



## **Emergency Planning**

# **Report: Lessons learned during response to COVID-19 (to date 20/06/2020)**

Emergency Planning

London Borough of Brent

Brent Civic Centre

Engineers Way

Wembley

HA9 0FJ

## Background

Readers of this report will be well aware of the context and timeline of this incident. There are likely to be numerous bodies at global, national, regional and sector level that, in the fullness of time, through further academic and scientific research, public enquiries, commissions and so on, will produce their own findings that present opportunities for learning and be drivers of change. Brent, and indeed the Local Government sector, is likely to be a contributor to many of these and, internally, Brent will need to further develop and adapt its own procedures in response.

This type of incident is described as a “Rising Tide” incident in our *Major Emergency Plan* - “A rising tide event (also called slow onset/slow burn incident) is likely to have a lead-in time of several days, weeks or even months. Such events include health pandemics, flooding, foot and mouth disease, drought, fuel emergency, industrial action, etc. The onset can be gradual and the final impact may not always be apparent in the early stages.”

The purpose of this report is not to dissect the specifics of the incident as it occurred outside of the organisation since these details will, at least in part, be familiar to most already. Instead, this report will focus on the experience of the council in responding to the challenges presented by this incident to date, what we did in response and what we have learned as a result. To inform this report, each directorate completed a debrief form in mid-May, asking 3 key questions:

- What did you do/achieve?
- What did you learn?
- What might you do differently?

The information in this report has been collated based on these returns. Many of the comments received were common and consistent across directorates and therefore the observations have been grouped into themes as follows:

1. Specific Response arrangements
2. Business Continuity & Working from Home
3. Communications

## Specific Response Arrangements

### Strategic Response Arrangements

The Council Gold Group was activated and met formally for the first time on the 16<sup>th</sup> March. The instruction from London Local Authority Gold (LLAG) for all Local Authorities to activate their BECC's and emergency arrangements followed on the 17<sup>th</sup> March.

A decision & action log and minutes of Gold Group meetings were maintained throughout according to our *Major Emergency Plan* - “If Council Gold is activated, a

decision loggist must be appointed to accompany Council Gold for the duration of their duty to record relevant decisions.”

An additional and separate log of decisions made by the Chief Executive was also kept for legal purposes.

Prior to this, activity had been managed by regular engagement between the business-as-usual organisational structure to monitor the emerging situation and to prepare for the anticipated impacts. Throughout the incident, most of the Business Continuity and service-specific arrangements continued to be dealt with through existing directorate structures which is consistent with the *Major Emergency Plan* - “Members (of Gold Group) assume control of areas within their usual remit using routine and familiar reporting lines.”

Oversight of Directorate activity at Gold Group was by means of written Directorate Situation Reports (SitReps) and verbal updates which formed part of the standing Gold Group agenda.

The tempo of Gold group meetings adjusted frequently throughout to match the tempo of the incident and to account for the timing of meetings at the regional tier. Throughout the peak of the pandemic and increased accompanying activity, Gold Group met daily. The frequency of meetings adjusted in line with the natural peaks and troughs of activity that are present in every incident. Our *Major Emergency Plan* does not dictate the frequency of these meetings but offers the following guidance - “Council Gold Group should only formally convene once there are matters for it to consider and enough information available upon which to base those considerations.”

Strategic decision-making was not confined solely to formal meetings of the Council Gold Group since a number of issues requiring a decision presented themselves throughout the course of the incident outside of this tempo of meetings. Where time permitted, the item was brought to Gold Group as an opportunity for those decisions to be considered and ratified. Where time did not permit consideration at full Gold Group, that decision was shared and minuted at Gold Group as part of the incident record. The tempo of future Gold Group meetings was carefully considered at each meeting to balance the amount of new information received, the levels of activity that required strategic management and the best use of senior officer time. This is a sensible approach as opposed to a regimented, inflexible tempo which may not match the natural tempo of an incident and members of Gold Group have reported that the frequency felt “natural” and right.

More widely, and as part of the National & Regional Response Structures, a number of senior staff represented their particular Local Government sector and/or Brent at strategic level through working groups, professional networks and other fora. The challenges of multi-agency working, particularly amongst competing organisational priorities is nothing new for those used to working in partnership.

The council also adopted a number of strategic sub-groups as part of its response structure as outlined in the *Major Emergency Plan* - “One of the early duties of initial command staff is to establish an appropriate command structure to exercise control

over the activities of the organisation, keep this under review and flex the structure up or down to match the demands of the incident.”

Sub-groups established were; Communications, Excess Deaths Management and Health & Wellbeing. Membership and terms of reference for each of these groups were modified from our existing response plans to suit the specifics of the incident. These groups continued to sit throughout the response without major alterations, although their focus and remit may have shifted as required to meet emerging information and demands. Each sub group was chaired by a senior member of Gold Group - *Major Emergency Plan* - “Members (of Gold Group) may also be delegated or co-opted to lead on elements of the response as an extension of their usual remit e.g. Mass Fatalities Coordination Group, Public Communications, Recovery Coordination Group, Humanitarian Assistance Steering Group etc.”

Some comments from the Gold Group regarding their experience at Gold Group meetings:

- Compared to previous Gold experience elsewhere, Brent’s arrangements were faster and more efficient with decision-making
- Meeting every day during the height of the crisis felt right so everyone had a full picture of the unfolding situation
- Planning in an agenda item especially around finance was good and is essential as future practice
- It is difficult to judge the frequency of meetings required and sometimes there wasn’t a whole lot to update, other times meetings were quite lengthy and frequencies were then adjusted accordingly
- Members of Gold should record reasons and risks for decisions within their own remit without overreliance on Gold Group to capture these
- Sometimes difficulty was experienced by Gold Group members when dialling in, bad line/audio issues/could not join.

## **Operational Response Arrangements**

The following arrangements were put in place to manage the particular demands and needs brought about by the incident. It is worth noting that some were activated as part of a pre-planned response to a particular impact but many were set up to deal with issues novel to the incident and therefore had to be imagined and set up at very short notice. As many of these arrangements are still in play, a separate “after action” debrief report is recommended for each of these elements from the lead person or team involved in their management at the appropriate time.

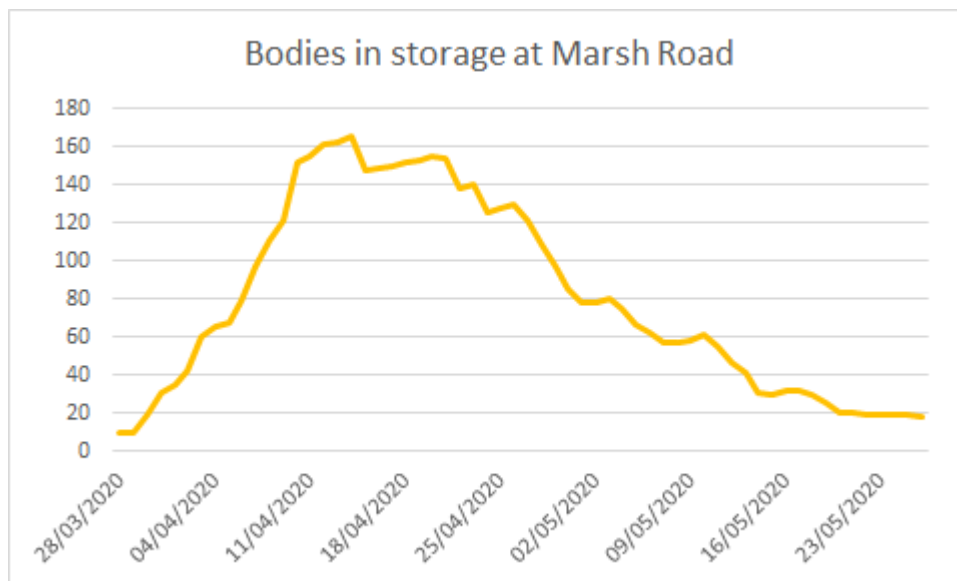
**Professional Network data gathering** - Throughout the incident, the demand for information from “central” grew and in order to ensure reporting requirements were kept to a single report, existing Professional Networks were used. They included ADASS, ALDCS, HR Directors, LEDNET, ADPH and Housing Directors. Reporting tempos altered throughout the course of the response from daily to weekly and datasets underwent multiple iterations which made for short deadlines and issues with version control. Any report is only as good as the data entered and timely, consistent submissions were achieved although the ever-changing nature of the data required made it difficult to accomplish smoothly every time. Every incident will bring its own set of data requirements, which are difficult to foresee and plan for in

advance. Some questions were raised over the usefulness of the dataset, possibly because the end results were not visible to those providing the information.

Primary comments received from Directorates regarding their experience of the Professional Networks centred on the helpful nature of these networks in sharing work between thematic leads but the feeling was that they were sometimes overactive, time-consuming, challenging and the added value and benefits of reporting was not always apparent.

**Resilience Mortuary** – Was established at Marsh Road, Alpertons, to manage the body storage element of the death management process. This part of the process had been identified through planning, as the element of the process most likely to come under strain during an excess deaths event and where mitigation measures, if implemented, would produce the greatest effect in alleviating pressure at other points in the process. Throughout the period the Public Mortuary at Northwick Park (110 spaces) and the Chapel at Alpertons Cemetery (36 spaces) were operating at or close to maximum capacity. At the time of writing this report, a total of 351 bodies have been stored at Marsh Road throughout this pandemic. This capability has never been deployed previously. It was fortunate that the Marsh Road depot was available to repurpose in this way and that the company that built the site, was available. As predicted in our *Excess Deaths Plan*, hire equipment for temporary body storage became increasingly difficult to source as the incident progressed and the fact that we took the decision early, meant that these material shortages were not encountered. It is worth noting that London and more locally Brent, peaked early in terms of infections and the subsequent number of deaths. Regional arrangements provide an option of last resort in excess deaths events and the establishment of regional hub mortuaries provided welcome relief to those authorities that wouldn't have coped without them. Unfortunately, due to their size and complexity, regional hubs take time to construct and, in this instance, due to our rapid and early peak, Brent had approximately 70 bodies in our excess storage by the time these regional arrangements went live. It is recommended, to prepare for any future excess deaths event, that:

- The Marsh Road site be the preferred and planned for option for equipping for this purpose
- The council should, within reason, attempt to purchase and store any equipment likely to be needed so as to avoid reliance on the hire market
- That the services of a professional company be documented through contract, MoU or preferred supplier arrangement, to supplement the additional equipment/services that cannot be sourced in-house
- To train additional members of staff in mortuary operations to avoid the concentration of skills and knowledge in a small number of staff
- That, subject to the above, a coronial agreement between boroughs is reached that will allow for joint use and funding of any resilience facilities established



**Helplines** – A mix of dedicated and routine service numbers, publicised widely to enable referral of individuals and businesses to the council for triage, direct assistance, advice or signposting to further support according to their needs. Included thousands of outbound calls made by council staff to vulnerable persons to triage their support needs.

**Voluntary sector engagement** – Networking and in some cases funding particular organisations to provide relief to those affected and the wider community. Supporting, engaging and promoting volunteers, community groups and potential volunteers as required. Our adopted approach is consistent with our *Donations Management Protocol* - “[...] the council must ensure that any official offer of support to those affected is well-coordinated between responding organisations whether or not those organisations have been pre-identified or brought on-board spontaneously as a result of an offer or commissioned arrangement. There may also be other organisations that wish to pursue their mission independently of the official effort and they are at liberty to do so without encumbrance from the authorities. The council will not attempt to undertake coordination of individual spontaneous volunteers from the community but encourage these individuals to affiliate themselves with existing partners within the response structure (e.g. via the British Red Cross Community Reserves initiative, CVS etc.)”

**Bridge Park Hub** – A food and household essentials warehousing and distribution network, focussed on supporting vulnerable individuals and families with essential items. Our experience of receiving, warehousing, sorting, packing and distribution during this crisis is a model for wider aid distribution and should be used to further develop the Donations Management Protocol. Following the Grenfell Tower tragedy, Humanitarian Assistance guidance was issued recommending that councils have the ability to capture the details of persons affected by any major incident. The suggestion was that, in the absence of a bespoke system, councils should use their Adult Social Care database as a method of case management. Brent has considered this undesirable and has used a proprietary software solution to capture these types of details for minor incidents in the past. For the COVID-19 incident, a

database was quickly built to precisely match the data needed during the incident. It would be useful to learn more about this process to see if this database – or another similar in-house development, might serve the wider purpose in future since it allows more seamless integration with other council systems than the current solution does.

**Housing rough sleepers** – Placement of rough sleeping population into commercial hotels based on their support needs through a combination of local and regionally arranged networks

**PPE to Social Care and schools** – A bulk ordering and onward distribution chain for PPE for the Social Care Sector and later, prior to reopening on the 1<sup>st</sup> June, to school hubs. Helped to overcome regular supply chain issues amongst providers such as stock availability, minimum purchase quantities etc.

**Step down beds for discharges** – Adapted NAIL property and commissioned care provision and agreed placement process with partners; all within a week.

**Health Protection Training** - The public health and PII teams developed training on health protection and infection control which was delivered to social care staff, early years settings and schools as well as council services.

**ASC commissioners** - Built on the provider forum to lead the wider support to care homes. Public Health played a new role in that support, and local community and primary care was developed and prioritised alongside NWL health support.

**Staff safety** - Occupational health and public health worked together on risk assessments and provision of advice for staff.

**Ongoing liaison** – Regular and frequent contact with a vast array of external stakeholders to provide information, updates, training, briefings and reassurance. Stakeholders have reported feeling well-supported by the council during the pandemic and hope to keep up the positive level of engagement and cooperation after the pandemic too. Some examples include Care Sector Provider Engagement, Member Engagement, Mental Health Services, Head Teacher Briefings and Schools Liaison to name a few.

**All Staff** - Among all the examples of good work listed above, where talented individuals and exceptional teams came together to get extraordinary things done, there were also those staff that quietly, efficiently and without fuss, got on with their regular day job of keeping services running (albeit in unusual circumstances). They are easily overlooked amidst the more exciting stories and achievements but are no less important or worthy of mention and praise.

A summary of feedback received from Directorates regarding the specific response arrangements they implemented:

### **What did we do?**

- Reviewed prioritisation of all services to ensure core/critical services continued to be delivered.
- Ensured that the unique demands that the incident presented could be resourced, often with short notice.
- Business practices shifted as many activities as possible to remote form
- All activities involving site visits and face to face contact were risk-assessed; those deemed essential continued, others moved to virtual visiting or telephone contact
- Redeployment of staff across a range of services into priority roles, either within their own service or in support of others
- Closure and/or relocation of council sites and services as required in response to lockdown
- Rapid adaptation/repurposing of a number of sites and properties in support of the response (e.g. NAIL property into a step down property, Bridge Park into a food distribution hub, Marsh Road Depot into a temporary mortuary, Willesden Sports Centre into a Mobile Testing Site, Harlesden Community Gardens into a Local Testing Site).
- Reviewed approaches to all enforcement activity (e.g. fines, debt collection etc) and placed emphasis on supporting people to access financial help linked to Covid-19.
- Secured additional emergency accommodation at very short notice to meet increase in demand from single homeless and rough sleepers.
- Public Health Advice and IPC training provided to a range of internal and external partners
- Financial support package agreed to support a range of providers
- Key council workers identified, provided letter of authority and other support e.g. PPE and car parking at the Civic.
- Parking made available to NHS and Emergency Service staff at council car parks
- Worked both at Regional and Sub-Regional level and across the WLA on a wide variety of issues, e.g. PPE, commissioning, placements etc
- Adapted and safely implemented significant legislative changes, worked with courts to continue hearings and provided a legal hub throughout.
- Changes to finance practices include; all financial approvals now paperless, compensation (and other) payments now all via BACS, continued collation and refreshing of financial impacts throughout
- Implementing the thematic leads structure with voluntary sector partners
- Set up volunteer brokerage arrange to do shopping and collect/deliver medication for vulnerable people
- Mobilised officers to advise businesses and conduct enforcement inspections/activities to ensure compliance
- Supported and mobilised partnership meetings to allow information sharing and reporting into various fora



- Maintained parks as open across the entire borough for the duration of the pandemic for people to be able to use and exercise
- Lockdown of every children's playground, MUGA and outdoor gym to keep people safe
- Conducted a communications campaign which supported the safe use of social distancing
- Early purchase of a small stock of PPE for office use before lockdown

### **What did we learn?**

- Remote forums are often better attended than the regular face-to-face sessions.
- Members and staff are very positive about promotional videos demonstrating good practice, the weekly newsletters and connecting remotely.
- It is difficult to know what data is a priority to collect at the beginning, so data collection has been refined as time has gone on, but this makes it difficult to compare and track.
- Member expectation around types and level of support can help create a longer-term dependency – more briefings for members around eligibility and promoting independence required.
- People in receipt of most services were easily supported and regular checks were easy to provide. Increased demand came from those people who had not been in receipt of services previously and this made it more difficult to ensure support was provided – more proactive prevention work would help reduce this risk.
- Joined up working with Public Health and Housing has been particularly helpful, with staff operating as a single team to support providers and managers to manage staff issues
- Insight into new processes, e.g. key safes at properties for tenants to leave their keys at end of tenancy
- When providing virtual support to clients, they may encounter difficulties around data use when using video calling if they are not on a contract that includes data
- National government and partner focus was around supporting acute hospitals. However, this was sometimes at the expense of community services.
- Every system can be automated through patience; these implementations need to be followed through to the end of each project.
- It is important to get staff on board with tech – not only in the use laptops and MS Teams, but to also learn the intricacies of the systems they use. Brent IT does not support any third party systems in Brent – it is classified as "self-service" within each department.
- As managers, we learnt how to be 'visible' while being remote.
- There is a different way to provide training in the authority, which can still be interactive.
- The importance of being financially resilient as an authority, planning is key.
- The importance of being ahead digitally

- Staff respond quicker to emails and queries when WFH, they have the ability to concentrate better without external interference of floorwalkers.
- How quickly we can get something like this up and running if the organisational and team 'will' is behind it
- How complex and time consuming the brokerage process can be.
- How much officer time it takes to set up and maintain the brokerage programme – much more than we anticipated, which created additional pressures as colleagues began to be drawn back into their day jobs
- Partners have increased expectations when working remotely. Therefore, desk time (for research, write up and email responses) should be protected and allocated time carved into the day.
- Meetings with public involvement require a higher level of resource if held remotely
- Street Lighting at BS level is sufficient – no complaints
- Staff are willing to work flexibly and outside of usual hours
- Officers ability to 'teach' themselves new legislation in a short period of time
- Confidence to delegate important functions to others and improve the speed of decision-making
- Working together and sharing intelligence and officers particularly around 'hot spots' within the Borough and during 'Days of Action' offered much better support for businesses and a greater visual impact in the area.
- Businesses appreciated the information/ guidance and printed materials such as posters on social distancing given out.
- Shielded officers restricted to work from home therefore unavailable for visits, drastically reduced the number of officers that could go out and check social distancing or serve compliance notices.
- It is helpful for the BECC to understand the information that is being passed through it. In that way questions can be anticipated and information supplemented before passing it on to central partners.

### **What could we do differently in future based on what we have learnt?**

- Examine our processes to remove bureaucracy and improve the speed of decision-making where possible
- Adapt our culture to promote increased remote-working and technological solutions to improve efficiency
- Ensure all employees have adequate equipment to accommodate new ways of working
- Make sure everyone can use the technology in advance. Explore other hardware / software.
- Agree preferred software solutions with partners (or share) to avoid partners using different or incompatible systems.
- Identify data collection needs earlier and set up appropriate mechanisms to collect them.

- Plan regular case reviews with Mental Health services rather than waiting for issues to escalate to crisis mode.
- Plan regular reviews with Community Safety on dealing with Anti-Social Behaviour and agree a joint protocol for tackling such behaviour.
- Prepare schools for potential future spikes including safeguarding roles while closed, reviews of vulnerable children data, contingencies for use of closed premises, have stock of PPE available
- Involve parents in child protection conferences sooner and strengthen the online parenting offer

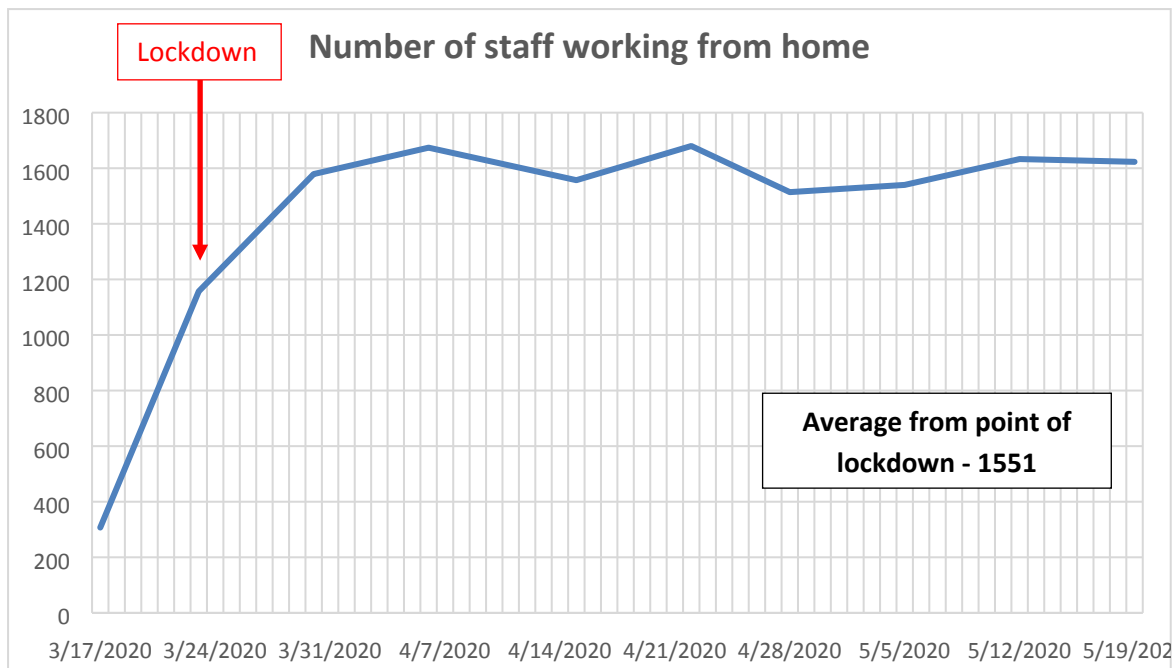
## **Business Continuity and Working from home**

As the situation developed in other affected countries, the potential for a UK lockdown and closure of public buildings, among other measures, was noted.

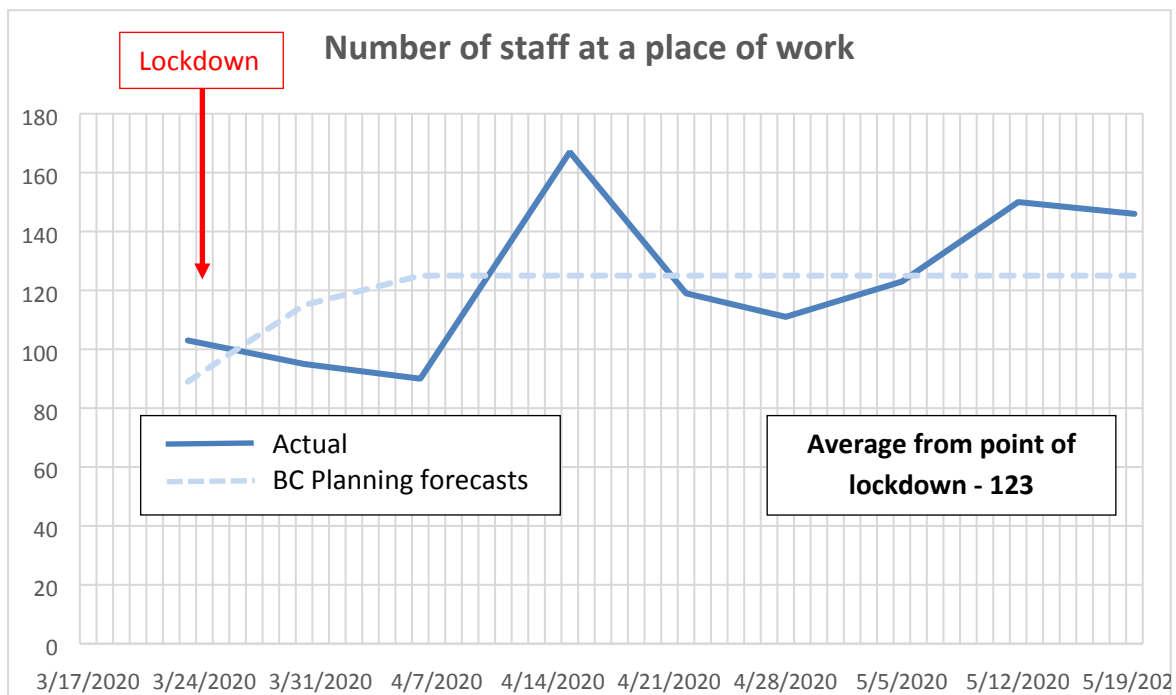
The council's primary strategy for dealing with a forced closure at one of its buildings, whatever the cause, is for a small group of key staff at the affected premises to relocate to another site and for the remainder of the staff from that site to work remotely. The latter part of the strategy is supported by a robust and reliable remote working solution, which allows network and telephony access via a corporately-issued managed laptop. Additional telephony capability is provided to some staff in the form of a corporately-issued mobile phone.

Since the roll-out of managed laptops in 2019, in order to work remotely, staff have to have their devices in their possession since they can no longer use personal devices. It was noted that government announcements were made in the evening and that should an instruction to lockdown occur on any evening in future, many staff would not have their laptop with them that evening and there would be little opportunity for them to retrieve it the following day without contravening the lockdown. On the 5/3, the instruction from the Chief Executive via all staff email was for staff to begin to take their devices home at the end of each day, instead of securing them in their lockers at work. The lockdown instruction came from the government on the evening of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March.

Figures regarding staff absence and working from home numbers were collected from all services by survey return from the 17/3. Returns were collected daily until the 8/4 and weekly thereafter. The chart below illustrates the number of staff reported as working from home over time.



The particulars of this incident meant that relocation to another site was unnecessary and the small group of key staff that would otherwise relocate, could remain at the Civic Centre whilst the others worked remotely. An additional field, “in the office”, was added to the survey return on the 24/3. The chart below illustrates the number of staff reported as being at a place of work over time.



It is interesting to note that the average actual numbers of staff attending a place of work during this incident very closely resembles the forecast requirements made during our annual Business Continuity Planning.

A summary of feedback received from Directorates regarding Business Continuity and home working:

### **What did we do?**

- Rapidly implemented home working amongst teams according to Business Continuity Plans whilst factoring in the specific needs of the incident
- Policy changes to support increased home working
- Staff training sessions and instructional videos on use of remote working technology
- Staff information on H&S, mental wellbeing and tips on effective home working shared widely
- Provision of office equipment, where needed, to support staff at home
- Accelerated roll out of Microsoft Teams to enable instant messaging, voice calls, video calls and content sharing between teams working remotely
- Regular keep in touch team meetings scheduled using technology
- Corporate messages from senior leaders via email bulletin and intranet article continued and also broadened to encompass recorded video messages and live streams (webcasts) for Q&A
- Updated BCPs in the lead up to the incident and collated an up to date Master BIA with a focus on the most likely disruption – staff absenteeism and planning for remote working

### **What did we learn?**

- Remote working in general:
  - a) “Enforced” working from home forces innovation and resourcefulness
  - b) Commuting time is wasted time, using technology effectively saves time
  - c) Our IT systems are able to support a large number of simultaneous remote log-ons
  - d) Performance notably improved in areas such as call-handling and as a result, there were fewer complaints
  - e) Staff are adaptable and can be trusted to remain engaged with their work whilst at home
  - f) Staff who are not routinely equipped to work from home and cannot report to their place of work lose productivity and may also feel isolated
  - g) Staff miss the social interaction that the workplace provides and to ensure they do not feel isolated, regular virtual team meetings are a useful substitute
- Holding meetings remotely
  - a) Remote meetings are often better attended than the regular face-to-face sessions
  - b) Frequent team meetings lead to better morale, sense of purpose and spirit of cooperation

- Doing business remotely
  - a) Many of the activities where we have previously considered face-to-face contact as an essential are not actually so and can be done as effectively at home by use of technology e.g.:
    - Wellbeing checks for social care service users and family
    - PSW staff reflection and Practice forums remotely
    - MCAs and DoLS completed utilising technology
    - Substance misuse service moved to virtual.
    - Expansion of on line sexual health service
    - Video and webcast training for multiple social care staff groups
    - Lower risk new birth “visits” done by phone.
    - Expansion of online library offer resulted in more online users and more online borrowing.
    - Virtual gallery space established
    - Online financial training with new school governors
    - Remote statutory meetings
    - Virtual member learning and development programme
    - Virtual support to our most vulnerable people
    - Remote diagnosis of housing repairs
    - Virtual viewing and lettings
    - Remote homelessness applications

Many of the above activities were supported by making processes paperless where possible

- We might have suffered from lack of imagination around the Business Continuity impacts of a pandemic disease – we planned for pressures on health and social care, staff absences and increased mortality but never considered societal impacts brought about by a pandemic (lockdown, social distancing, mandatory closure of business, PPE for general use, key workers, shielded people, mental health, extent and duration of closure etc)

### **What could we do differently in future based on what we have learnt?**

- We should adapt our practices and culture accordingly to maximise the benefits of technology, including paperless transactions where possible
- The Remote Desktop Solution (RDS) environment should be developed and incorporated into our Business Continuity Plans so that staff with no corporately-issued IT kit can use personal devices to work remotely in extreme/protracted scenarios
- To support enhanced working from home, solutions need to be found to allow printing and copying as well as sending letters etc.
- Making regular working from home part of the culture will benefit the organisation in a multitude of ways, not least by enhancing our preparedness for this type of scenario in future
- Conduct a risk assessment for staff at home
- Have a standardised approach for services to review their BCP's by a fixed cut-off date

## Communications

As mentioned previously, a dedicated sub-group was established to handle the complex and varied communications requirements of this incident. Brent used all available methods and enhanced its offer, especially around member and staff comms through intelligent use of remote technology. The communications piece comprised the following elements:

- communication and provision of health advice to the public, both National/Regional campaigns as well as local and targeted messages
- communications to members of the public known to be resident in Brent and who had subscribed to the councils mailing list
- media and press-handling
- advice to managers to review/update their service BC Plans communications
- ongoing liaison with multi-agency partners and the voluntary sector concerning issues arising or as part of a tempo of information sharing
- liaison with partner press offices

These were achieved using a combination of the following means:

- Council Website, both intranet and internet
- The Brent Magazine
- Leaflet drops and “mail shots”
- Yammer, the councils internal social media site
- Resident mailing lists
- Social media platforms
- Media liaison, including press statements and briefings
- A staffed Public Information/Help Line
- Internal Mass messaging system sending SMS texts and emails
- By telephone call and email to established key contacts

### Staff liaison

With the majority of staff working remotely, keeping in touch became ever more important. Apart from regular virtual team meetings and briefings, a number of special initiatives were implemented to support the flow of information and enhance the feeling of inclusivity and working towards a collective purpose. These included:

- Weekly videos from the Chief Executive
- Staff virtual live Q&A sessions
- A staff survey about individual experiences
- All staff email briefings
- Enhanced Yammer activity with key briefings shared, working from home tips, wellbeing and mental health advice, signposting the support available etc.

### Member liaison

Keeping members informed and sharing key messages was a vital piece of work. The business as usual means of doing this continued throughout and a number of special arrangements were implemented, including:

- All member in-person briefings commenced early and continued virtually after lockdown
- Special members briefing bulletins
- Webcasts from Senior Management with live Q&A for members

Members were extremely cooperative and worked well with officers in keeping the focus of the response on COVID-19 and other, less-urgent business to a minimum. The member Emergency Awareness training, hosted in February 2020, meant that the understanding of roles, structure and principles of emergency management were still fresh and this session should be held annually to enhance and build on member awareness and understanding. Member feedback has been overwhelmingly positive and appreciative of not only the huge efforts made during response, but also the timely and efficient way they were kept informed and briefed on the rapidly changing situation

A summary of feedback received from Directorates regarding the Communications theme:

### **What did we do?**

- Informed our various audiences about the actions they can take to minimise the spread of Coronavirus
- Worked with service departments to provide timely updates to both internal and external audiences of significant changes to service delivery
- Encouraged a positive community spirit and community cohesion while countering misinformation.
- Structured approach to meetings and decision-making – worked well from Gold/DMT's/SMG
- Regular DMT's, team meetings and 1-2-1's continued within directorates using technology
- Weekly webcasts and daily calls to Social Care providers to communicate and offer support throughout this period – excellent feedback from this group
- Engagement from the Housing Service using technology was accepted and appreciated by residents and in some cases increased participation
- Virtual multi-agency groups worked well e.g. Homelessness Covid-19 working group and voluntary sector partners
- Set up Whatsapp Groups amongst teams and took care to establish one purely for social interaction (staff room) keeping another for work matters
- Being straightforward and realistic with voluntary sector partners and community groups about what could and could not be achieved

### **What did we learn?**

- Sometimes less is more. Our audiences are busy people and videos, infographics and shorter punchy news items proved popular and received high engagement rates.
- Staff appreciate regular contact and not always necessarily about work matters



- Providers feel more engaged and part of the team when they are regularly involved and kept informed
- Video calling is particularly effective at increasing participation during meetings
- Choosing a time to connect and focussing our efforts on staying connected is a good use of time and the service feels more joined up as a result
- We don't need to come into the office to connect with each other
- We can do many things, like interviews, assessments and repairs diagnosis just as effectively remotely
- Physical separation does not mean less connection as a team but a system of regular contact must be put in place
- Staff who felt anxious were reassured by regular communication and it is important to counter fake-news, rumour and speculation
- Having no choice but to communicate remotely has been as, if not more, effective at engaging staff in activities
- Staff value regular and personal communication
- You can host virtual "coffee breaks" as a time to de-stress and maintain team spirit and morale

#### **What could we do differently in future based on what we have learnt?**

- Expand the approach to provider communication (subject to capacity)
- Ensure everyone is set up to work remotely or have in place a process to rapidly scale up and equip this capability
- Agree a preferred software solution amongst multi-agency partners so we are all using the same platform to communicate
- Trial and incorporate video calling into our BC Plans
- Move to minimal office cover now that we know how well remote comms work
- Look at where we can use software solutions to enable remote learning/training, even "live hosted" training
- Focus the Corporate Comms Team on a smaller number of core campaigns to ensure we are not spread too thinly and can offer the necessary strategic support during an incident
- Use National campaign material instead of designing our own from scratch – unless a local approach is required
- Review our database of businesses, consider capturing email addresses and type of business so that more targeted messaging could occur to each business sector
- Embed digital consultation as a more frequent mechanism

## **Summary**

This is the largest and most significant peace-time incident to affect the modern world. It has required a significant response from every nation and every facet of society and the effects will persist for many years to come.

This incident presented a double-impact to the council in that it caused a significant and sustained emergency in our community to which we had to respond and also a substantial internal Business Continuity disruption to our premises, staff and services. It is a testament to each individual staff member and to the organisation collectively, that these challenges were overcome in a coordinated, cooperative and timely way.

Brent Council has planned, trained and exercised for major incidents as well as having responded to numerous lesser emergencies which have contributed to our learning and provided valuable experience which has been brought to bear during this pandemic. As with any incident, there are lessons learned that provide us with a unique opportunity to change, adapt, review and improve so that we are better prepared and more resilient as an organisation in future.