

WATFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL: A DISTRICT REPOSE TO COVID-19

May 2020

Across the country, districts councils have been asked to step up and deliver in a way that no one could have anticipated before COVID-19 hit the country in March 2020. The challenges and calls to action have tested council chief executives and their teams to the full and have demanded new ways of working that have had to adapt and respond as the pandemic develops.

For Watford Borough Council, this meant recognising at an early stage that the way the organisation, and particularly its leadership, responded would be the determining factor for not just effective management of the crisis but also for successfully steering staff, members and the borough through the recovery journey. For Watford's, Managing Director, Donna Nolan, the urgency of the COVID-19 response was a particular challenge – given that she was less than a month in post and still building relationships at Watford and her understanding of the complexity of local networks, partners and ways of working.

Like many organisations, the council's did an early review of its business continuity plans. Whilst a good starting point, it quickly became clear that these were not geared to manage a pandemic on a scale not experienced for a century. A Senior Leadership Team (SLT) Awayday, quickly turned from strategic planning for the next 10 years, to developing a new way of operating for the council. There was no blueprint for how to do this but the collective approach helped build shared understanding of what was needed and buy-in for how the council would deliver.

What became immediately clear, was that the virus presented not just a challenge for Watford BC but an opportunity. For Watford BC, this meant continuing to be ambitious for the town and stepping up to provide the leadership needed for effectively responding to the pressing needs of its communities and stakeholders.

So an early decision taken by the Elected Mayor, supported by his Cabinet and the Managing Director and SLT, was to reset the council's role and relationships, recognising the crisis required:

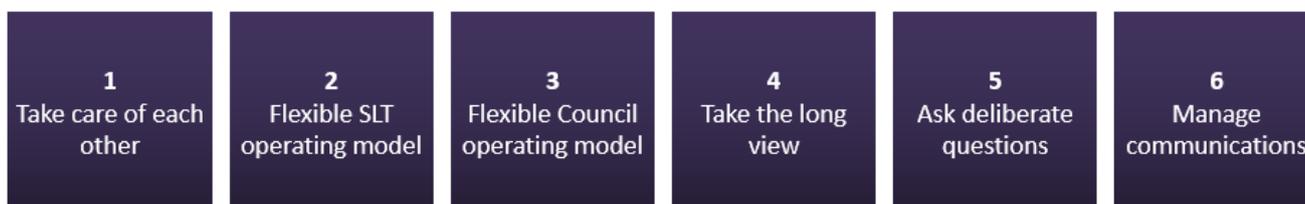
- Early recognition of the significant changes to come and willingness to embrace new ways of working
- Quicker and shorter decision-making lines
- Greater flexibility and adaptability – there are very few certainties to fall back on
- Focus on those whose contribution was vital both internally and externally
- Recognition that new teams would emerge (not just within the council)
- Allowing staff to flourish – previous hierarchies might not work and new organisational 'stars' might emerge
- Discipline in terms of recording decisions, actions and areas where any future audit would be looking for evidence of why things were done
- Business as usual needed managing as well – and ensuring those involved in keeping the business running were just as involved
- Communications needed to be regular, informative and two-way

By the time, the government directed homeworking as far as possible, the council had its initial COVID-19 response plan in place. Being ahead of the curve was invaluable as it gave assurance to the Mayor, members, staff and partners that the council could cope with what was to come and when, the following week, the country went into lockdown, the organisation was already well placed, not only to respond to the immediate needs of the emergency, but also to explore where it could go above and beyond for its communities.

Getting the foundations right

Watford BC's early clarity on its COVID-19 response has been critical. The council understood that agreeing the principles on which it would operate through the crisis, and as it emerged into recovery, would allow it the speed and flexibility needed to quickly recognise key issues for the organisation and the borough, identify how to manage them and test any change or decisions required.

Developing core, underlying principles



Galvanising the council to manage effectively and flexibly

Like all organisations, Watford BC has a well-defined leadership and management model based on a structure of group heads and heads of service, linking into the Elected Mayor, Cabinet and councillors. This framework, whilst effective in normal times, was not the right one for leading and managing the COVID-19 emergency.

A new governance for Watford BC was quickly established by the Managing Director to meet the immediate needs of the organisation, particularly for clear decision-making and political engagement. The council organised itself into 'cells', each with an appointed lead and team, which could focus on the areas of work critical to the council's response.

Everything, beyond business as usual, is referred through these cells. Heads of Service are asked to do a daily situation report to highlight any arising issues within their areas and all requests for service changes are documented and considered by the silver or tactical team. The council also quickly set up a means for capturing staffing through the period so that there was an up to date database of who was available to work and who could be redeployed if needed (and they were) and a COVID-19 spending tracker so there was a clear audit trail of money going out, coming in and also potential loss of income through the period.

Critical to the governance is the daily briefings between the Mayor and Managing Director that ensure the democratic link is upheld and to speed up decision-making where needed.

Mobilising through cells

A key strength of the council's approach, is how effectively it can flex. As the pandemic wave reached Watford (and for a variety of factors, Watford is a district that has been hit hard in terms of cases and deaths), with a hospital, two cemeteries and as part of a consortium that oversees the local cremation service at West Herts Crematorium, death management emerged as a pressing issue. A cell was quickly mobilised, led by the Head of Community Protection who also provided district input at a county level. This quick response prevented the cemetery service and the crematorium service becoming overwhelmed, ensured additional council staff were redeployed and that Watford could step up to provide additional mortuary space for our hospital. The flexibility also meant, the council could

link into other cells including a bereavement cell that brought together the town's faith leaders, bereavement and mental health agencies so that for anyone going through loss in Watford there was wrap around support and guidance.

Getting to the heart of local communities

The council's public health cell is an outstanding example of how a district can make a real difference where it matters the most. Watford's environmental health team opted not to work from home but rather to work frontline in the town to provide the professional advice businesses, particularly shops, needed to open safely. As a diverse town, Watford has a high number of small, locally owned shops and take-aways. These struggled with social distancing, messages for staff and customers and were, at times, at a loss on how to manage. Face to face visits have offered them the support they needed, whilst ensuring safety risks are minimised. Practical help is being provided in terms of special COVID-19 information packs, premises signs, social distancing stickers for pavements and queuing signs. These have been developed to be rolled out across Watford and so people can immediately recognise the messaging and see a 'one town' response, which will support the behaviour change we know we need to keep people safe and limit the spread of the virus.

As high streets, and other retail areas, prepare for a phased re-opening, this work means Watford is ahead – with an approach ready to roll out to the wider business community. This has been incorporated into the town's 'Business Re-opening' cell, set up in advance of government announcements so Watford and partners were ready for the easing of lockdown. District councils are well-placed to bring together the organisations with an interest in a safe, phased return to a new normal. Watford's cell is led by the Elected Mayor and incorporates the town's regional shopping centre (intu), Watford BID, the county council, the chamber of commerce, the police, the town's market and taxi trade – everyone who needs to be round the table for a successful re-opening that combines the desire to reinvigorate the local economy with the ongoing need to keep people safe and healthy.

Delivering help where it is needed

As the pandemic hit, there was a tremendous outpouring from people keen to volunteer and offer support and a subsequent amount of activity amongst relevant agencies in Watford, which was at risk of overlapping and not identifying everyone who needed extra help. The council set up a volunteering cell, which has coordinated volunteers and those asking for support through the council's 'Watford Helps' initiative. This is led by the Elected Mayor and brings together the charities and community groups leading the volunteer effort in the town. This includes the foodbank, Salvation Army, faith groups, charities and residents' groups and has resulted in new partnerships forming and a collective effort to make sure those most in need get help. Behind the scenes, the council team is actively contacting anyone identified as potentially at risk through lockdown, using its data and intelligence and that of partners, redeploying customer service staff to provide this vital link to potentially vulnerable residents.

Early on, it became clear that the pandemic posed a real threat to Watford's previously thriving voluntary and community sector, with demand increasing for many at a time when income is under pressure due to the restrictions on fund raising activities. The Elected Mayor has, through Watford Helps, championed a covid appeal – with a target to raise £250k initially. The council, working with our local CVS, is allocating funds to help charities manage and to secure their long-term future as part of the important fabric of the Watford community. The council's communications team has used it

skills to develop a dedicated Watford Helps website in-house as a basis for a wider marketing campaign: www.watfordcovidappeal.org

Bringing out the best in our town in a time of adversity

The COVID-19 lockdown presented immediate challenges for arts and entertainment venues and providers and, with no clear sign of when restrictions will be lifted, those in Watford faced months of inactivity, potentially impacting on their longer term success and viability.

The council recognised the potential of mobilising this community, with its high levels of creativity, organisational skills and experience of bringing people together to support the town and its residents through the COVID-19 crisis. Just as importantly, the council understood culture would be a positive force in the town, rebuilding its confidence, enthusiasm and sense of community spirit once the country looks to recovery. Within a week of the closure of venues, #WatfordTogether – bringing out the best in our town in a time of adversity - had been created. Whilst the Mayor and council are providing the initial direction and support, #WatfordTogether it is being driven by the town's creative, cultural and heritage community who have grasped the challenge to make a contribution and to utilise their skills to boost residents physical and mental health and wellbeing when they need it most. Through this group, plans are also underway for a Watford commemoration event, providing local people with an opportunity to remember and reflect as well as a chance to look forward and rebuild. Again, the council's communications team has risen to the challenge and developed a website to capture the wide variety of activity available including a weekly quiz hosted by the Mayor, a book club, photo competition - www.watfordtogether.co.uk/

Recognising staff as the engine for delivery

Staff have been the key to Watford's COVID-19 journey, called on to rise to the challenge of what being a public servant really means whilst disconnected from their usual working environment and teams, facing both professional and personal challenges. Watford's Managing Director instigated regular 'In touch' update, blending personal reflections with work related messaging. Both staff and councillors received regular bulletins from the Managing Director and the Mayor and, as part of preparing staff for the new normal, a comprehensive online survey was carried out, seeking their views on their perspective on the future direction for the council and ways of working. The Managing Director also led an online meeting of the staff ambassador group (comprising over 20 members of staff), working with them to draw out the important lessons from the COVID-19 and building understanding and consensus for the future direction of the council.

Donna Nolan, Managing Director comments: "The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the pivotal role district and borough councils play in leading and coordinating their areas at a time of emergency. Our strength comes from working alongside and understanding our communities as well as our ability to mobilise quickly and adapt to fast changing situations."

For Watford, a borough with the motto 'to go boldly' the pandemic has not been a time for the council to retrench or be less ambitious. With a refocused organisation, a renewed structure and fast and effective decision making, we have successfully managed both our responsibilities around key areas such as rough sleepers, business grants, cemeteries and waste collections with stepping up into areas that signalled we were standing alongside our communities. As we emerge into recovery, we recognise the council's leadership will continue to be vital as we plan for our economic revival and success in a post-Covid world."