

Customer Focus Scrutiny

16 July 2020

Environment and City Management COVID-19 response and recovery actions

Introduction

Environment and City Management deliver a large number of the council's front line practical services directly to the public. They are front facing and have regular daily interactions with our communities. Service adaptation in the light of the threat posed by the Coronavirus started before lock down started on 23 March. Our teams were revising business continuity plans, reviewing working practices and preparing with additional equipment at the start of March when the first COVID-19 deaths were confirmed in the UK. At this early stage however the information available in regard to this new threat was understandably thin. As the department is responsible for delivering critical front line service our focus was on business continuity and scenario planning to ensure that we could maintain service provision. For us it was business as usual wherever possible.

1. Initial Operational response and lockdown measures

Section 1 deals with our immediate (and sometimes still ongoing) operational response and actions during lockdown, section 2 deal with the recovery phase.

1.2 Public and Green Spaces

- In line with UK Government Guidance all play areas were closed and secured but parks and open spaces remained open with all general maintenance ongoing.
- Skate Parks at Flowerpots and the Arena were fenced off with temporary fence panels and signs indicating why.
- Public and Green Spaces staff were trained on refuse loading and helped out with bolstering crew numbers due to instances of self-isolating within the refuse crews (in accordance with our business continuity plan). As the self-isolation cases proved to be not COVID-19 numbers eventually stabilised sickness levels still remain low.
- Deep cleans organised in the City Centre while roads and footways were quiet.

1.3 Public Toilets

- All public toilets were temporarily closed to help prevent the spread of the virus, apart from those at the bus station to give some provision for homeless or street attached people.

1.4 Cemeteries

- Additional shoring and excavator drivers trained to prepare for an anticipated increase in demand (which thankfully didn't occur) so we could if required have three or four teams in shifts covering 14 hours a day.
- Louise Harvey joined the Excessive Death Management Team working as part of the Local Resilience Forum emergency response to COVID-19.

1.5 Waterways

- Harbour team using the opportunity to work on water safety critical navigation buoys and actively deterred those seeking to use the waterways recreationally during lockdown.

1.6 Car Parking

- Mary Arches and John Lewis MSCPs were closed. Guildhall and Cathedral and Quay remained open.
- Howell Road, Magdalen Street, Magdalen Road payment machines were bagged off and made available free for key workers in a response to the reduction in public transport.
- Guildhall was made free to enable customers to reach essential food shops in the Guildhall shopping centre such as Sainsbury's.
- Two electric vans and CEO's volunteered for the shielding and community hubs and were involved with delivering food parcels to those at risk.

1.7 CCTV and Homecall

- CCTV and 24/7 emergency response operating as normal
- Telephone welfare checks were organised for all Homecall customers.
- New Homecall installations were suspended due to the need for close 1-2-1 training with the vulnerable person requesting the service. Safe working practices and risk assessments have been developed with the corporate H&S team and new installations can start again shortly.

1.8 Engineering

- Some Engineering staff were furloughed when the job retention scheme was launched but a core element retained to inspect our high risk assets.
- The team took advantage of the closed play parks and refurbished major elements of play equipment in King George V, Anne Close, Haccombe Close, Cowick Barton and St Thomas play areas.
- Used the opportunity while car parks were quiet to carry out various maintenance activities including resurfacing some of our surface car parks, removing potholes, to reduce the risk of trips and falls and to improve their appearance and ease of use for customers.

1.9 Waste Collection and the MRF

Waste Management is one of our critical services and there was a great deal of work done to enable the service to operate as safely as possible. All waste and recycling collections have continued as normal throughout the pandemic. Achieving a social distance of two metres was extremely difficult and numerous changes to working practices were made in consultation with the workforce which included...

- For our operational workforce we implemented appropriate risk control measures recommended by the Waste Industry Safety & Health Forum, including restriction on collection crew size, 'cohorting' of crews to ensure the same people worked together as much as possible, staggering of start times & locations, social distancing at break times, ample supplies of PPE and hand gels & wipes and an instruction in how to use them
- We prioritised the core services of refuse and recycling collection in anticipation of higher staff absence levels, temporarily suspending bulky waste collection and new garden waste subscriptions. This suspension was lifted in April when it became clear we had adequate staff resources
- We used our usual communications channels to encourage residents to carry on recycling as normal. Materials such as glass and garden waste saw increases of 25% in the early weeks
- All collection rounds for refuse, recycling and garden waste were completed on the scheduled day throughout the whole period

1.10 Growth and Commercialisation

- Worked with the business community to signpost businesses to official advice, support and guidance in a time of great uncertainty.

- Set up the Coronavirus business pages on www.exeter.gov.uk with the latest government advice.
- In conjunction with the Business Rates team, the Growth & Commercialisation team set up the Exeter Discretionary Business Grant - £1.4m available for Exeter businesses most affected by Coronavirus
- The Growth & Commercialisation team have weekly meetings with Exeter Chamber, Exeter FSB and InExeter to help address business concerns and challenges.

1.11 Corporate Property and Estates

- Worked with our business tenants on a one to one basis, to offer a tailor made package of measures including deferring rents to ease cash flow, giving them the best opportunity of withstanding the crisis and returning to profitability.
- Rolled this process out to establish a basis for further concessionary terms by negotiation, thereby limiting risk of early business closures
- Kept Exeter Business Centre open for its occupants throughout
- Liaised with building managers to determine a list of assets that would/could be closed and worked with them to manage this process
- Negotiated temporary amendments to maintenance and compliance contracts to minimise expenditure for the council and wasted attendance
- Progressed the Smartgrid and solar field project so as not to lose momentum on this crucial carbon saving project

2. Recovery Phase

Somewhat unusually in emergency planning, the recovery phase is running at the same time as the incident response to Coronavirus, which puts additional strain on our capacity to respond. However teams within Environment and City Management have been leading the recovery phase for the City and proving the link to the County Council Recovery Groups. We have provided lead officers for the ECC City Centre Recovery and the Business Support Groups as well the DCC Recovery Groups such as the Recovery Coordination Group, Business and Economy Recovery Task Group and the Place Sub Group. During the recovery work the teams within Environment and City Management have worked as one to help the City to recover. Another critical activity for all teams was to identify in year savings to balance the loss of income from our revenue generating activities. Activities in this phase include...

- Social distancing measures including signs, floor stencils, banners and one way pedestrian systems installed in our car parks, throughout the main shopping areas of the City Centre and our other district centres.
- Public conveniences reopened at Exeter Quay, Topsham Quay, Heavitree Park and Cowick Barton Playing Fields in addition to the toilets which remained open on Paris Street. These facilities are cleaned every hour with a virucidal cleaner to limit the risk of COVID-19 infection to users and staff.
- Open air tennis courts, basketball courts and skate parks reopened with signage to explain social distancing
- Enhanced cleaning to the City Centre focussing on touch points such as bins and street furniture.
- Established the City Centre Recovery Group – Chair John Laramy from Exeter College – to develop a recovery plan for the city centre to ensure its long term survival and growth
- Established the Exeter Business Support Recovery Group – Chair Matthew Roach from Exeter Airport – to support businesses adapting to the effects of Coronavirus and to address skill / re-training needs for residents

- Continuing to liaise with our business tenants to help them with their recovery plans.
- Establishing a simple, streamlined process for assessing applications for pavement licences for additional tables and chairs as per the Governments temporary legislation. This will assist hospitality businesses to trade while social distancing rules are in place.
- Making sure that corporate buildings which have been closed over the outbreak can be opened safely and with adequate checks and testing. Working with building managers to ensure this process is smooth and as quick as possible.

3. Income

Environment and City Management is one of the largest income generators in the authority but COVID-19 has hit our income streams hard.

- Corporate Property income for the March Quarter dropped by £590,000
- Car parking income dropped by up to 99.1 % throughout April and May and has only just started to rise again. As of the first week in June it has only risen slightly and still represents a drop of 90.3% compared to this time last year.
- Commercial waste income, which dropped to less than half the normal amount in the early weeks, continues to recover steadily at 4-5% per week but is currently 40% lower than before lockdown.

These represent significant values to the authority and income will remain depressed for many months and may never reach previous values. The commercial team are working to replace those lost revenues by replacing customers or with new ventures.

4. Summary

Environment and City Management has managed to continue with the vast majority of its operations as usual. This is all thanks to the dedication of all the staff and their ability to adapt and rise to the challenges posed by Coronavirus. Restoring our income levels will be a challenge and much of this will depend on the success of the recovery plan for the city. Despite the difficulties we face, we continue to serve the residents of the City and help with its recovery and the desire to build back better.

David Bartram

Director

26/06/2020