

Recovery and Reset Panel

Dorset Council

7th September 2020

1. Overview of the approach to the Recovery and Reset Panel with Dorset Council

The Local Government Association (LGA) is hugely grateful to Dorset Council for being amongst the first local authorities, and the very first in the South West region, to undertake a Recovery and Reset Panel. This tool, along with a sister model entitled 'Remote Peer Support', has been developed to aid councils in their work relating to the Covid-19 crisis and its many and varied impacts.

The Panel ran for two hours on the morning of Monday 7th September 2020 and focused on the following:

- Digital maturity in recovery – how this has helped the response, support and information to residents and work with partners
- Remote working and meetings, embracing new technology, improved decision-making and member-officer relations and impact on governance
- Workforce capacity and flexibility, use of 'Skills Agency', benefits to employees and impact on service delivery
- Determination to continue to innovate, maintain new practice and attitudes

Around half a dozen of the council's senior political and managerial leadership and senior officers in a supporting role were involved and the session was facilitated by the following peers:

- Dave Perry, Chief Executive, South Gloucestershire Council
- Councillor Alan Jarrett, Leader, Medway Council
- Simon Oliver, Director for Digital Transformation, Bristol City Council

They were supported by Chris Bowron and Suraiya Khatun from the LGA. The input to the preparations for, and delivery of, the Panel by Sarah Longdon, the council's Covid-19 Recovery Lead, were very much appreciated by all involved.

Such Panels are focused on enabling councils to take stock of, and reflect upon, the period since the current crisis first impacted and to look at the challenges that lie ahead as the local authority seeks to lead both the local and organisational recoveries. They are tailored to meet individual councils' needs and are designed to complement and add value to a council's own mechanisms for identifying areas of good practice, learning and improvement. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of the council's plans and activities. In what is an unprecedented environment, where knowledge is continuously emerging and everybody is learning through experience, peers are applying their perspectives to the information presented to them and, through this, prompting reflection and discussion on the part of the senior political and managerial leadership of the host council.

This letter provides a summary of the peer team's feedback in the light of the discussions during the course of the Panel session. In providing this to the council we have done so simply as fellow local government officers and elected members. By its nature, such Panels provide a brief and only partial snapshot of a very complex, intense and unique set of happenings in relation both to response activity and emerging plans regarding recovery and reset.

2. Feedback

Council ambition around organisational culture and ways of working

The approaches adopted during the Covid-19 crisis have served to demonstrate that Dorset Council has clear ambitions to reinforce an organisational culture, across both officers and elected members, that is collegiate, involving and engaging and that provides people with opportunities. They have also shown that the organisation's political and managerial leadership possesses a strong desire to learn, reflect and review in order to inform future action and direction.

As a new council emerging from six authorities previously, developing an organisational culture has been a key area of focus. A positive element of the Covid-19 crisis has been the opportunity to reinforce and expedite the culture being sought, which includes the following organisational values and aspects of being an 'employer of choice' as defined by staff:

- We value people and build on their strengths
- An organisation where we are supported to develop ourselves, enhance our skills and increase our knowledge
- Developing a positive working culture that is flexible, responsive and enhances the health and wellbeing of our employees

Staff have responded positively since the outset of the crisis, with around 500 people switching into new roles temporarily. This has been facilitated through both the council's Skills Agency and discussions between managers across different services and the employees concerned, serving to identify and respond to needs and opportunities as they have emerged. Appropriate support has been provided and welcoming attitudes demonstrated – enabling staff to adapt to their new roles, helping to overcome anxieties that may have existed and enabling people to operate effectively from the outset.

Staff across the council are seen to have felt engaged and empowered and to have got on and delivered, including adapting to working from home, whilst relying merely on a framework of simple and clear direction in responding to unprecedented circumstances and challenges. Regular staff surveys undertaken during the first few months of the current crisis indicate that morale and motivation have increased significantly, as has pride in the council. The wellbeing of employees and councillors is also seen to have increased. The council is looking to capitalise upon what has been experienced by maintaining the new ways of working that have emerged – for both officers and councillors – where this would be desired and beneficial.

Diversity and inclusion sessions delivered by Public Health Dorset with small groupings of elected members helped to aid both individual and organisational learning around the impacts of Covid-19 upon different aspects of life in Dorset, different geographies and different communities. Elected members' use of technology has been enhanced, with a buddy system proving very beneficial, and the council's target for the number of meetings to be being conducted via Teams technology in five years' time has already been met. The council also sought to learn from others around their approaches to the crisis generally, looking at Cornwall and the Thames Valley authorities in particular.

The Executive Advisory Panel (EAP) concept has been created to aid cross-party working, engagement of the wider elected membership and organisational learning. The clear intention in moving to the new scrutiny and policy committee arrangements – approved at the Annual Council meeting on 3rd September and taking effect shortly – is to build on this, seeking to engage

councillors in policy development and, through the work undertaken at the EAP level, provide an established evidence base for them to draw upon. Additionally, the membership of the Transformation Programme Board has now been extended to enable wider engagement, having previously comprised just the Leader, Deputy Leader and Finance Portfolio Holder.

The council's Recovery and Reset Report, produced by the EAP, focuses on capturing learning, whilst the Council Plan is set to be reviewed and a residents' survey is to be conducted next month. The council recognises the opportunity exists to assess its future direction of travel through all of this and in the light of the current crisis, although it is not currently anticipating any major shift will be required.

The authority has established itself on a 'member-led, governance-light' basis and there are many strengths to this, with regular informal engagement across the political and managerial leadership of the council enabling situations to be assessed rapidly and decisions taken quickly. There is another side to this coin, that we will touch on later, regarding ensuring the council has adequate arrangements in place around evidencing decision-making.

The experiences of recent months can be seen to have enhanced joint working and relationships with a range of partners, with obvious examples being around hospital discharge and delivery of shielding support with the voluntary and community sector. Also, the role of the Executive Director of Place on the Local Resilience Forum appears to have been highly valued and mutually beneficial.

Digital ambition

The authority has positioned itself as a 'Digital Council' and is aligned with the ambitions of the Government Digital Service and the Local Digital Declaration. The council is mature in its digital thinking and approach and has invested both in the technology itself and culturally, with its people, to drive this agenda forward. A focus on digital is embedded across the organisation, aided by 'Digital Champions', and people understand the benefits that digital approaches bring.

Recent months have seen the council deliver:

- Improved processes to support hospital discharge
- Increased accessing of the Dorset Care Record
- New layers added to the Dorset Explorer map
- More than 14% increase this year in the users of the council's website
- The creation of Skype video rooms to support the family courts process
- The collection of data and information on-line for shielding
- Foster care teams moving from paper based to digital returns
- The introduction of click and collect library services
- The hosting virtual council meetings and testing electronic voting
- 278% increase in the organisation's Teams' usage this year
- On-line information to aid staff wellbeing

In order for the council to fulfil totally its digital ambitions, we see the need for a clear roadmap underpinned by full options appraisals.

Council finance

The council is considering, in a calm and measured way, the financial challenge it is facing. It is modelling a range of potential scenarios and seeking to engage widely in its budget consultation in due course. A £35m in-year pressure is currently seen to exist and the council is intending to

utilise reserves as a key means of addressing this issue. For 2021/22, the scenarios currently, in terms of the budget gap, range from £12m to £48m – with the sense being it will prove ultimately to be around £30m.

A Cabinet exercise is currently underway modelling options of 5, 10 and 15 per cent savings being delivered across all services. The council is intending to then move on to a more sophisticated and targeted approach for determining the areas of savings, reflecting both its priorities and its statutory requirements, as the budget-setting process gathers pace.

The council plans to re-visit its Transformation Programme, established as a key means of helping to address the budget pressures that existed prior to Covid-19 but paused due to other demands. It is important that this work comes to be delivered given the potential on offer both to aid the way the organisation operates and to contribute to addressing the financial challenge.

Whilst the council sees potential in relation to savings in procurement, aspirations need to be realistic around the extent to which these will be able to contribute significantly to closing the budget gap.

Leadership and governance

The collegiate style of the political leadership reflects well on the organisation and the individuals concerned. That said, the leadership is cognisant of the need to ensure that ‘clear blue water’ exists in terms of where the leadership for Dorset can be seen to have come from during the crisis and its aftermath. The public profile of the political leadership will continue to be important, particularly in a context of responding to any local outbreaks and leading the social and economic recovery. Looking more internally, the central role Cabinet members eventually came to play in the elected member webinars of recent months served to highlight the importance of leadership from that level for the organisation.

Similarly, it is crucial that policy is seen to have been determined, ultimately, at Cabinet level whenever the prerogative is theirs. As an example, the EAP draft Recovery and Reset Report highlights the following as essential themes in the next phase of recovery:

- Capitalise on behavioural change in communities and promote wellbeing
- Encourage active travel
- Plan in renewable energy in new buildings
- Target approach, resources and data at town and parish level

The council needs to determine how these concepts come to be established formally as policy and implemented. Our understanding is that there is a strong desire to see policy development work on themes such as this delivered through the scrutiny and policy committees, which will continue the principle of wide engagement. However, the responsibility for determining policy/policies such as this ultimately sits with Cabinet and the council’s processes need to support this. Alongside this is the need to ensure the approaches and plans for translating policy into delivery are robust and clear.

Ensuring the approaches to the current challenges deliver effectively is crucial in a context of ensuring the run-up to the next elections are smooth. Whilst this is a four-year period, the issues being experienced now have a potentially ‘long tail’ and courses of action need to be considered with this fully in mind. Difficult choices and strong leadership are likely to be required to address

the financial challenges facing the council and align this with the future role and shape of the organisation. Similarly, the socio-economic impacts in local communities are likely to be long and deep and people will be looking to the council to lead the recovery and establish initiatives that support it.

Ensuring a smooth run up to 2024 requires the necessary rigour around a solid basis for decision-making; a focus simultaneously across the short, medium and long terms; and sufficiently robust governance. As we touched on earlier, the advantages of being a 'governance-light' council need to be balanced with ensuring adequate arrangements are in place around evidencing decision-making – both in terms of where decisions were taken and by whom and the basis for those decisions. The council has had to move quickly in response to the crisis and has demonstrated its ability to be 'fleet of foot' in doing so. As people look back on the experience of Covid-19 in the months and years ahead, the council will want to be able to point clearly to the audit trail around decision-making.

Recovery and Reset Report

The next iteration of the Recovery and Reset Report (which was in draft form at the time of the LGA's Recovery and Reset Panel) from the EAP could benefit from an increased outlining of the work undertaken by the council in the response and recovery phase; greater emphasis on the approach to the economic recovery; an outlining of the way inequalities are being impacted in Dorset; and the changing nature and shape of the council, linked to the concept of service reform.

The current version of the report provides an overview of what has been considered at each meeting of the EAP. We see merit in the report evolving to consider cross-cutting themes, which would need to be for the council to determine based on its strategic objectives, but which the peers thought might include the types of themes outlined in the paragraph above. At present, the report touches only lightly on such areas. As one example, the element on the economy essentially focuses on high streets. As another, there is much work taking place in the council related to service reform, with the report offering the opportunity to highlight this, including:

- The work in relation to asset rationalisation linked to the Workforce Programme
- The way the council has used the current crisis to consider the future of tourist information centres and contact points
- Ways of working for staff and elected members in the light of the adaptations made in recent months, including working from home and the conducting of meetings virtually

The report could also reflect more regarding what the use of the RSA model by the council has led to. This tool helps organisations to reflect, during or following a period of change, what it would wish to end, amplify, restart or let go in light of its experiences. We heard during the Panel session of the decision by the council to halt temporarily the garden waste service and clearly other amenities such as libraries, tourist information centres and customer contact points closed too. Linked to the theme of service reform, the report could usefully outline the way in which the RSA model is informing thinking on the future of services and ways of working.

The Recovery and Reset Report, the refresh of the Council Plan, the planned re-visiting of the Transformation Programme and a revision of the Medium-Term Financial Strategy need to inform and underpin one another. These will serve to re/define the priorities of the council in the light of the Covid-19 crisis and the financial challenge being faced. They represent key strategic drivers for the organisation and, as such, they need to 'speak' to one another in order to ensure priorities and targets are clear, aspirations are deliverable and the financial viability of the council is safeguarded.

The Recovery and Reset Panel session represented one of the council's first steps in inviting external challenge to its recovery thinking and planning and it intends to build on this. It will want to ensure the voice of the community and key stakeholders can be seen to run through the revised plans, priorities and ambitions.

3. Next steps

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership of the council will wish to reflect on our feedback. The council is encouraged to enter the findings into the public domain in due course.

Under the umbrella of LGA sector-led improvement, there is an on-going offer of support to councils. The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a range of issues and we would be happy to discuss this. Paul Clarke (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the LGA. His e-mail address is paul.clarke@local.gov.uk