

Report by Councillor R Metcalfe, Portfolio Holder for 'Our People and Resources'

In light of the significant effects of the COVID19 virus on our services, the way we are currently working and ongoing recovery process, I am bringing to committee a very different style of annual report, in which I have focussed primarily on what has happened in the last 6 months.

Like all other organisations, we have had to make dramatic changes, not only to ensure that we kept our critical services functioning since the start of the outbreak, but also so we could perform our community leadership role for our city in this time of crisis.

Our People

Officers and Members alike have risen to the challenges presented over the last six months.

We have seen both take on completely new roles, either instead of, or alongside their reduced main role. Many still work from home with only a small proportion working from our sites at any one time.

HR has developed significant support for all - available on City People. This includes:

- Plans for looking after our most vulnerable staff and members
- Wellbeing action plans for staff, members and managers
- Introduction of the new cycle to work scheme
- Links to Every Mind Matters, 'One You' and MIND advice
- Policy adaptations to allow staff to work effectively and safely
- Tips on everything from yoga, fitness, working from home to preventing burnout

Our IT team has provided, at very short notice, the backbone of a new structure which has allowed us to function as a cohesive One Council unit

- We have 630 full Team Licenses in operation across the council
- We have distributed new 300 mobile devices to allow home working
- Over a recent 90-day period there were 380 (unique) active users of 'Teams'
- IT have provided on-line training solutions, tips and hints for all

Members have been able to continue with decision making through the media of Zoom, with key committee meetings held remotely. For those members with poor internet connections in their area this has posed a challenge for some.

Members have been kept up to date with the current situation via the Members Bulletin produced by the Comms team.

As a contribution towards balancing the books this year, a number of staff agreed to accept a furlough period.

Our financial resources

It is evident that COVID19 has had, and will continue to have, a significant and unprecedented effect on the Council's financial position. Income streams have plummeted, and it has been necessary to incur additional costs to ensure services continue to be provided throughout this difficult period and to respond to the consequences of the pandemic.

In response to calls from the sector the Government has allocated a total of £3.2bn of grant funding to support local authorities. To date the Council has received funding support of £1.255m for COVID19 related pressures. In addition, the Government has recently announced an income compensation scheme which seeks to reimburse Council's for every 75p in the £1 of lost sales, fees and charges income after allowing for a 5% deductible. Although final specific details of the scheme are yet to be confirmed it is estimated that £2.5m of lost income will be reimbursed.

Despite this Government financial support, the Council is currently still forecasting a shortfall on the General Fund budget of £1.834m in 2020/21. The Housing Revenue Account is forecasting a £0.671m shortfall for which no government support has been provided. Although there is still a considerable amount of uncertainty over some of the forecasts the Council faces a significant budget shortfall and action therefore needs to be taken in 2020/21 in order to maintain a balanced budget. Proposals for mitigating this shortfall will be presented to the Performance Scrutiny Committee and Executive as part of the Quarter 1 Financial Performance report in September.

Despite proposed action to ensure that a balanced budget position is maintained for 20/21, beyond this the Council is set to face ongoing reductions in resources and increased service costs from the legacy of impacts of COVID19. The combined potential impact in future years is possibly greater than that experienced in 20/21 and will require ongoing reductions in the net cost base in order to live within a significantly reduced resources envelope.

Further work will take place during the summer to assess the ongoing impacts on the Council's resources and to analyse any further Government announcements on local government finance. A report updating the financial planning assumptions for the Budget 2021/22 and MTFS 2021-2026 will be presented in early Autumn. Work will also continue to develop a TFS Phase 7 programme aimed at delivering an increased savings target which will be required to ensure a sustainable Medium-Term Financial Strategy.

Our services

We have seen our key services continue with minimal negative effect on residents and businesses and we have had significant recognition from the public for this.

Some key points to note include:

- All defined critical services remained functional throughout lockdown
- Excellent communication to all sectors of the community through a strong series of branded support and advice – pushed out on our website and social media
- All street sleepers and those in hotels and B&B which closed were provided with accommodation at the start of the lockdown, 21 people benefited from this
- Supported Housing conducted between 200 and 300 welfare checks daily

- Staff were trained as back up staff for critical services in case of need
- Customer services dealt with emails within one working day maximum
- Revenues and Benefits dealt with five times as many new claims as usual
- Despite restriction, our Bereavement team provided sympathetic services
- Waste and recycling collections continued throughout lockdown and bulky waste collections started again in May after a short close-down period. Green waste services have continued and relaunched for the new service year
- CCTV has kept a close eye on our city centre, working closely with the police and other partners.
- Our Food H&S team provided advice on the new government guidance
- Emergency Housing repairs and work on void properties continue throughout
- Lincare took over the Housing tenants befriending service in June
- Two rent-free weeks were brought forward to April to ease financial difficulties
- Tenancy Services set up a Tenancy Hardship fund to directly help those tenants impacted on financially
- All public parks and commons, including Hartsholme Country Park, remained open for use throughout lock down period, and provided vital opportunities for health and recreation.
- Street cleaning teams remained working, and modified work to take advantage of reduced footfall, tackling other troublesome issues such as graffiti.
- Although the general grounds maintenance functions reduced initially, they resumed quickly, keeping basic services running throughout.
- The allotments service never stopped, the annual renewals were undertaken, and we now have numbers of tenants not seen for many years, including a new site.
- Scaled back parking services were maintained to ensure support for those who needed to park
- The bus station, and its public toilets, has remained open to ensure travelling key workers were supported.
- Maintained progress with the Boutham Park lake restoration project, recognising the increasing importance of good quality open spaces not just under covid, but on public health longer term

In our community leadership role, we have instigated new community support activities:

- Business support - a cross directorate working group of up to 20 people from ten services contacted Lincoln businesses to ensure they benefited from available support and achieved any business rate relief they were entitled to
- Almost 500 residents signed up to our Befriending Service manned by staff and members, with vulnerable residents receiving weekly calls to help them through issues from isolation and maintain their mental health
- We launched a Community Signposting Helpline to point residents towards all sorts of support from Foodbanks to a new map of local community groups
- Working with partners we launched the Lincoln Community Foundation Crisis Fund in early May to provide financial grants for charities and community groups delivering support to Lincoln residents

As we commenced our strong re-mobilisation plans we have:

- Worked with our partners to enable the re-opening of the city centre safely
- Agreed with the Unions guidance and risk assessments for staff to return to work safely
- Opened Customer Services in City Hall on an appointment basis from July
- Reduced CoLC car parking fees to encourage people back into the city centre
- Developed an exit plan for people still using the Befriending Service, so they can still access calls if they need them
- Taken the decision taken to cancel all large volume events for the rest of 2020 – this includes civic events including the Christmas lights switch on, mayoral activity - as well as our key sporting events and of course the Christmas Market
- Reopened uphill toilets to ensure there are facilities available both uphill and downhill for shoppers return. Some facilities however do remain closed
- Re-opened our play areas
- Deep cleaned the city centre in preparation for retailer re-openings
- Our housing building projects restarted and are all making good progress
- We currently have 123 open homelessness applications and are working hard to prevent homelessness or find alternative accommodation
- Welcomed back and re-opened the Visitor Information Centre in uphill Lincoln
- Helped develop a Local Outbreak Plan to deal with a possible second Covid19 wave in Lincolnshire
- Reopened our camp site at Hartsholme Park to support the visitor economy

Vision 2025

Vision 2025 was completed in February this year and was due to be launched at the Growth conference in March. However, circumstances overtook this plan, the conference was cancelled, and our focus has been on service delivery and recovery. However, once we are operating at near normal levels and have fully assessed the financial impact, we will be able to re-consider a formal launch date for the new Vision.

Restructuring Local Government

Some weeks ago, Lincolnshire County Council approached the Government to ask for a review of the two-tier system of local government in Lincolnshire. This was without the knowledge or consent of the District Councils

I wrote immediately to the secretary of state disassociating ourselves from this request and making the strongest possible case for concentrating on recovery from Covid 19 and playing our full part in getting the country back on its feet.

To date I have received no reply to that and a further letter I sent to the Secretary of State on the same subject.

At the time of writing this report, it is rumoured (nothing more) that the Secretary of State is intent on issuing an invitation very soon to all councils in Lincolnshire to submit their proposals for change by the preposterous deadline date of 7th September 2020.

If the City of Lincoln Council's hand is forced, we will need to submit proposals within this timescale and our proposals for change will need to be approved by our Council by no later than the 7th September.

Performance challenges for the coming year in Lincolnshire.

We are seeing or expecting an increased workload in many areas such as:

- Revenues and Benefits teams – expect to continue seeing higher new claims for example Business rate relief and local council tax support scheme claims
- Welfare Advice team
- PPASB – especially instances of domestic abuse
- Homelessness

Moving forward

Importantly, we have learned much about how we can do things differently; how we can use the positive learning from the last three months to drive long term change in the way we work and interact with our customers.

We have proved we can work at distance; we can work on-line, and we now have the technology to make choices about what a new operating model for the future could look like.

Where staff need to travel in to work – we will encourage walking and cycling as healthier and safer options and will promote this as good practice across the city and play our part in achieving a net zero carbon city by 2030.