

Warrington Borough Council

LGA Recovery & Renewal Panel

Key Reflections

25th November 2020

Page 1 of 7

Introduction

LGA Recovery and Renewal Panel sessions provide an opportunity for the Leader, Chief Executive, senior members and officers to come together, virtually, with peers to:

- Reflect on what the Council has achieved and learnt in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Discuss with peers the challenges and opportunities COVID-19 has presented for the Council and local area.
- Consider the steps the Council wishes to take towards recovery/renewal.

The sessions help to identify a series of steps the Council may wish to take as well as further support and good practice available from across the sector.

On 25th November 2020, Warrington Borough Council undertook an LGA Recovery & Renewal Panel. This was set within the context of the Council's recently developed Corporate Plan (2020-24) which has been developed as a guiding document to help steer the borough through recovery and renewal.

The panel discussion involved the Leader, Deputy Leader, Cabinet Member for Health and Adult Social Care, Chief Executive as well as the majority of the Senior Leadership Team. The following peer team were brought together for this panel discussion:

- Cllr Sir Stephen Houghton (Leader – Barnsley Council)
- Tony Reeves (CEX – Liverpool City Council)
- Dan Archer (LGA)
- Cindy Lowthian (LGA)
- Mille Adkins (LGA)

Background to the LGA Recovery and Renewal Panel offer

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the commencement of 'lockdown' in March 2020, the LGA suspended the physical delivery of all peer challenge work including the core offer of a Corporate Peer Challenge.

To continue to support councils during this unprecedented period, the LGA refocused its support and adopted a new remote approach.

'Recovery and Renewal Panels' do not replace LGA Corporate Peer Challenge and offer something distinctly different.

This work is there to primarily support improvement rather than providing concrete assurance and should be treated as such. This note acts as a high level summary of the key reflections from the more detailed discussion.

In summary

In responding to COVID-19, the Council has gone above and beyond what could ever be described as 'business as usual'. The political and officer leadership of the Council are rightfully proud of the collective drive and team ethos shown throughout this period, both within the Council but also across the local system of partners.

A platform for closer working with the community, the VCFS, wider partners and ward councillors has been set. Building on this further will mean an ongoing commitment, as well as purposeful shared and specific actions. Doing so can help the borough to realise a local recovery and renewal but can also support individual agencies to develop new ways of working which help meet their own specific pressures and objectives.

For the Council, this can have an important role in meeting the corporate priorities as well as the financial challenge and the tough decisions required over the short and medium term. In particular, the role of collaboration internally and building further on the potential of the wider system offer in relation to prevention and early intervention

Key Reflections

The following key themes emerged from the panel discussion which the Council may wish to give further consideration to as it progresses its approach to recovery/renewal or 'reset'.

A massive local community effort has been seen in responding to COVID-19. Building this into the future default way of working can help to accelerate the Council's pre COVID ambitions for working with the community differently.

Pre COVID-19 the Cabinet had ambitions for further developing the Council's relationship with the local community. This also included how closely and consistently the Council works with the local voluntary, community and faith sector (VCFS). There are examples already of this relationship in specific service areas including working with the community in the maintenance of parks and green spaces through the 'Count Me In' initiative, as well as work that is developing around early help and prevention.

In response to COVID-19, the Council has seen a "tremendous community effort" on a much wider scale. This enhanced understanding of the VCFS has the potential to be a springboard into a closer relationship long term. Building on this relationship can help the borough achieve outcomes for Warrington in new ways. Both sustaining and continuing to build this relationship will require purposeful steps and will not happen by default.

Choosing to prioritise this way of working and the relationships required is a long-term commitment which requires corporate consistency. The benefits of which for the borough can then build up over time as this way of working (and individual stakeholders' familiarity with roles within it) become more embedded. This is particularly the case in relation to the potential benefits to the prevention and early intervention offer across the local system.

How this relationship with the VCFS is shaped, the roles that different stakeholders take and the ways in which they discharge those roles should be crafted in collaboration. The focus of this work must also be led by a set of agreed outcomes for the borough, rather than siloed service objectives, to have the best chances of success. As quoted by one of the attendees at the session *"this can take the form of an agreed framework for a way of working with the third sector and community partners to help ensure standards, under a shared vision."*

Continuing to build a trusting relationship is key and requires consistent openness and an observed willingness to adapt and move obstacles for others. This has been seen during this response stage to the pandemic in Warrington, laying the foundations for this to continue. Working in this new way will also require looking at how any operational risks involved can be managed differently as well as challenging traditional ways of working. The Council has strengths in being able to challenge established ways of working and seeking out alternative solutions, an asset which can be of use here too. Taking these types of steps can help the Council to recalibrate the holistic, corporate relationship it has with the community and VCFS and will be demonstrated when partners consistently see officers engaging the VCFS at earlier points in the decision making cycle. This means working increasingly on equal terms in 'designing' responses/initiatives, not in a more traditional and hierarchical way in the 'delivery' stages. The Council will have a view as to the strength of the sector locally to take on an increased/different role and how, where and when this role can be 'dialled up' in a relevant way. The role the Council plays as a Place Leader in sustainably supporting the sector to develop and grow will be important.

Ensuring the VCFS has a clear, direct route into the Council, not just into dedicated service areas will also be important, both when the Council has a request, but also when the sector wishes to share insights and opportunities. Both Cabinet and ward members can have a particularly important role in this regard. Building on the role that local members have played during the response stage and how this is supported, would also be a part of this. Examples of which may include:

- An effective signpost for residents and businesses to the support they need from across the wider 'system' offer.
- A source of informed encouragement and support to develop solutions – the community and partners.
- Supporting, challenging and informing the Council's operational delivery – without stepping into operational delivery.

Delivering on recovery and renewal will be helped by embedding the new style of partnership working as much as possible.

The Council have seen a significant reinvention of partnership working in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This has included the "levelling of relationships", swifter and more pragmatic shared responses and supportive, collective activity behind a common, singular goal.

The Council's relationship with health colleagues is an example where members and officers have seen a shift during this response stage. The work with Integrated Commissioning Board has potential to be built upon. Progress from partnership working is also reported in relation to hospital discharge - which has involved closer working between social care and the NHS acute trust. In relation to health and this partnership space, the proposed re-configuration of the CCG onto a wider footprint is flagged by the Council as a particular challenge and risk to more locally focussed relationships.

The Council's relationship with school head teachers has also been highlighted as an area of strength – the root of which seems to be based upon regular, open, communication which is less transactional in nature. This is an example of the benefits from an improved approach to communications which aligns with the relationships the Council is aiming to grow.

The Council are keen to maintain this system wide way of partnership working beyond the COVID-19 period as a legacy for future ways of working across Warrington.

To help achieve this, the council should consider bringing partners together at a dedicated event to:

- listen to, recognise and enshrine the ways of doing partnership working which have brought the system closer together.

- map out, align or design the common priorities for recovery/renewal for the borough (the Council's priorities in the Corporate Plan may help this discussion).
- fully understand the current and future individual pressures and drivers which are likely to shape each partners behaviours as a sense of normality is returned to.
- be clear on the ways of working, partners wish to avoid returning to.

Doing this can give the partnership a firmer footing to move forward with, which can help in refreshing partnership working for the longer journey ahead and limit the potential for “partner fatigue”. There is potential value in co-designing a borough wide strategy with partners which clearly states the ways of working and priorities that partners equally commit to and the shared responsibilities of the partnership in terms of recovery and renewal. This can have benefits for all partners around the table – most crucially benefitting Warrington overall and would help open up further opportunities beyond traditional service silos which include social value, and corporate social responsibility.

The way in which member and officer leadership have responded to the pandemic has been recognised. Given how these relationships have now evolved, how will you use them in future?

There is a consistent recognition from the members and officers at the panel session that members of the Executive and the SLT have worked closer than ever, as one team across service and portfolio areas with a "no elbowing culture". In responding to the pandemic, the Council are proud of the collective spirit of resilience and endeavour that has been shown. This has resulted in more informal dialogue and frank discussions which have been valued by all. The bravery of leadership in both advocating for Warrington and those at the Council in responding to the crisis has also been recognised. An important quality for the Council to build upon as local place leader going forward.

All of the above speaks to a collaborative approach which the Council are keen to retain. Taking clear and visible steps to ensure this happens are required in order to sustain this. Thinking about the support and encouragement for this style of working, the spaces and informal time required for this will be important. Doing so in a way which is mindful of the impacts from other changes which may be taking simultaneously (such as a continued, ongoing shift to increased home based working) can also provide a useful consideration.

Examples of where this collaborative approach could be of particular benefit include how the corporate priorities are delivered ‘corporately’ and not just reported back corporately. The CEX is keen to highlight the equal balance of the priorities between ‘people’ and ‘place’ based themes – when the outcomes these priorities are intended to deliver are unpacked. This mindset lends itself to an approach based on collaboration and corporate ownership.

A further opportunity to bring members and senior officers from different portfolios/services collectively around an area, is through the delivery of Town Deal project. The Council were successful in this application after taking the bold decision to apply within cohort one of this programme despite the pressures on capacity at that time, seeing the benefits this opportunity could bring for an inclusive recovery and renewal. The outcomes of this project have benefits for both people and place based outcomes and could be delivered as such. Particularly given the bid includes Health and Social Care Academy.

There is an open and consistent recognition of the tough financial decisions to come, a number of which will require lead in time. Building on the strengths that exist locally, and the recent changes you have seen can have an important role in making this happen.

Members and officers are acutely aware of the need for tough financial decisions, with the period up to 2023 appearing particularly key. There is recognition from the CEX that seeking out further, additional commercial investments does not feature as prominently in the Council's thoughts about how to deal with this funding challenge. This is due to the lower returns for the level of risk they may present. Due to the distribution of the Council's spend across service areas, there is particular attention given to the contribution that may be required from both adults and children's services over the medium term (and specifically up to 2023).

In these service areas, as in all councils there is often a delay between delivery of a given project and the realisation of the savings required. This is especially the case in the delivery of savings which are based on early intervention and prevention – an area the Council is increasingly looking at. Activity is underway here and should be prioritised given this lag. Examples of this include continuing to step up the Mockingbird model and 'no wrong door' approach in children's social care, as well as work on purchasing frameworks.

Officers identify the success of working with schools when developing early intervention, and schools reportedly recognising the way in which the Council invests into early help. Utilising partnership working (including, equally the VCFS), building on the points raised earlier in this note can help to amplify the efforts of the Council in ensuring an effective, recognised and easily accessible early help offer. This brings a range of support across a host of social welfare measures but can also potentially help the Council to reduce spend in some service areas.

In adult social care there is significant work in place around intermediate care which aims to reduce the number of people entering residential care. This involves shared roles with the hospital on discharge and a frailty unit at the hospital looking to support people to avoid hospital in the first place.

Progressing spending decisions to realise the savings required will mean continuing to identify the service areas which require additional, temporary, corporate support to deliver the change identified robustly and at pace. This can be another opportunity to utilise the appetite for closer team working as well as the spirit of endeavour, resilience and pride the Council has demonstrated throughout 2020.

Next steps

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 number of the areas identified for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Claire Hogan (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the Council and the Local Government Association (LGA). Her e-mail address is Claire.hogan@local.gov.uk