

NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL

CABINET

2020-21 REVIEW: GOVERNANCE AND PARTNERSHIPS

1. OBJECT AND KEY POINTS IN THIS REPORT

- 1.1 To present a review against the Council Plan 2018-21 in the context of the COVID-19 response and mid-term recovery plan.
- 1.2 The report provides an overview of performance for the year and achievement against the ambitions, goals, priorities and outcomes of the council plan.
- 1.3 It also informs cabinet of the work undertaken across the service to support the response to the pandemic and contribution to the COVID-19 mid-term recovery plan priorities.
- 1.4 As part of the next phase of strategic planning the report highlights areas of focus for 2021-22 and beyond.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 The Council Plan 2018-21 sets the strategic framework for the operational delivery of council functions. This report demonstrates the performance across the Governance and Partnership area contributing to the council's strategic ambitions and priorities.
- 2.2 The operating environment during 2020-21 has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the report outlines how we have reacted, responded and adjusted our responsibilities in implementation of government initiatives, legislation and guidance to ensure that our services continued to deliver and our role in enabling and supporting businesses, communities and residents continued.
- 2.3 The Council's approach throughout the pandemic has been rooted in the values, principles and ambitions of the council plan, and furthered

through the strong partnerships, one Council approach, excellent assurance, and financial practice, framed under the following priorities:

- keeping staff and residents safe and well
- protecting the most vulnerable
- protecting the local economy
- enabling communities to remain resilient.

2.5 Over the period service performance has improved or maintained in most measures, with the few been directly affected by COVID-19 related factors, and these have now rapidly improved during 2021/22. Key headlines contributing to the Council Plan and COVID-19 priorities include:

2.5.1 **Well Led: Business Continuity** - business has continued across all functions to ensure that the council operates legally, internal controls remain robust, assurance processes are in place, information governance remains strong, IT systems maintained available and financial accounts prepared, whilst simultaneously adapting and supporting the overall COVID-19 response. The vast majority of staff within Governance and Partnerships have been working from home since the beginning of the pandemic, continuing to deliver for the council and residents by making swift adaptations to systems, processes and professional practice to ensure organisational assurance and sustainability. For example:

- Facilitating over 150 statutory council meetings through MS Teams, enabling public access and increased participation with over 1000+ hits recorded on the council's website for live streaming.
- Enabled the council to successfully move to an agile at scale model with over 1,800 employees continuing to deliver services virtually from home.
- Facilitated education appeal hearings on MS Teams to ensure admissions arrangements were not delayed.
- Internal Audits were completed virtually to ensure assurance of internal control systems was provided and sufficient evidence to report to the Audit Committee.

2.5.2 **Well Led: Transformation** – while reacting and responding to the pandemic has been a significant factor, the drive to transform and develop the way we operate has continued.

- Modernised customer contact for residents with new digital capabilities, self-service and call-back options improving responsiveness for customers.
- Increasing our efficiency and effectiveness of legal processes by enabling court applications via MS Teams, particularly in support of vulnerable children and adults and moving the majority of prosecutions to electronic court bundling systems.

- Enhancing business resilience, environmental performance and value for money as we continue to migrate council IT systems to the “cloud”.
- Initiating and implementing major IT systems replacements to ensure that service delivery is efficient, modern and enhances end-user productivity.
- Introduced a digital electoral canvass resulting in early publication of electoral registers in readiness for use in the 2021 elections.
- Enhanced ways in which residents and businesses transact with the council digitally, including:
 - An online assessment tool providing a self-service offer so people can understand and plan for potential care costs at the earliest opportunity.
 - An online portal for blue badges applications enabling management of the full lifecycle of the badge together with an online payment facility.
 - Wholly digitised the local land charges function.
 - An appointment based bulky item collection service to improve service user experience.

2.5.3 Well Led: Financial Resilience and Sustainability – we have continued to safeguard public funds to ensure that they are available and used for their intended purpose:

- Audited accounts 2019-20 were published within legal timescales – only achieved by 45% of councils.
- Internal audit plan substantially completed and audit opinion produced in line with auditing standards despite the impact of Covid-19 on workloads and priorities.
- Developed assurance processes for the COVID-19 Support Grants to business reducing the risk of fraud and payment errors.
- There have been no challenges to procurement activity. Contracts let include the Construction and Highways Professional Services Framework £6m; Highways Labour and Street Lighting Services and Works £11m, the Northern Junction £4.5m, Demand Responsive Transport £2.5m, the Finance system £1.3m. These account for 59.3% of the whole life value of total contracts let.
- Identified for recovery £839k of unused direct payments to support the financial sustainability of adult services budgets and future service provision.
- Monitored and assured effective use of more than 30 COVID-19 related grants meeting the national reporting requirements.

2.5.4 Well Led: Governance and Assurance – we have improved and maintained high standards and performance:

- Coordinated and shaped key strategic partnerships throughout the period, including having local governance as part of the Humber Local Resilience Forum arrangements.

- Maintained nationally accredited public sector standards across information governance, IT connectivity and security capabilities, strengthening the council's credibility, and increasing trust from partners and government departments in data handling and sharing to assist COVID-19 response and planning.
- Improved timeliness on many of our customer transaction process times leading to increased customer confidence and satisfaction.
- Sustained improvement in level of complaints received through resolution at the earliest point.

2.5.5 Keeping People Safe and Well:

- Enabled shielding provision to support vulnerable and extremely clinically vulnerable residents during the Covid-19 pandemic through effective customer contact provision, extended operating hours and outbound welfare calls.
- Enabling the distribution of over 1,500 DEFRA emergency assistance grants to residents to support them with day to day living essentials.
- Supporting around 500 residents, required to self-isolate by NHS Test and Trace through timely processing of self-isolation payments.

2.5.4 Enabling Resilient and Flourishing Communities:

- Improved broadband provision with 96% of properties now having access to superfast speeds with 53% having ultrafast coverage, enabling residents to connect to education, learning, employment and wellbeing opportunities.
- enhanced community resilience, capacity and outcomes through the timely and effective provision of community grants.
- Continued to develop and strengthen community partnerships through effective liaison and relationships with Town & Parish Councils.
- Enabling additional support to almost 7,000 residents through a reduction of up to £150 in their Council Tax liability and in addition made available flexible payment options to all households to assist them in managing their household finances.

2.5.3 Enabling Economic Growth and Renewal:

- Extended gigabit capable fibre broadband provision from 2% to 12% of properties in North Lincolnshire to support the competitiveness of urban and rural based businesses and as an incentive to attract new enterprises.

- Enabled the timely provision of changes to business rates and business support grants during the Covid-19 pandemic to provide financial resilience to local businesses.

2.6 Based on the review of 2020-21 and current position the following areas have been identified for further consideration and development during 2021-22:

- Business Rates – performance against tax base assumptions for 2021-22 tax yield.
- Council Tax - review of discounts and supplements to be applied in 2022-23.
- Promote e-billing for Council tax for April 2022 go live.
- Enabling safe and transparent decision making in accordance with COVID-19 guidelines.
- Working with the Local Government Boundary Commission to facilitate completion and implementation of their review of our warding arrangements.
- In accordance with legislative requirements, continue to explore virtual platforms to enhance flexibility of partnership meetings and elected member business.
- Continuous assessment of customer experience, optimising the benefits from the omni-channel system for customer contact.
- Commissioning projects include Integrated Health and Wellbeing Service 0-19 years and Substance Misuse service.
- Drive further improvement in the council's digital maturity by delivering key IT initiatives including core system and infrastructure modernisation, cloud-based services and agile IT desktops which underpin the Digital Vision.

3. OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

3.1 Cabinet are asked to consider the report and note the contribution made to the Council Plan strategic ambitions, outcomes and priorities including the response made to date to the COVID-19 pandemic and mid-term recovery.

4. ANALYSIS OF OPTIONS

4.1 The core functions across Governance and Partnerships have been effectively maintained and a range of systems and processes updated and implemented to enable efficient and agile operational delivery and improved customer experience.

4.2 The positive working practices that have been successfully embedded throughout this period will be considered and built on as part of the next phase of strategic planning and organisational development for the council.

5. FINANCIAL AND OTHER RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (e.g. LEGAL, HR, PROPERTY, IT, COMMUNICATIONS etc.)

5.1 Financial

The total cost of operational delivery for governance and partnerships 2020/21, including COVID-19 response was £17.4m against the allocated budget of £17.58m. After applying the COVID-19 specific grants the net cost of services was £15.2m. There were several factors that contributed to keeping overall costs below budget, including a general pandemic related slowdown of spending on core costs such as staffing and reflecting improvements in failure demand leading to reduced insurance costs and liabilities. Transformation and improvement made to the council's telephony infrastructure has also contributed to efficiencies. And lastly the contribution the team have made to the COVID-19 response by redirection of core resources funded by COVID-19 grants enabled effective use of external funding. Additional costs incurred as part of the council response to and recovery from COVID-19 is highlighted below:

Theme	£'000's
Test, trace and isolate	417
Agile and digital	208
Elections – COVID secure measures	38
Contribution to Humber Local Resilience Forum emergency arrangements	165
Deferred savings	409
Loss of income	114
Protecting vulnerable people	322

5.2 Workforce

The FTE for governance and partnerships at the end of 2020/21 stood at 262.53 with an improved level of attendance: 67% no absences compared to 50% the previous year; an average of 5.04 days lost to sickness compared to previous year of 7.4 days. Turnover during the year was 6% broken down as 11 resignations and 6 retirements.

6. OTHER RELEVANT IMPLICATIONS (e.g. CRIME AND DISORDER, EQUALITIES, COUNCIL PLAN, ENVIRONMENTAL, RISK etc.)

6.1 National advice and guidance has been incorporated into the local response to the pandemic as it has become available. The enactment of the Coronavirus Act 2020 led to certain relaxations of statutory requirements and the introduction of new powers and statutory instruments.

6.2 The key risks to governance and partnerships going forward are:

- Cyber threats and associated data protection risks.
- Increase cost of insurance premium and level of self-insurance required.
- Project risk - implementation of new finance system.

These are being managed through the operational risk registers with controls in place and appropriate mitigations.

7. OUTCOMES OF INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT (IF APPLICABLE)

7.1 Not applicable for the purposes of this report.

8. OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION AND CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS DECLARED

8.1 Not applicable for the purposes of this report.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 That Cabinet notes the contribution made to the Council Plan strategic ambitions, outcomes and priorities including the response made to date to the COVID-19 pandemic and mid-term recovery as outlined in the report.

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Background Papers used in the preparation of this report: None