

Full Council Meeting – 30 March 2021

Report of Councillor Ross Henley – Corporate Resources

The past financial year has been unprecedented in terms of the challenges presented to the Council area in just keeping basic service delivery running to a high standard for our residents – none more so than in for the services in my portfolio.

To a great extent, the year has been defined by the Covid crisis and our response to it. We have successfully maintained basic day-to-day service delivery at the same time as delivering significant Covid related support to residents and businesses, remodelling the way in which we operate to quickly enable effective home working, delivering a number of key service improvements and developing plans for our future direction of travel.

The key to this success is the flexibility shown by our staff, their willingness to get stuck in and tackle the challenges presented by the last 12 months and the way in which they have worked together as a team.

Listed below are examples of our key achievements for the past 12 months some of which are above and beyond our normal day to day service delivery.

- Administering the distribution of Covid related business grants – to date we have distributed circa 13,000 payments totalling £60m to businesses
- Awarding additional Council Tax Support £150 Covid related payments to support customers on low incomes - £1.238m paid to 7,600 customers
- Making proactive telephone calls and visits to potentially vulnerable people to identify any support needs through lockdown – approx.. 560 calls & visits
- Administering the Test & Trace payments scheme providing financial support to people required to self isolate – to date we've paid circa £244k to 488 applicants
- Assisting the NHS with calls to book Covid vaccination appointments – to date we've made 6,868 calls
- The quick development of processes to collect and manipulate data from across the organisation to support the Covid relief effort – this was key to identifying lists of potentially vulnerable people & in developing processes to pay and monitor business grants, test & trace payments etc.
- Maintaining delivery of our Deane Helpline Service to support vulnerable customers throughout the crisis – in total we dealt with 298,558 calls (Apr-Feb) to the Helpline and handled 1,589 Emergency Response visits.
- Maximising turnaround times for paying suppliers in order to ensure we get payments out as quickly as possible – we are processing approx. 96% of invoices within 30 days.
- Reviewing our complaints processes, introducing a new policy and delivering significantly improved turnaround times

For the services internally focussed COVID has been a main driver for focussing priorities, which has among many included the following priorities for Finance and Procurement:

- Reviewed the financial strategy and reserves to ensure financial resilience and risk has been carefully managed, at the same time as supporting in year funding to support economic recovery.

- Supporting the process for distributing many £millions of grant funding for businesses.
- Completing a myriad of additional weekly and monthly returns to government including to report our COVID related costs and income losses and progress with business grants payments.
- Managing the cash flow and treasury implications for the exceptional funding and costs that we have managed this year.
- Engaging and supporting with services and suppliers to manage risk and business continuity for contracted services.

As we currently preparation for delivering the 2021 Elections in a Covid secure way – Police & Crime Commissioner plus any District, Town and Parish by-elections I reflect on how our Councillors have adapted to new ways of working through the introduction of virtual meetings from April 2020, meaning that our Council could continue to function and make decisions.

Our ICT and Digital Teams have also provided outstanding improvements that have enabled the whole Council to maintain services, stay connected and with little or no business interruption.

Not forgetting our staff our People Function and Health and Safety team saw a change of focus during 2020/21 with the emphasis on supporting the majority of staff working remotely from home. We have invested in supporting the mental health and well-being of our employees and have offered a variety of initiatives including guidance, workshops and partnerships with charities such as Mind

This year with the great help of Julie Jordan and our staff working groups we have introduced a new Neurodiversity support policy which supports staff and job applicants with Neurodiversity issues. This policy has now been shared by the local government association as good practice to all English local authorities.

When viewed against the background of the unprecedented year that the world has collectively experienced we can all look to ourselves, each other and our communities to see the amazing and heart-warming efforts that we have all undertaken. For my portfolio the achievements of the previous 12 months are simply outstanding