

Meeting date: 13 January 2022

Report to: Cabinet

Subject/report title: Summary of Covid-19 Debrief Reports

Report from: Director of Public Health

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Wards affected:

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Public/private report: Public

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this short report is to collate & summarise the pertinent learning & recommendations from the recently released Covid-19 debrief reports, from Solihull MBC and the Warwickshire & West Midlands Local Resilience Forums.
- 1.2 This report covers the emergency response systems and processes at local and regional level during the first phases of the pandemic. The forthcoming Director of Public Health Annual Report will summarise the local impact and response in more detail.

2. Background & Scope

- 2.1 The Warwickshire LRF & West Midlands Conurbation LRF Covid-19 Debrief Report was released in October 2021
- 2.2 Local Resilience Forums bring together emergency responders and supporting agencies within a police force area to jointly prepare for major incidents. In February 2020 the two Local Resilience Forums for Warwickshire and the West Midlands agreed to respond collaboratively to the evolving coronavirus pandemic.

- 2.3 A joint Warwickshire & West Midlands command structure was established in February 2020 and ran until August 2021
- 2.4 As the initial joint response came to a close the two LRFs commissioned an impartial debrief report which was conducted by Coventry University as an independent debriefer and delivered by professionals within their Emergency Planning School.
- 2.5 The debrief process was completed in June 2021 and captured feedback from all twelve response groups & sub-groups via interviews, focus groups and online surveys.
- 2.6 The report focusses on the period between January 2020 and May 2021 and outlines the key learning and recommendations in relation to multi-agency preparedness and response within the West Midlands & Warwickshire sub-region
- 2.7 The Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council Covid-19 Debrief Report was also released in October 2021
- 2.8 Solihull Council is a category one responder under the *Civil Contingencies Act 2004* and an active member of the West Midlands Local Resilience Forum
- 2.9 The Solihull MBC Covid-19 debrief report was completed in June 2021 with support from impartial emergency planners from Coventry. The focus of the report is on the councils' emergency plans, business continuity plans and its emergency response structure & activities.
- 2.10 The report makes a number of recommendations based on the headline learning from the council's response to Covid-19, which included but is not limited to:
 - 2.10.1 Providing support to local communities, especially those who were clinically extremely vulnerable.
 - 2.10.2 Hosting a regional temporary mortuary facility to ensure the dignity of the deceased was maintained when normal mortuary and bereavement services became overwhelmed
 - 2.10.3 Managing logistics of central government PPE deliveries and onward distribution to local health & care professional
 - 2.10.4 Owning Local Outbreak Management responsibilities including local Covid-19 testing and contact tracing activities
 - 2.10.5 Responding to concurrent and compounding emergency incidents, including Brexit, severe weather, evacuations and repatriation flights into Birmingham Airport
 - 2.10.6 Officers from Solihull Council played a significant role in the multi-agency emergency response to Covid-19

3. Decision(s) recommended

3.1 None – this report is for awareness

4. Matters for Consideration

4.1 None

5. What options have been considered and what is the evidence telling us about them?

5.1 The report draws from internal and multi-agency learning from both SMBC's and the wider region's response to Covid-19

5.2 Headline Learning

5.3 The Warwickshire & West Midlands debrief report recognised 5 areas of good practice:

5.3.1 Strong and positive partnership working: Many areas of good or leading practice were identified with the overwhelming positive being one of positive, strong, partnership working. The joint partnership worked effectively with a good structure and process to ensure its operation was facilitated effectively. Early activation of the Command-and-Control groups aided a more effective response, and the various pandemic exercises were also credited in aiding the initial response.

5.3.2 Commitment and engagement: Representation and engagement from most agencies have been strong throughout the response, with high levels of professionalism, flexibility and a willingness to help and support, with the spirit of getting things done ever present. Working groups, both new and existing stood up quickly and adopted these same joint working principals and attitudes. Levels of support and mutual aid have been high, and support from colleagues has been invaluable, not only in response but in trying to maintain a positive outlook on a personal level for many.

5.3.3 Mutual aid and shared financing: The decision making process over the financial aspects of the response. A decision framework based on recent good practice would support less experienced leads in future events.

5.3.4 Virtual meetings: The use of Microsoft Team was recognised to be effective. A short guidance for chairs and members based on good practice developed over the last year.

5.3.5 Debriefing and the benefits of detailed review: For example, the debrief report provided by the PPE, quarantine and communication groups contained an excellent level of detail and reflective analysis, the LRF might consider using this as an exemplar in its debriefing training.

5.4 The report also highlighted a number of challenges, including:

- 5.4.1 The communication, information and guidance from central government often came with little or no notice and was required to be implemented at pace, often with a lack of guidance on how the policy should be enforced locally. The response was also impacted by delays accessing national data & modelling regarding epidemiology and mortality, as well as difficulties interpreting these as the science emerged.
- 5.4.2 The nature of the emergency meant that this was a top-down approach to response, as opposed to the more usual bottom-up approach which agencies are used to. Formal escalation routes to national level took some time to operationalise robustly although informal channels were used frequently to raise issues.
- 5.4.3 The longevity of the response challenged responders in a way not seen before and required a degree of dynamism. This also extended to the need for new (and previously unplanned for) working groups to be established, such as; shielding, managed quarantine, testing etc. Business as usual had to be paused intermittently to allow responders to establish groups and a strong battle rhythm, both of which were continually adjusted as required throughout the response.
- 5.4.4 Staff all worked incredibly hard and agencies put in place plans to support staff well-being but work levels continued at an unsustainable level for long period of time with insufficient capacity to release staff and support work-life balance and recovery. Additional staff capacity was brought on stream but needed training to take on new roles which in itself created additional pressures.

5.5 The Solihull MBC debrief report highlighted learning along the following themes:

Internal:

- 5.5.1 Many noted that the SMBC Major Emergency Plan and structures were quickly stood up and were easily adapted to respond to the needs created by the pandemic
- 5.5.2 Regular training, specifically Exercise Black Swan which took place in January 2020, was highlighted as being timely, helping prepare and giving confidence to colleagues to deal with a major incident.
- 5.5.3 It was expressed that 'every part of our business stepped up, whilst also continuing to keep pressing on delivering a number of key objectives'.
- 5.5.4 Meeting frequency and organisation were highlighted as positives with clear Terms of Reference and action logs. Frequency of meetings was easily adapted to suit the demand including taking place on weekends.
- 5.5.5 The negative impacts on staff working long hours for a prolonged period were significant and compounded by working from home which allowed for little separation between home and work stress.
- 5.5.6 Services had to revise their business as usual approach whilst still meeting all statutory duties. This was possible due to the commitment and willingness of staff to work differently.

Working with external partners

- 5.5.7 The strength of collaborative working was noted in relation to both existing and new relationships. Existing relationships had been fostered through previous close working and training & exercising within the Local Resilience Forum
- 5.5.8 The role of the voluntary sector and the community was invaluable throughout the response but in particular during the shielding operation and the way they were able to mobilise quickly to support vulnerable residents.
- 5.5.9 The scale of illness, death & staff sickness/isolation within Care Homes was significant. However, the local response scaled-up rapidly and was sustained. SMBC's Care Provider Failure Protocol worked well when providers decided to close or where SMBC needed to intervene because of infection. This protocol was created and tested pre Covid19, and was therefore familiar to all who needed to use with it
- 5.5.10 Joint working with Public Health England at regional level was important to providing specialist support for complex outbreaks.
- 5.5.11 It took time to agree localisation of testing and contact tracing with national Test and Trace and this limited the ability to put in place flexible and holistic support to help people successfully self-isolate. This meant that locally capacity, capability and knowledge was not deployed as rapidly as it could have been.

5.5 Communications & Data

- 5.5.1 Internal communication between SMBCs response cells was good. Initially SMBC did not have Microsoft Teams but ICT were able to get this in place quickly which aided communication.
- 5.5.2 Regular external communications were established between SMBC and; schools, care homes, partners, staff & volunteers. This necessitated a major ramping up of communications capability which was supported through additional national funding.
- 5.5.3 Communication between the council and the community was crucial and Community Champions were critical in facilitating this. A good relationship was built and maintained with Champions through clear objectives, honesty and transparency.
- 5.5.4 Data processing and analysis has been key to SMBC's local outbreak management and helped to ensure evidence-based solutions could be implemented with near-real time surveillance being put in place to drive the local response.

6. Key Recommendations

- 6.1 Common Themes. Debrief reports made recommendation along the following themes:
 - 6.1.1 In line with good practice, relevant emergency plans & business continuity plans should be reviewed to capture the learning from this response – this refers to both internal SMBC plans and also multi-agency plans held by the Local Resilience Forum.

- 6.1.2 Both reports recognised the strain that officers were placed under due to the longevity of the response and the subsequent staff fatigue. As a result it would be beneficial to incorporate wellbeing considerations for responding officers into emergency plans.
- 6.1.3 Once reviewed the updated plans should be communicated to relevant staff and *trained & exercised* through the usual internal and multi-agency channels.
- 6.1.4 Although outside of the scope of the debriefs, Recovery Plans should be reviewed to ensure activities proactively link with local & regional policy on community development, regeneration, safety, sustainability and future risk mitigation. Plans should also identify partners and maintain or develop active working relationships with the relevant leads for these policy objectives
- 6.1.5 Continue to utilise technology such as video conferencing and explore how it could be further used to aide both emergency planning and response activity
- 6.1.6 Continue to strengthen relationships with the voluntary sector and make considerations for their involvement within internal (SMBC) and multi-agency (LRF) emergency responses
- 6.1.7 Explore methods for analysing the impact of public communications and their effect on behavioural change within communities
- 6.2 Warwickshire & West Midlands LRFs - Specific recommendations relevant to the Local Resilience Forum included:
 - 6.2.1 Agree and implement a clear communications link with central government to relay local best practice across Warwickshire & the West Midlands to inform government guidance and policy.
 - 6.2.2 The national resilience review should consider funding arrangements for LRFs with a view to putting these on a more sustainable footing
- 6.3 Next steps
 - 6.3.1 Internal recommendations for Solihull MBC will be captured, turned into actions and assigned to the Council's Tactical Team to address as part of their business as usual meetings, with regular updates reported back to the Corporate Leadership Team
 - 6.3.2 As outlined in the recommendations, Solihull MBC will review its resilience planning activity & emergency response capabilities and explore opportunities to strengthen the resilience of the wider region by building on both the good working relationships established during Covid and the long-standing, well-established relationship between Coventry, Solihull & Warwickshire.
 - 6.3.3 Multi-agency recommendations will be put to both Local Resilience Forums and partners will decide on the priority of their delivery. Solihull will continue to play a leading role within the West Midlands LRF and will work with partners both locally and regionally, where necessary to ensure that we emerge from Covid-19 as a more resilient council and a stronger multi-agency preparedness system

7. Implications and Considerations

7.1 State how the proposals in this report contribute to the priorities in the Council Plan:

Priority:	Contribution:
Economy: 1. Revitalising our towns and local centres. 2. Deliver UK Central (UKC) and maximise the opportunities of HS2. 3. Increase the supply, quality and energy efficiency of housing, especially affordable and social housing.	N/A
Environment: 4. Enhance Solihull's natural and physical environment. 5. Improve Solihull's air quality. 6. Reduce Solihull's net carbon emissions.	N/A
People and Communities: 7. Take action to improve life chances and health outcomes in our most disadvantaged communities. 8. Enable communities to thrive. 9. Sustainable, quality care and support for adults & children with complex needs.	N/A
10. Promote employee wellbeing	N/A

7.2 Consultation and Scrutiny:

7.2.1 N/A

7.3 Financial implications:

7.3.1 N/A

7.4 Legal implications:

7.4.1 N/A

7.5 Risk implications:

7.5.1 N/A

7.6 Equality implications:

7.6.1 N/A

7.7 Linkages to our work with the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), the Local Enterprise Partnership or the Birmingham & Solihull Integrated Care System (ICS):

7.7.1 N/A

8. List of appendices referred to

8.1 N/A

9. Background papers used to compile this report

9.1 Solihull MBC Covid-19 Debrief Report – October 2021

9.2 Warwickshire LRF & West Midlands LRF Covid-19 Debrief Report – October 2021

10. List of other relevant documents

10.1 The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 & Supporting Guidance