CHELTENHAM
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Summary of the Council's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic

What went well, outcomes, lessons learned and what could have been done differently

March 2020 to February 2022

Introduction:

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.

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. This document provides a valuable summary and reference point for future emergency response situations.

Cllr Rowena Hay
Leader of the Council

Gareth Edmundson
Chief Executive

Our partners:

We have 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.

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 to...

#teamcheltenham

Maintaining Services:

To support the emergency response and recovery efforts, the council needed a solid foundation. The business continuity response, mobilised in March 2020, included setting a up a dedicated Covid-19 health, safety & employee working group, a business continuity working group for the Council's crematorium as well as achieving our objective of becoming a virtual Council; we were one of the first district Councils in Gloucestershire to establish virtual meetings with support from the One Legal partnership. 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

- Seamlessly moving to virtual Cabinet, Council and committee meetings, ensuring 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.

- We were also one of the first councils to partner with Podback, offering residents a simple way to recycle coffee pods at the kerbside.

Protecting Communities:

Community Help hub:

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.

Community Resiliance Fund:

Combining our community grant funding with additional funding from Gloucestershire County Council saw a £100,000 funding pot to bolster those charities/community groups that were providing essential support for the most vulnerable; 51 good causes received on average £1900. The importance of this fund is illustrated by the example in the following video - **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g0h0tPSMPio&feature=youtu.be**

Five examples include:

The Long Table Cheltenham	**The Indian Association**	**Battledown Friends Group**
£2,000	£500	£798
Outcome: Delivering healthy, wholesome frozen meals to people's doors, charities and NHS workers.	**Outcome:** For PPE and cleaning materials to allow their community centre and place of worship to reopen with social distancing measures in place.	**Outcome:** To increase ICT resources in the special school to allow children to see their therapists during Covid-19.

Gloucestershire Counselling
£2,000

Outcome: To provide laptops and licences to enable their counselling services to operate remotely.

Gloucestershire Deaf Association
£1,302

Outcome: To provide a Covid-19 specific information support pack to those living with deafness in the area.

Tackling rough sleeping:

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

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.

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.
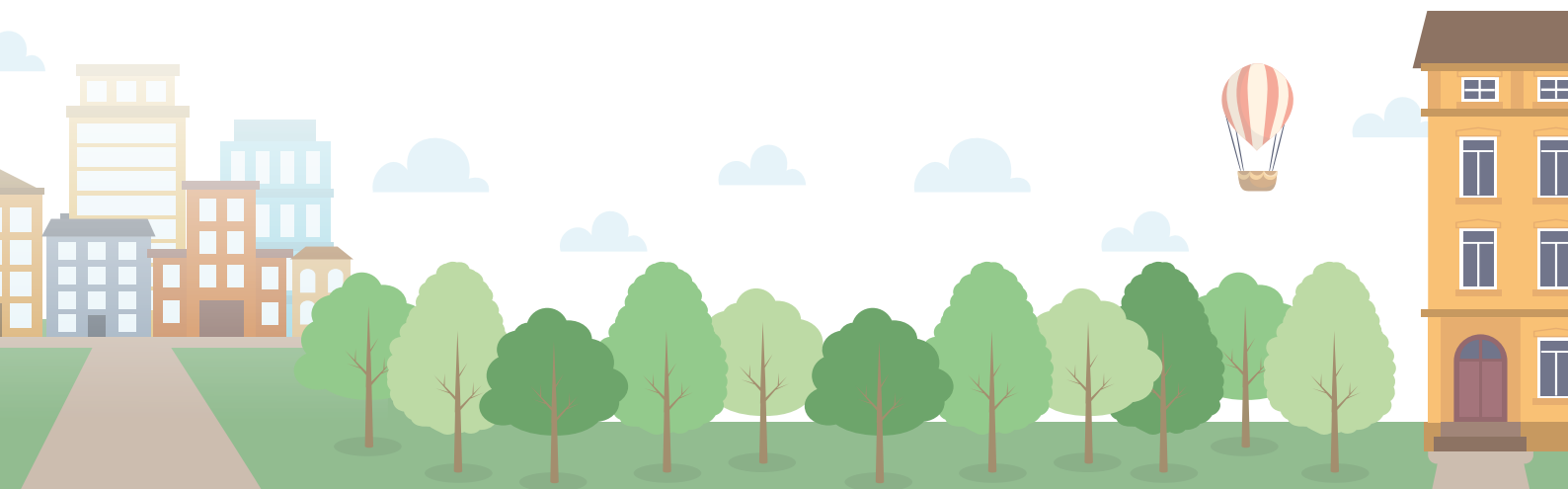
Helping Communities Recover:

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.

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.

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

Community Food Network:

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.

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.
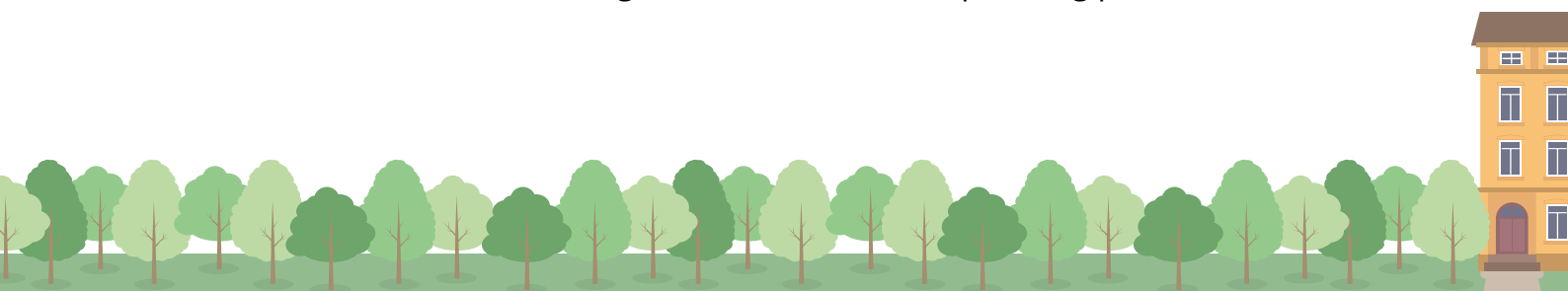
Our Revenue & Benefits team have continued to rapidly establish grant schemes to ensure support gets to those businesses in need. In December, 2021, another scheme was rapidly established with a new round of the Council's discretionary business grant scheme live, offering financial support to Cheltenham 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.

"The BID and its businesses have been delighted with the open approach from the Council to tackling the impact that the coronavirus epidemic has had. Right from the start, they engaged with us to ensure that businesses were aware of the grants they were entitled to"

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**.

Our Public Protection Team stepped up to the challenge in the fight to containing and managing Covid 19. The team's new 'Covid Compliance' role were given the regulatory enforcement powers for the huge raft of ever changing regulations within the business realm and used a combination of interventions to support compliance and keep everyone safe whilst also supporting the economy and keeping businesses trading when regulations allowed.

The hospitality industry and late night premises faced the biggest challenges so joint visits and weekly partnership group meetings clarified tasking and gave a forum for intelligence gathering. We engaged with the Business Improvement District (BID) to support businesses and explain the regulatory expectations.

We worked with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) on 2 large scale programmes: the 'spot check' and the 'working safely' programme targeting non-compliant businesses. We investigated outbreaks of Covid within businesses following 'alerts' and intelligence reports form County Public Health teams. We assisted our Public Health Colleagues on test and trace calls, contacting those who did not engage with the national test and trace team and we tasked and worked with the County 'Covid Marshalls' who were deployed as a high visible presence across the borough, enabling us to target our enforcement resources more effectively.

Despite an immensely difficult time for all the one positive is that we strengthened our links with our external partners such as the NHS, Police and Trading Standards. This will endure into the future giving us more resilience and capability to work as a team should any such public health crisis re-emerge.

Leading Recovery:

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.

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.

"In challenging times this is exciting news for both the Cyber and the Cheltenham community. This new build facility will be of low carbon modular construction, will deliver innovative co-working space right in the heart of Cheltenham and will act as a pilot for developments at the Cyber Central Campus"

David Owen
CEO GFirstLEP

Economic recovery activity has continued with support from the Council's destination management arm; Marketing Cheltenham with the launch of:

- **The Big Screen:** Led by the Council 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 the Council, 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

Communications:

To support the wider Covid-19 safety messaging we adopted new and innovative communication techniques and campaigns which received national recognition. With a modest budget of £150, we delivered a range of 'famous faces' based content that appealed to our audiences through a local connection or via nostalgic reasons. Metrics outlined what we achieved through organic means without the use of paid ads.

The content developed not only performed better than the standard public safety messages issued but was also repeatedly picked up and promoted by the local media which further increased the message. Below is a brief summary of total views of the 'hello Cheltenham' campaign content to promote: hands – face – space.
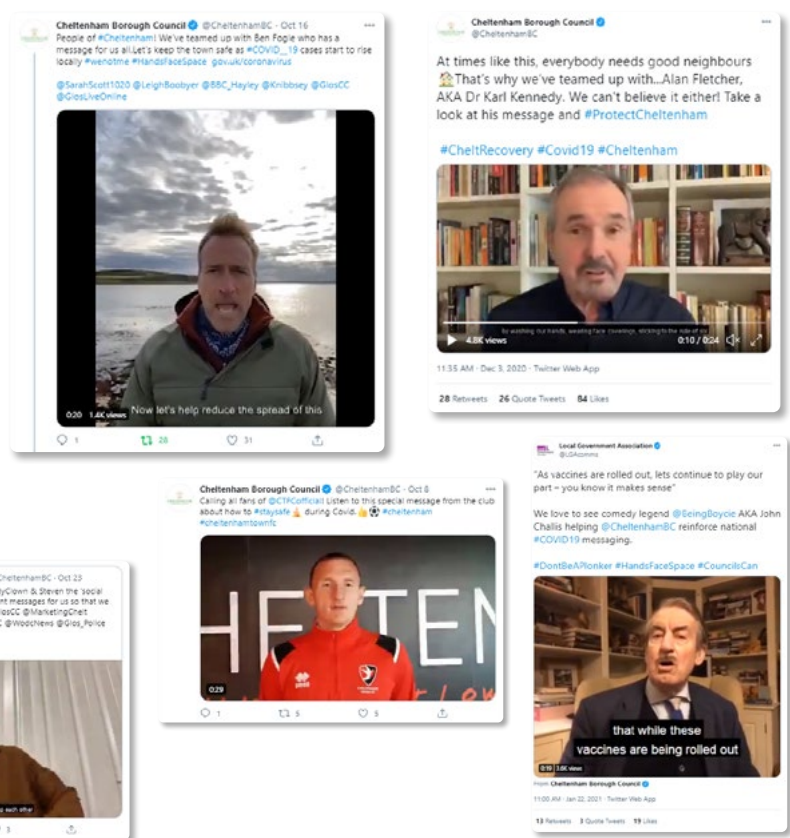
This content achieved thousands of views and achieved significantly higher engagement rates than more generic content issued to local councils to use. This doesn't include the reach via sharing and features by the local media. Our objective was for our content to be picked up and shared by the local media.

Our approach achieved 'front page' news several times on the Gloucestershire Live website. For example: **https://www.gloucestershirelive.co.uk/news/cheltenham-news/neighbours-dr-karl-kennedy-neighbours-4762059**. This has enabled our public safety messages to reach an even bigger audience outside of Cheltenham Borough Council's social media channels.

With easing of national lockdown, we experienced a massive spike in littering in our parks and gardens and rapidly initiated a bold anti-littering campaign.

Following residents' demand, posters were rolled out across the whole borough! This was our best ever digital campaign achieving over 120,000 organic social media views.

Our social media communications have been nationally recognised, in 2021, we won Gold at the iESE Transformation Awards.

"I've been impressed how the Cheltenham team have put into action creative and effective social media tactics - with residents at the heart of their strategy. The team have made bold and pioneering decisions that delight residents, increase reach and engage new people. This isn't easy, but has been made possible by leadership in the organisation trusting the skills and judgement of the comms team, a willingness to try new techniques, and a culture of innovation. I've been told by professionals in the public and private sector that Cheltenham campaigns and content have inspired them, and I am very happy to show my support and champion their sensational work"

Helen Reynolds
Award winning
trainer and author

During the height the pandemic, all internal and external communications were centralised to ensure consistency of message, efficient and effective co-ordination of messages. Members, employees and partner organisations received regular e-briefings along with the introduction of regular all member and all employee virtual meetings, which have continued.

Covid-19 Recovery Budget:

Despite Government support covering some of the additional expenditure and lost income, we were still facing a budget deficit in 2020/2021 of £1.831m, more than 12% of our net budget and concerned this could be replicated in future years until the economy recovers.

With an asset portfolio valued in excess of £0.5bn we were able to agree a strategy last November that's clever in many ways yet simple to implement; focusing on assets that are surplus to requirements, low yielding but strategically placed to drive economic activity and deliver regeneration opportunities for the whole borough, under a local policy of 'the right to regenerate' ahead of Government committing to similar policies.

This allows the Council to utilise capital funds to replenish revenue, generating almost £5m over the next 3 years to ensure financial sustainability. This will provide additional resource into our flagship ambition to make Cheltenham the cyber capital of the UK, continue with our £180m housing plan, tackling the climate challenge and creating jobs through a new apprenticeship scheme.

Lessons Learned:

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.

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 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

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.

The Council's response to the pandemic has undergone different types of review, which are briefly summarised below:

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"

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

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".

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

Summary:

We've learnt sometimes the simplest things mean the most. From delivering prescriptions and groceries to having a chat to someone who may not have had much contact with the outside world.

The not so simple tasks of delivering millions of grant funding in weeks to businesses, asking the amazing people of Cheltenham not to hug, keep their distance and to wash their hands, has been challenging to say the least.

Through bold initiatives, we've shown local and national leadership in supporting emergency response and recovery efforts by being brave and pushing boundaries through innovation, sector first initiatives and collaboration.