



Surrey Heath Borough Council COVID-19 Response Overview and Debrief Report

Written by Applied Resilience

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Since the first confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the UK at the end of January 2020, the UK has been responding to a global pandemic. The coronavirus has impacted all levels of society.

As a Category 1 responder under the Civil Contingencies Act of 2004, Surrey Heath Borough Council has been at the forefront of efforts to support its residents alongside other partners. This has required substantial redeployment of Council staff, in particular to drive the welfare response. However, these efforts have no doubt made a difference to thousands of residents and businesses throughout the borough.

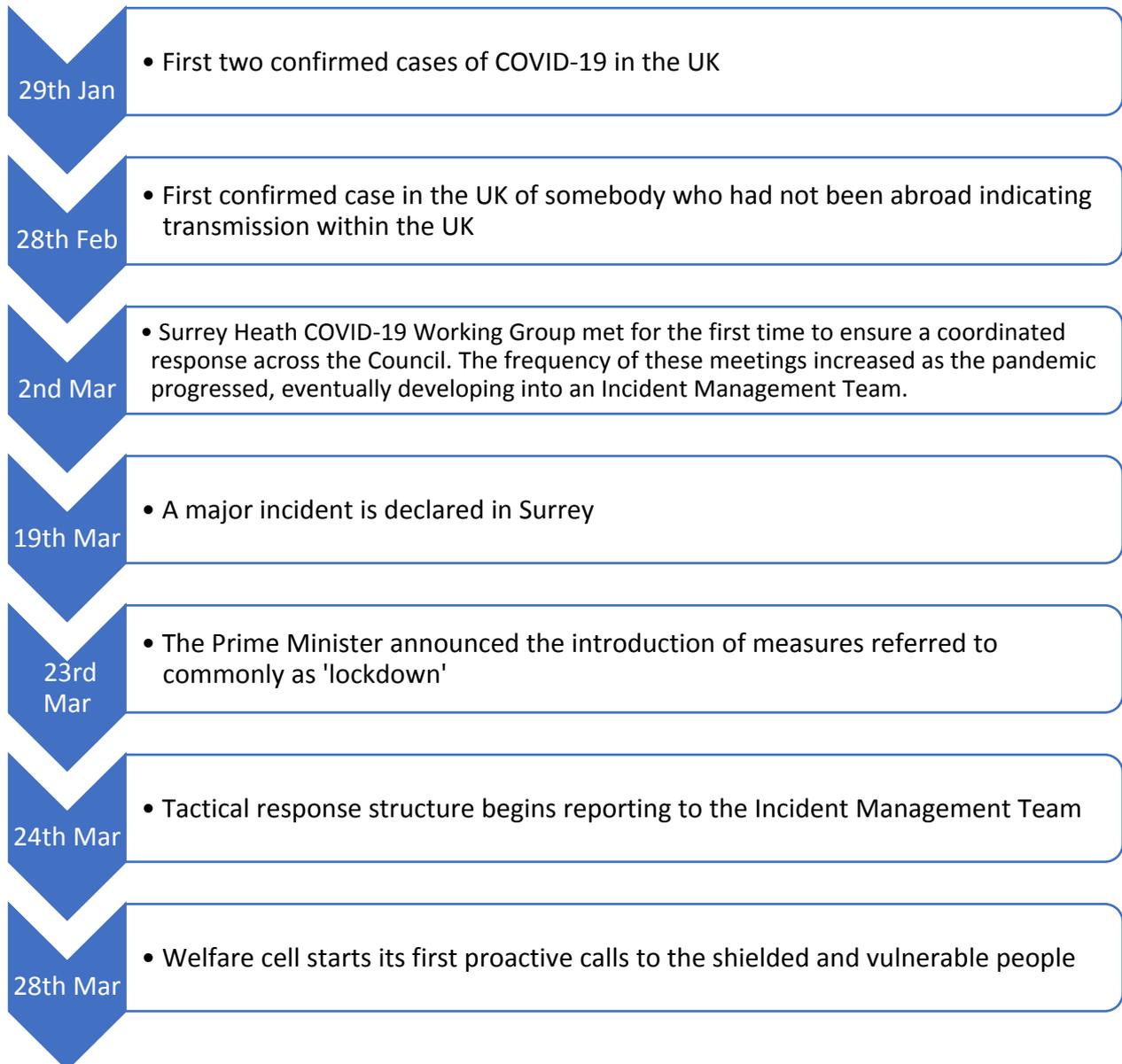
This report initially provides a summary of Surrey Heath's response to COVID-19 from both emergency response and business continuity perspectives. It then summarises some of the key findings from a two-pronged debriefing process of questionnaires and debrief meetings with those most heavily involved in the response.

These lessons learned will be fed into future emergency and business continuity planning as well as preparing for a potential second wave of COVID-19.

2.0 OVERVIEW OF COVID-19 RESPONSE

2.1 MOBILISATION

The following timeline outlines the key dates of Surrey Heath's mobilisation to respond to COVID-19.



2.1 EMERGENCY RESPONSE STRUCTURE

In order to respond to COVID-19, with the assistance of Applied Resilience, the Council's contractor for emergency planning and business continuity, Surrey Heath set up its emergency response structures which were adapted from the Council's Emergency Plan. There were three levels of response: strategic, tactical and operational.

2.1.1 Strategic

Incident Management Team (IMT)

IMT was led by Tim Pashen, Acting Chief Executive, and consisted of the Corporate Management Team and a few additional staff to provide strategic input and direction to Surrey Heath's response. A tactical lead and strategic-tactical liaison were also appointed to ensure consistency between the strategic intent of IMT and tactical actions of the tactical leads. At the height of the response, IMT met daily with input from Surrey Heath Prepared, the Borough Commander and a representative from Applied Resilience.

2.1.2 Tactical & Operational

The tactical command was led by Sue McCubbin. The tactical cell leads met daily during the peak of the response with the responsibility of allocating resources and coordinating tasks accordingly. Tactical command implemented the strategy set out by IMT. There were a number of cells at the tactical level to coordinate the various aspects of the Council's response to COVID-19, which were as follows.

Welfare Cell

The welfare cell was the most resource intensive aspect of Surrey Heath's COVID-19 response, driving an unprecedented effort to redeploy staff to assist. The welfare cell was responsible for proactively calling the shielded and vulnerable people in the Borough as well as delivering food packages and medication to those who were unable to provide for themselves. The cell worked closely with Surrey Police, who deployed PCSOs to those who the cell was unable to get in touch with.

Corporate Cell

The demands of the COVID-19 response required considerable redeployment of staff from their day to day functions to the emergency response, particularly the resource intensive welfare effort. One of the key roles of the corporate cell was to plan and action the redeployment of staff to support the Council's response. This involved using the Council's Business Continuity plans to identify critical functions and hence redeploy those who had the capacity to support, in addition to providing those critical functions. The critical functions initially identified were as follows. However, these were adapted as resource requirements for the welfare response became clear.

Critical Functions Identified:

- Meals at Home, welfare checks on vulnerable people and community transport
- Homelessness
- Essential repairs to Council properties
- Waste collection - Amey is our contractor working on behalf of 4 borough/district councils
- Benefits and advice to residents including housing benefits/rents, universal credit and Council Tax enquiries
- Advice and financial assistance to businesses including Business Rates and Government Grants
- Processing of planning applications—including possible advice to temporary mortuary sites

- Land charges
- Dealing with dangerous structures
- Any urgent environmental health issues but not routine matters (reduced as pubs, bars and restaurants etc. are closed)
- Regular communications to staff, Members and businesses. Signposting to relevant guidance and support provided reassurance and consistency.
- Contact Centre to support telephony and admin where required for above services
- Finance staff to make payments for benefit claimants and businesses
- Legal to advise on emergency legislation
- Democratic Services-changes in legislation to allow virtual meetings and decision making
- Civil emergency response—including IMT and administrative support
- Human Resources to support resourcing related to all the above functions
- ICT team to support the requirements to deliver all of above
- Facilities who are leading on the cleaning of Surrey Heath House and general upkeep of the building to keep the Council operational
- Greenspace/contractors –maintenance of grass verges at junctions, emptying of bins in greenspace areas and cleaning of public toilets

Business Cell

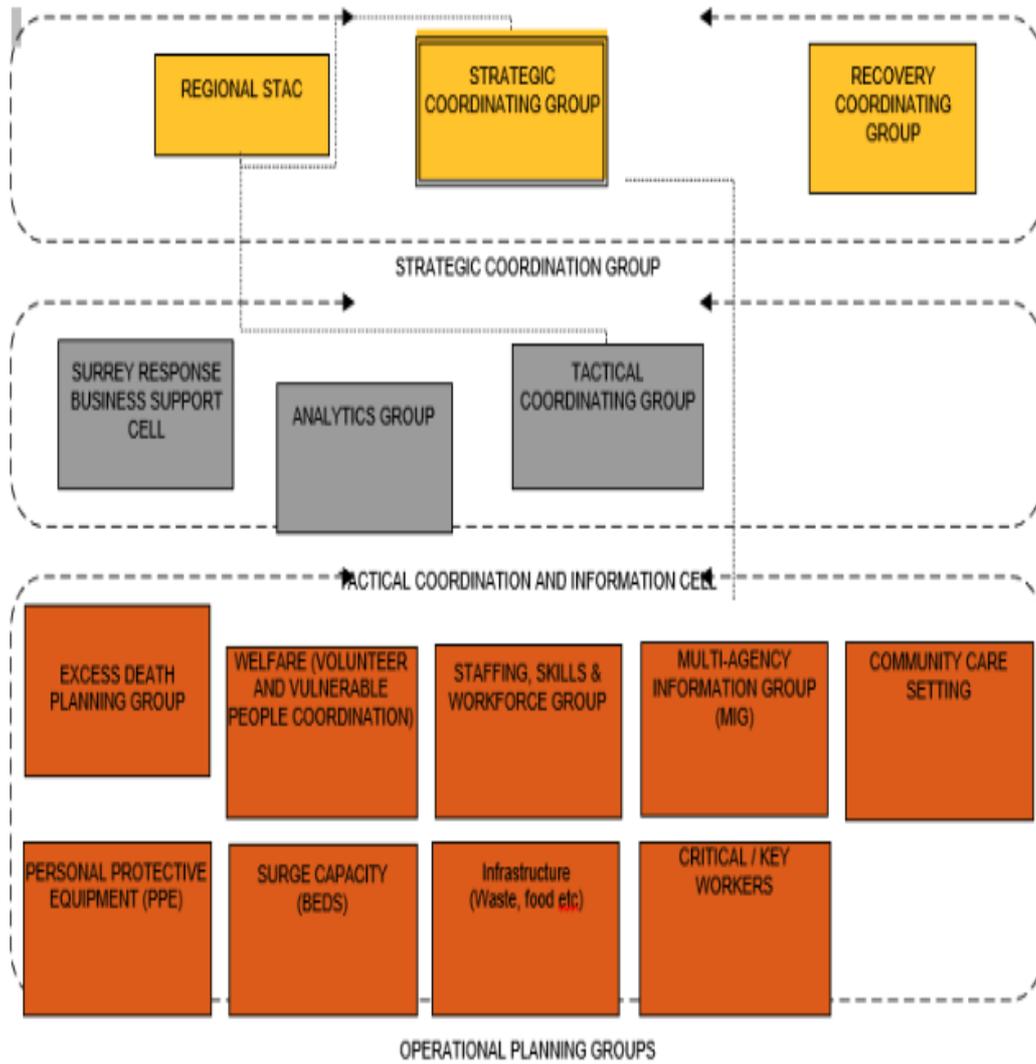
The business cell primarily focussed on supporting small businesses in Surrey Heath, in particular with the payment of business support grants.

Admin Cell

The admin cell provided admin support across all the cells, particularly supporting internal data flow.

2.1.3 Surrey Local Resilience Forum (LRF)

Applied Resilience represented the council at a wide range of groups within the SLRF structure. The structure that was set up by the SLRF in order to assist partners in effectively coordinating and collaborating with each other is shown below.



3.0 DEBRIEF OUTCOMES

As Surrey Heath's COVID-19 response has gradually shifted to recovery, Applied Resilience carried out a debriefing process to establish the emergency response and business continuity lessons learned from the pandemic. This debriefing process involved a questionnaire and two debrief meetings (one with IMT, one with tactical command). Undertaking a debrief at this stage allows for lessons learned to be collated and actioned in preparation for any subsequent waves of COVID-19 and for future emergency and business continuity planning. The key outcomes are summarised below.

3.1 Areas of Good Practice

Staffing and management/Welfare Response

A recurring theme across the questionnaires and debrief sessions at both the strategic and tactical levels was the willingness of staff to go the extra mile for each other as well as for residents. There was a passion, commitment and drive at all levels of the Council's response to undertake critical and at times unfamiliar roles. This facilitated a rapid response which has been highlighted throughout the debriefing process as being a standout success.

Additionally, the speed of redeploying staff and setting up the welfare cell to provide proactive calls and support to residents in a short amount of time was an area of pride. This involved training call handlers, setting up a rota for such a large operation and working closely with the community volunteer service, Surrey Heath Prepared. There were a number of challenges faced by the welfare cell, including data inaccuracies and constantly moving goalposts as a result of national and SLRF changes. However, the welfare cell adapted extremely quickly on every occasion. There is no doubt that Surrey Heath's welfare cell can be extremely proud of the work they did to support thousands of residents across the Borough. The feedback from residents that the welfare cell has been supporting is overwhelmingly positive.

The close relationship with the police and the attendance of Surrey Heath's Borough Commander at IMT meetings allowed for quick resolution of issues and reassurance of a coordinated approach between the agencies. The presence of Surrey Heath Prepared at IMT and the strong relationship that was built allowed for a smooth and effective Borough-wide welfare response with minimal duplication of efforts. These relationships bode well were there to be a second wave.

Finally, staff across the Council worked with individuals from services that they wouldn't have otherwise worked with, forming new relationships that will increase coordination and streamline processes across services in the future.

Technology

The use of Zoom to hold teleconferences was extremely successful and facilitated effective communication throughout the COVID-19 response. Moreover, the hard work of the ICT team to ensure an effective transition to remote working has been an essential part of the Council's efforts to maintain its critical functions throughout.

Communications

The willingness of the whole Marketing and Communication team to lead on different themes from an internal and multi-agency perspective allowed for effective, joined-up communications. This is an area of good practice that should be taken forward and integrated into the Council's Emergency Plans.

Emergency Response Structures

The battle rhythm and command structures were also a success. At the height of the response, tactical command would meet in the morning, Tim Pashen would attend the multi-agency Strategic Coordination Group in the early afternoon and IMT would meet directly after with the tactical lead sharing a situation report with IMT and Tim sharing the update from the SCG. This facilitated a smooth flow of information between the command levels during the day and rapid decision making.

3.2 Learning points identified and subsequent recommendations

Responding to such an unprecedented incident meant inevitably there were challenges and subsequently lessons learned for Surrey Heath. This section highlights the key points.

Staffing and management

On the whole, staff were eager to assist where required. As service managers had previously completed Business Impact Assessments in which they RAG rated their service functions in preparation for a business continuity incident, there was a general understanding across the Council regarding what was deemed a critical function and which functions could be put on hold. However, there was a slight reluctance amongst a small proportion of the staff to drop certain activities which were non-critical. In such a large incident, it is not possible for business as usual to continue. Therefore, it is clear that there is a need for service managers to discuss and communicate their Business Impact Assessments with all of their team. In addition, these Business Impact Assessments are carried out within teams. To ensure there is consistency across all council functions, it is recommended that CMT and Members review these functions.

Moreover, key staff were in position for the entirety of the response and due to the nature of their roles, needed to work under extreme pressure over significantly extended periods, including evenings and weekends. Here there is the concern that some roles do not have clear deputies and as a result fatigue could become a real issue. This was particularly true at the start of the response. It is therefore recommended that for second wave planning, clear deputies are identified, including at CMT level, to ensure there are no single points of failure and staff welfare remains a priority.

Welfare response

One of the key challenges of the welfare response was the inaccuracy of data received from central government via Surrey County Council. The data improved as the response continued with next of kin contact details being useful. However, inaccuracies in the data resulted in significant efforts to cleanse the data and more PCSO welfare visits being required to those the Council could not contact. Inaccurate data was also an issue when reaching out to the Council's own vulnerable list. Throughout this process, the data has been cleansed and so it is recommended that the cleansed data is used to update the

Council's current vulnerable people data. This will improve the efficiency of any welfare response in future incidents and in a potential second wave of COVID-19.

Communications

Due to a lack of forewarning of national announcements, it was difficult for staff comms to keep pace with the rapid developments. This, at times, led to confusion and frustration amongst staff about whether they should come into the office or work from home. This was impacted by an initial lack of capacity for everyone to work from home from an ICT perspective.

Technology

In Applied Resilience's experience of COVID-19 response across a number of Boroughs in Surrey, getting everyone working from home so quickly was a test and this was no different in Surrey Heath. The issue with the Firewall perhaps resulted in some staff starting to work from home later than desired. However, the speed at which the firewall was upgraded which facilitated everyone to work from home was very impressive. If this didn't happen this could have significantly impacted the speed of the Council's response.

Emergency Response Training

There was the feeling that more training on rising tide emergencies (such as pandemics) as opposed to big bang emergencies would be beneficial, in particular for tactical leads. Applied Resilience is also keen to ensure that as many staff and Members are trained in the Council's responsibilities as a Category 1 responder under the Civil Contingencies Act of 2004. Therefore, Applied Resilience will be scheduling an Emergency Planning training for Members in addition to the one earlier this year. The creation of an online module on Emergency Planning for all staff is also being explored to ensure everyone is well versed on the council's responsibilities in a civil emergency.

4.0 CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has posed an unprecedented challenge for Surrey Heath Borough Council. Emergency response and business continuity incidents taken in isolation are difficult enough to manage. However, COVID-19 has presented the Council with a business continuity and emergency response incident in tandem which Surrey Heath has tackled with energy and vigour.

The speed of redeployment of staff and setting up the welfare cell to support Surrey Heath's most vulnerable residents are stand out successes of the Council's response. However, there are success stories across every level and service in the Council and the unequivocal dedication of staff throughout the COVID-19 response has been admirable to watch.

Nevertheless, there are inevitably learning points that have been identified. These include reviewing the Council's list of critical functions and ensuring they are clearly communicated to all staff. To facilitate this, additional training will be made available to all staff and Members to ensure all are well versed on the Council's responsibilities as Category 1 responders.

Whilst there are areas of improvement to factor into second wave planning, Surrey Heath's response to COVID-19 has been strong across the board. Were there to be a second wave, the team at Applied Resilience would be confident that Surrey Heath would be able to confront it with similar professionalism, flexibility and determination.