

Communities, Environment and Highways Select Committee



Thursday 18 June 2020

Overview of the Response to COVID-19 from the Environment Transport and Infrastructure Directorate

Purpose of report:

To provide the Committee with an update and overview of the activity of the Environment Transport and Infrastructure (ETI) Directorate in providing services over the period of the COVID 19 pandemic, including the latest efforts to recover services to a new normal.

Introduction:

1. Since early March, the Environment Transport and Infrastructure (ETI) Directorate has been actively managing its services' response to the COVID 19 pandemic alongside and as part of the Council-wide strategy and county-wide response effort. This report provides a brief overview of this response, and an update in respect of the phased return to a new normal for ETI's services.

Details:

Response phase

2. Since early March 2020, the ETI Directorate, along with the wider Council, has been responding to the unprecedented challenge of COVID 19. The pandemic and the associated lockdown created a need to fundamentally review and modify a range of services, and more fundamentally, the way of working for all teams. The ETI Directorate Leadership Team (DLT) started meeting on a bi-weekly basis as an incident management team to enable a coordinated approach to the Directorate's response and recovery efforts.
3. With the introduction of lockdown on 23 March, the Directorate's strategy was to ensure the continued delivery of the most critical services, whilst modifying the delivery of other services to ensure that as much of the Directorate's outcomes continued to be progressed, both in respect of business as usual activity but also the Directorate's ambitious transformation programme. As such, much of the Directorate's activity has continued in some way shape or form over the lockdown period, although some

4. By 23 March, critical services were reviewed and made safe for staff continuing to work on the front line, so to speak, and in roles that required attendance either on site or at an office setting. These critical services included certain highways functions, particularly maintenance of the road network focusing on addressing safety critical works; waste; strategic transport, including the work we do to commission certain bus routes; and certain other safety critical services, such as the continued management of the county's countryside sites and rights of way.
5. In respect of bus operators in particular, it is worth noting the particularly challenging climate in which the industry and our contractors in particular have been operating. From even before the official lockdown, bus services have suffered a significant decrease in patronage, and therefore passenger fare revenue. The Council acted swiftly to work with operators to review and reduce early on to reduce routes to the most critical, ensuring that routes serving key workers were maintained as much as possible. In addition, SCC took a decision relatively quickly that for the period of disruption, the county would continue to pay for services contracted regardless of the reduction in service or disruption that occurred. This assurance was provided in advance of later Government assurances to the industry.
6. Other ETI services have been maintained but have moved into largely virtual working. This includes the work that our planning team have done to continue to review and prepare for planning committee, now scheduled as a virtual planning committee for July, and the move to virtual planning enforcement activity where possible.
7. Some teams were able to carry on largely as normal, although impacts have still been felt across the Directorate. For instance, our environment commissioning team continued with the development of and progression through Cabinet of the Climate Change Strategy, which was approved in late April.
8. However, inevitably not all services were maintainable given the customer-facing or interactive nature of some of these services. Such services were ceased in line with the Government's social distancing guidelines over the period of lockdown. Community Recycling Centres (CRCs) were closed at the start of lockdown on the basis that a trip to a CRC was not considered an essential journey in line with Government guidance. Countryside car parks were closed to mitigate against the gathering of groups of people on sites, although the Council's countryside sites were kept open throughout lockdown.
9. Planned highways works were stopped in order for the service to put in place a robust risk assessment approach to providing assurance over the social distancing practices to be employed on such sites. As a result, there was little material impact on the delivery of planned highways works. As an example of the volume of highways works delivered in May, the following were delivered by the county's highways maintenance contractor, Kier:
 - 296 A&E's attended
 - 3266 safety defects completed, of which 2651 were potholes
 - 14641 gullies cleaned and 36 gullies rebuilt
 - 1782 jet patching jobs completed

- 28364m² of carriageway resurfaced
 - 16 total footway reconstruction jobs completed or underway
 - 10,211m² of tarmac footway renewed
 - 4,400m of kerbing renewed
 - 12 surface treatment schemes completed, 1,627m²
10. Some other services were stopped because they could not be safely delivered in the context of social distancing, such as cycle training.
11. Whilst the capital programme for the Directorate has not been significantly impacted, there will be inevitably some delays to certain schemes that were at a critical stage of delivery. These impacts are being monitored and are being mitigated where possible.
12. Where teams or contractors were unable to carry out their normal day to day activity over lockdown, the Directorate identified a pool of potential redeployees that were available, and in some cases deployed, to support the front-line response efforts and/or the Local Resilience Forum in coordinating that response. In May, c. 50% of council staff redeployed to the COVID response were provided by ETI – some of which are still redeployed to continue to support the ongoing response. These staff have undertaken a significant range of activity, including supporting the deployment of personal protective equipment (PPE), from the logistics of collecting and delivering much needed PPE, to sourcing the production of and donation of materials to support the front-line effort.
13. Further, the Council supported district and borough collection services through the redeployment of Suez staff that otherwise would have been working in our CRCs to support a couple of our districts' services. This helped to ensure that certain critical kerbside collections in these areas were maintained and/or restarted.

Phased return to normal

14. Even in advance of the Government's announcement of the initial easing of lockdown on 11 May 2020, the Directorate had been planning for the phased return to normal of its services.
15. Whilst most services and teams continue to work from home and virtually by default, a number of teams and contractors have returned to the front line and to sites at various points since April.
16. Highlights of this return to normal, which is still very much under way, are highlighted below:
- From mid-April, highways contractors and the associated SCC staff have been deployed back onto planned highways works, based on the risk assessments that the team have developed to provide assurance as to the social distancing practices to be employed on sites
 - From 11 May, a majority of our CRCs (10 of our 15 centres) have been reopened to the public. The initial phase of this reopening saw the CRCs opening to black

bag and green waste to enable a large pent-up demand to be handled quickly in the initial opening stage, which received a number of positive reactions from members and the public. A considerable amount of planning and traffic management was deployed to ensure the smooth and safe reopening of the Centres. The second phase from 1 June has seen a return to accepting all materials at these 10 sites, which has seen considerably longer queues, but again traffic management is in place and is ensuring that as much as possible, expectations of customers are managed, and site staff are ensuring as efficient a throughput of vehicles as possible

- From 13 May, the countryside car parks were reopened, in line with Government guidance easing the lockdown to enable people to travel to leisure activities.
- From mid-May planning enforcement visits are being reintroduced, and site visits for various other teams are being undertaken with risk assessments on a case by case basis.

17. In addition, a number of services are working to accelerate certain activities and/or develop innovative new approaches to how we deliver services in the return to a new normal. For instance, highways teams are working across the county to deploy “pop-up” active travel measures – such as the widening of pavements to enable social distancing – in town centres and the like. The environment commissioning team are identifying opportunities for capitalising on the new practices that have been developed by residents as a result of the lockdown, such as an increased working from home and/or reduction in car use more generally.

18. However, whilst the Directorate has managed a balanced approach to the response and return to normal, there remain some key risks to the recovery of some of our services. For example, the Government social distancing guidelines and customer reticence around the return to public transport will continue to present a real risk to both the bus and rail industry in the short to medium term, if not longer term.

19. Further, delivering services in the context of social distancing has required greater cost for the Directorate – some of which will be a one-off cost of recovery, but some of which could be an ongoing cost of service for the period in which social distancing continues to apply – the traffic management associated with our CRCs being a case in point.

20. This financial reality of recovery presents a particular challenge to the ETI Directorate at a time it is being reviewed and there is a need to build up capacity in some teams to be able to deliver on the outcomes to which the Directorate is committed. To this end, ETI will be developing a five-year budget strategy to enable its leadership and Cabinet Members consider how to continue to support the development of the Directorate’s capacity to deliver against the significant place ambitions that have been set by the Council.

Conclusions:

21. Leading up to and since the start of the lockdown implemented to respond to COVID-19, the ETI Directorate has focused on maintaining critical services, whilst continuing to

progress as much of its business as usual and transformational activities as possible in different ways, including implementing new ways of working. In addition, it has provided support to the main COVID response effort through a redeployment of some staff where possible – redeployments that in some cases will continue where necessary. Looking to the future, the critical priority for the Directorate will be to ensure that services are restored to a new, safer and more resilient normal.

Recommendations:

The Committee are invited to consider and ask questions of the Cabinet Members and the Executive Director in respect of ETI's delivery of services for the period of the pandemic. The outcome of the discussion will help the Directorate to refine its strategy for the continued phased return to normal over coming months.

It is recommended that:

- a. The Committee discuss and make comments on the report
- b. The Committee note the progress of the Directorate in responding to the pandemic

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