



Council – 23 April 2020

Agenda Item CC2097/20

Coronavirus – Setting a Strategic Direction for the Council

Introduction

The current spending plans for the council as set out in its budget are based on steady state, business as usual principles. We offer grants to worthy projects, facilitate events by sponsoring them, deliver some events and services to residents directly and run a local authority. Unusually and due, as we understand it, to the convergence of the timing of the council's creation and the attitude of the principal authority, we are not enabled to use some of the powers that normally fall to parish councils.

It may be appropriate to rethink these principles in the context of the coronavirus.

Discussion

The Macro View

The impact of the novel coronavirus and the resulting illness, CoViD 19, will not be limited to the immediate lockdown or the weeks and months that follow, even after a vaccine is found, the success of which endeavour is by no means guaranteed and unlikely to be available until the second half of 2021. The impacts include, at least, the list below.

Economic

The size of central government intervention, the virtual nationalisation of the economy, the likely levels of unemployment and the debt amassed to pay for it all will have consequences for the current and probably the next generation. While economists can model recovery from previous epidemics in terms of a V shape (a sharp fall in economic metrics followed by a sharp rise), this particular virus is having a deeper effect and the resultant recovery may look more like a U, which implies that the return to normal for the economy will be protracted.

Medical

The most seriously ill victims of the virus, if they recover from the treatments given in intensive care, are likely, it is understood, to suffer lasting damage to the respiratory and to the neurological systems. Those individuals are likely to have long-term care needs.

Psychological

Some individuals cope better with self-isolation than others. Before the restrictions on everyday activity, there were 1.4 million lonely people in the UK¹. It is reasonable to believe that number will have increased and the feelings of loneliness will have increased.

General Health

An unintended consequence of the restrictions put in place to 'protect the NHS' is an overall reduction in hospital admissions and treatments of 'normal' conditions, including emergencies and cancer treatment. This may lead to a backlog of sick people and more who become avoidably chronically unwell.

¹ Age UK: All the Lonely People September 2018

Reduction in Social Cohesion

Charities are experiencing material drop off in donations because of the financial displacement experienced by many donors. The financial support offered by Government for the sector over and above business rates relief and furlough financing is specifically targeted at ameliorating the direct consequences of the epidemic. It is estimated that many charities will be forced to close disadvantaging the people who rely on their support for personal, emotional and physical support.

The question before the Council is whether, how and the extent to which it should respond, in the near and longer term, to the virus' effect on the residents of Croxley Green.

The Current Manner of Disbursing Council Funds

Apart from the cost of running a local government authority, our current spending falls into four groups.

- Funding the maintenance of the local green environment: including footpaths, supplying and servicing dog waste bins; planters on Watford Road; The Green; Stone's Orchard; Weston Woods and various verges and roundabouts.
- Funding events that would otherwise have been less likely to take place: these events are generally put on for local residents and are known to attract visitors from the wider locality and beyond. Examples include Croxfest, Revels on The Green, the Home & Produce Show, the Croxley Green History Project WWI exhibition and Peace Picnic.
- Making grants to local organisations, to fund projects most of which depend on the funding to be possible. Recent and not so recent examples include the engraved doors at All Saints Church; the Parish Nurse sponsored by local churches; provision of a CAB advisor in the village and the refurbishment of the swimming pool at Harvey Road Junior School.
- Actually putting on events in the village for the local population of which recent examples include New Year Eve Fireworks; Christmas Market and Tree; Weekly bus trip to Watford, annual coach trips to the seaside; Dog Show; and Easter Egg Hunt.

A common feature of much of the spending is that it is relatively untargeted – the Council offers a facility to the wider populace and is benignly unconcerned as to who exactly takes it up and benefits.

It may be appropriate to take this opportunity to revisit the council's strategy and the direction of the strategy, to reflect changes to societal needs and expectations.

The Strategic Challenges

1. How should the council react to the effects of the coronavirus in its near term spending plans.
2. How should the council react to the effects of the coronavirus in its medium and long term spending plans.

There are a number of options including but not limited to:

- We could establish new direct projects – such as a food bank; a soup kitchen, a mental health counsellor; care coordinator; patient advocate; loneliness solutions such as friendship clubs.
- We could indirectly fund the same or similar through third party agencies, allowing for the likelihood that some charities that could deliver such services may not exist after the crisis passes.
- We could set up a services arm, in partnership with local volunteers that is mandated to deliver such services on our behalf.
- We could ignore the whole issue and carry on as we currently do, on the assumption that this is outside our scope, expertise and ability to deliver.

There are a number of decisions that might follow a change in strategic direction:

- In a period of scarce resources, we should consider whether and by how much we can increase the precept to fund spending plans and the extent to which we may call upon council general reserves for the purpose.
- We might need to reassess the current programme of activities included in our budget to confirm whether they fit with our identified strategic direction.
- We may need to rank, for their strategic fit, long-standing activities that we have historically supported.
- We may need to initiate a phased withdrawal of support for items that are no longer strategically important.
- We may need to increase spending on projects that offer long term support to other strategic choices.

Recommendations

1. It is proposed that a working party be established with the following responsibilities

To meet as often as required over the course of the next 6 weeks and to return to Council with the following:

- A draft mission statement
 - A high level (max 6 points) strategic summary
2. With input from the Working Group, and all councillors, the parish council office liaises with local groups and organisations to assess their immediate problems & needs and how the council may assist them in meeting them.

Cllr Nigel Cole
April 2020