thanks to funding of £3.114m and will see utilisation of the region's Cyber-tech businesses, social value £3m to £5m, visitors 10,000p.a., Jobs (direct) 75 and support the repurposing the high street.

4.4 Licensing & Planning: CBC was one of the first Councils to accelerate licensing applications and relax licensing policy to help businesses recover. This attracted sector interest and we were interviewed by the LGA and Kings Chambers, who were part of an industry group providing advice to government on licencing and planning changes required to businesses in the short-term. This approach was nationally recognised as best practice. We were one of the first Councils to implement sector leading initiatives around Planning, including:

- Extending our 'standard' construction hours across the town to benefit residents and the construction sector with Government then also announcing a similar initiative
- Taking a proactive approach to planning enforcement, to enable businesses to erect temporary buildings to support their operations/allow for social distancing, without the need for planning permission
- Business as usual continued, including issuing hundreds of planning decisions, responding to dangerous trees and getting our Local Plan ready for adoption at July 2020's virtual Council meeting and the SPD for Golden Valley. The Council's Planning Team were recognised by 'Have we got planning news for you' as champion of the week:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1M98z9yjKgA>.

4.5 **Continued Economic Recovery Activity:** With support from the Council's destination management arm; Marketing Cheltenham; several initiatives were established to support economic recover:

- **The Big Screen:** Led by CBC forming part of the town's economic recovery activity with support of the government's Welcome Back fund, which seeks to help towns and cities across the country to reopen and encourage visitors to return. This estimated to have generated 5,000 to 10,000 visitors
- **Cheltenham Ice Rink:** The ice rink is being funded and organised by CBC, as part of its continued efforts to stimulate and support the town's economic recovery. This has been used by 43,500 skaters. A partnership with No Child Left Behind meant that more than 300 local families were able to enjoy free or half price skating

4.6 Community Food Network: #FeedCheltenham - The issue of access to affordable food and essential items was seen as the highest risk by community partners. We know that at the height of the pandemic, in excess of 1500 food parcels were being delivered per-week to Cheltenham residents. Volunteers from GCHQ initially offered their expertise to help build a map of the food support being offered to local residents to help us understand where there might be gaps in coverage or organisational resilience risks. Alongside this report, local partners Family Space, came up with the idea of #FeedCheltenham, a means of raising much needed funds to support community food providers.

4.7 From May 2020, we launched our community food network that brings community-based food providers under the #FeedCheltenham banner with the Council providing co-ordination, access to grants and communications support to help them grow their capacity and increase the ability to respond. As the issue of food poverty has continued to be a real challenge, the #FeedCheltenham community food network has continued to meet monthly over the past 20 months. We have seen some significant successes with the establishment of three new community food pantries at Springbank, Hesters Way and Cornerstone (Oakley). The success of the #FeedCheltenham food network and the quality of the relationships have enabled CBC to tap into county council funding to access both household grant funds and funds for holiday food and

activity programmes. For instance, just before Christmas, #FeedCheltenham partners ensured that children on free school meals wouldn't go hungry this Christmas and helped to deliver 700 food hampers to local schools, 760 food pantry tokens and 700 activity packs.

- 4.8 No Child Left Behind:** Through the Council's No Child Left Behind initiative, we established the laptops for learning campaign, which saw under £35,000 raised and 129 devices donated. This enabled Cheltenham's children to have access to the right IT equipment which gives them the foundations to get the most out of their education. No Child Left Behind teamed up with Cheltenham Education Partnership, representing local secondary schools, Cheltenham Learning Partnership, representing local primary schools and IT Schools Africa - <https://nclbcheltenham.org.uk/laptops-for-learning>

5. Lessons Learned:

- 5.1** Reviewing the response to any emergency situation will always identify learning. The organisational learning for the Council is briefly summarised below:

- **Business Continuity & Emergency Response:** Importance of having a clearly set out command structure with defined roles and responsibilities. This included the centralisation of all internal and external communication activity. This ensured decision making was evaluated in a consistent way and communicated effectively.
- **Local partnerships:** Time invested in establishing, developing and maintaining local partnerships and liaison meetings with stakeholders helped reduce duplication of effort, provided valuable local intelligence and enabled efforts to be sustained.
- **Innovation:** Unique challenges needed unique solutions and decisions needed in a fast paced environment. Innovation and creativity was encouraged, as evidenced in this report.
- **Communications:** The frequency of internal communications to Members and employees at the height of the pandemic were well received. The introduction of all member and employee virtual meetings have remained in place. Increased confidence around bolder and more creative external communications was well received by residents and the local media.
- **Making decisions at pace:** The unique challenge of the pandemic meant decisions needed to be made at pace to ensure there were no delays in providing support. Having governance structures in place with the capability and capacity to dynamically assess issues, enabled the Council to respond promptly.

6. What if anything would be done differently:

- 6.1** Since the start of the pandemic, it has been the most challenging experience of our careers due to the unique nature of the emergency and the range of challenges that have needed to be overcome. The Council was able to respond in the way it did due to the following reasons:

- Breadth and depth of the Council's partnerships
- Strategic capacity
- Experienced professional employees
- Use of local knowledge and Cllr insights
- Support from Cabinet and ELT to innovate and think creatively
- Command structure established at the start of the pandemic ensured there was adequate control and oversight
- Pre-Covid-19 technology investment

- 6.2** We have had our approach internally reviewed by SWAP Audit and received a 'substantial' assurance opinion, an independent review by the Local Government Association and benchmarked our work via national awards. Following a lot of reflection, there is nothing of significance that we would do differently if we had the chance again, however, this does not underestimate the amount of work and effort that has been put in over the last two years. It's also

important to highlight the role of the Council's partner organisations who worked with the Council as part of a wider #teamcheltenham effort.

7. Partnerships:

- 7.1 The Council has invested a lot of time over many years in developing partnerships across community, private, public and voluntary sectors. This enabled the Council to increase its reach and effectiveness and ensure help got to those who needed it. Appendix 1 sets out the broad range of organisations CBC has worked with during the pandemic.
- 7.2 One of the outcomes from the pandemic is that the Council's working relationships have further strengthened. It's therefore important to recognise all those individuals and organisations who contributed so much for #teamcheltenham.

8. Performance management - monitoring and review:

- 8.1 The Council's response to the pandemic has undergone different types of review, to assess the Council's response in terms of both outcomes and approach.
- 8.2 **November 2020 Local Government Association (LGA) Renewal & Recovery Review Panel:** The Council took part in an LGA Recovery and Renewal Panel with the Deputy Leader and CEO of Exeter City Council, looking at our emergency response and identifying ways to improve our recovery efforts; snapshots from this review included:
- *“External stakeholders in particular, value the Council's ability to adapt at pace to meet the needs of residents and businesses in a dynamic and complex environment”*
 - *“CBC was one of, if not the first council to publish a Recovery Strategy. That early publication and consultation enabled the Council to clearly signal recovery aims and objectives, which in turn informed the thinking and work of others including Gloucestershire County Council”*
 - *“Both internally and externally the enhanced communications put in place by the Council are recognised and hugely valued as transparent and timely, in particular the Council's social media channel has helped to maintain visibility for the Council and keep people informed”*
- 8.3 **June 2021 an internal audit review by the South West Audit Partnership (SWAP):** SWAP Audit Services undertook an audit on the following areas:
- ICT: equipment, Data Protection considerations and arrangements to allow staff to work from home
 - H&S of staff: arrangements allowing staff to safely WFH
 - Key service delivery: arrangements in place to ensure customer access to previous face-to-face services staff wellbeing arrangements
 - Community response
 - Emergency response and liaison with appropriate agencies
 - Emergency decision-making arrangements
- 8.4 The audit objective was to provide assurance that the response to Covid-19 was robust and responsive to the needs of staff and customers, and in line with national Government guidelines. The resulting assurance opinion was 'substantial and *“A sound system of governance, risk management and control exist, with internal controls operating effectively and being consistently applied to support the achievement of objectives in the area audited”*.
- 8.5 **Benchmarking:** A number of initiatives and work of the Council was benchmarked and recognised nationally through various awards, which are briefly summarised below:

- Punchline Gloucestershire Community & Business Champion for the rapid payment of business grants
- iESE Transformation Award in the Working Together category for way the Council worked with partners to protect communities, support businesses, recovery efforts and maintain services
- RTPi award for planning heroes in a pandemic for business support initiatives
- Room 151 Impact Awards finalist in the Covid-19 Business Support category for the approach to business grants



8.6 January 2022 Overview & Scrutiny: The Council's Overview & Scrutiny Panel reviewed the Council's response to the pandemic and recognised the excellent work by Members, Officers and partner organisations.

9. Summary:

9.1 Unique challenges require a unique response. Covid-19 has tested Cheltenham's communities, economy and way of life in a way that hasn't been seen since the Second World War. Our Borough has lost loved ones, business has been disrupted and we've all had to re-learn a new existence that tries to retain our human connections while being apart. We give our grateful thanks to the thousands of key workers and volunteers across health and front-line services both in Cheltenham and nationally who have responded so selflessly to keep the country going and to care, protect and shield us from Covid-19. We are proud to witness the strength and resilience of our town in the face of this challenge and to have played our part.

9.2 Between March 2020 and February 2022, the Council, with the support of its various partner organisations has effectively maintained services, rapidly supported businesses and protected communities. This work has helped the most vulnerable people through the work of the community help hub, ensured rapid business support and put in place economic and community recovery initiatives, whilst operating in a challenging financial environment. The work of the Council across many services has been nationally recognised as examples of best practice. The attached document provides a valuable summary and reference point for future emergency response situations.

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Appendices	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Risk Assessment 2. The Council's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic
Background information	<p>CBC Covid-19 Recovery Strategy: https://issuu.com/cheltenhamboroughcouncil/docs/recovery_strategy_final?fr=sNjM3ZTQzMDEyNw</p> <p>LGA Renewal & Recovery Review: https://issuu.com/cheltenhamboroughcouncil/docs/lga_recovery_renewal_panel_key_reflections_chelte</p>

The risk				Original risk score (impact x likelihood)			Managing risk				
Risk ref.	Risk description	Risk Owner	Date raised	Impact 1-5	Likelihood 1-6	Score	Control	Action	Deadline	Responsible officer	Transferred to risk register
	No Risks										

Explanatory notes

Impact – an assessment of the impact if the risk occurs on a scale of 1-5 (1 being least impact and 5 being major or critical)

Likelihood – how likely is it that the risk will occur on a scale of 1-6
(1 being almost impossible, 2 is very low, 3 is low, 4 significant, 5 high and 6 a very high probability)

Control - Either: Reduce / Accept / Transfer to 3rd party / Close