

Executive Statement on Social Media Concerns

Thank you Madam Chairman. It is important that councillors have the opportunity to hold those running the council to account. It is equally important that this Council operates in an open and transparent way. We should never forget that we are the keepers of our residents' money, and we spend it on their behalf, with their permission.

Therefore, as soon as this matter was brought to my attention I immediately asked for a full report. That information was published some weeks ago. I am sure those of you who have expressed concern will have read it.

That said, our Monitoring Officer has reminded me we do have to be careful about those who can't answer back. There are things which the law says we can't share in public. I have been advised that I won't be able to answer questions about whether or not there have been investigations or action taken (or not taken) against individuals. All councillors collectively are the legal employers of our staff - and we need to comply with contracts and data protection law.

Prior to the recent interest in this issue, like almost all of us in this chamber - I was aware of Essex Coronavirus Action and its role to share and amplify messages issued by our own communications team. However I was not aware of the full costs of the work, or of the individuals involved in delivering it alongside the Council. This is because we have a clear and published delegation of duties and responsibilities to Officers and especially in times of emergency.

Let us not forget what life was like during the pandemic.

In March 2020 we were told by the Prime Minister "you must stay at home". We had nightly covid briefings from politicians and senior medics. The rules about what we could and could not do that were changed regularly. The BBC told us that deaths in London were worse than the blitz, and the World Health Organisation warned us that two million deaths were 'very likely' - even with a vaccine. Against this backdrop was a tidal wave of misinformation, and never before or since had it been more important to get clear messages to the residents of Essex.

This council had to transform its services almost overnight. We had to find ways of keeping essential services going and keeping our employees and residents safe. We had to ensure our social workers and other essential staff could continue to work safely and effectively to safeguard our people, bravely continuing to work on the front lines while feeling the same fear and uncertainty we all felt. We set up new services such as the Essex Welfare Service. We set up a temporary mortuary to deal with excess deaths. We set up temporary care homes for people with Covid.

None of this would have been done in normal times. The whole country was in crisis and I remain incredibly proud of how this council kept going, supporting our residents. It is easy today, as we sit once more in the council chamber, to forget what those days felt like. Our greatest weapon in responding to this was communications: to talk to our residents in whatever way we could and support them to stay safe. Confusion and misinformation was rife. It was absolutely crucial that key public health messages were communicated to everyone.

The Essex Coronavirus Action page was set up in this context. It was a vehicle for local people to help. The idea was to communicate via local facebook groups and persuade local group administrators to share messages around safety and virus transmission. This was a novel approach - but it was effective, there was substantial content creation and incredible engagement. It was also lauded nationally. There was a favourable review and analysis by London Southbank University; the Local Government Chronicle shortlisted it for an award; and the Local Government Association used it as a case study.

I am told that this was led by our Public Health and Strengthening communities team because it was they who had the existing connections to the local community groups. This was extra communication activity carried out in a 'non-local government voice' – supporting the messages we were sharing on our more formal channels. Because this work was felt to have been effective it was expanded to cover other areas, including suicide prevention, climate action and support for veterans. I have taken the time to put this context forward. I have done this, not to justify anything, but because I think it is important to remember the environment in which this was happening.

Understandably since this issue arose there have been concerns raised about the amount of money that was spent and whether it represents good value. People also want to be assured that proper processes were followed, that the right amount of oversight of this work was taking place, and that there is accountability for those taking the decisions. Most importantly I think we all want to be assured that any lessons are learned if, God forbid, we were faced with such a life threatening global pandemic or other world crisis again.

Where the Council has since found that things were not done by the correct procedure, Officers have not hidden it and I have ensured the information has been published. The Council has been open that procurement waivers weren't granted for most of the spend, that some of the contracts were not signed and that processes were not always followed around declarations of interest. Some money was paid to an individual to pass onto others. That was not good practice either. Although it was not illegal, it would not have been allowed to happen in this way if our central services had been aware of it - which at the time they were not. Lastly, the record keeping by those involved for decision making was in many cases poor, meaning that we can't always provide the information we would like to about why decisions were taken.

All of this is extremely regrettable and wrong. It is true to say that this is not the kind of thing that Members or people outside the immediate Strengthening Communities team would have been aware of. However, it is a matter which I have raised with the Chief Executive. We do have processes to deal with these things when they come to light. For legal reasons and out of fairness to the people who are the focus of attention I have been advised that I can't discuss what happened in public. I can say that we would of course follow due processes, as you would expect.

There was also other activity that was the subject of interest, and we have published the information about that too. This includes grants for 'the Better Divorce Course' and funding for a pub to provide community and care home meals. Some of that spend was welcomed by members on all sides when it came to Cabinet in 2021.

I know a lot of people will be asking about value for money. Given the novel approach taken at the time and as I have explained this is difficult to assess. I am advised that there was not and is not a ready market for this type of activity. Since the start of the Pandemic we have set up a framework for communications providers, but that does not cover work of this type. We have also established a new in-house approach to public health communications which will use different approaches.

Does this reflect on the council more widely? An organisation of this size has to allow managers of its services to set up processes in their teams. We can't do everything centrally or we would grind to a halt. While I would never pretend that this was anything other than a significant amount of public money, it reflects around 0.02% of the council's overall annual spend.

That said, I acknowledge that there is significant concern and that all members have a shared responsibility to ensure that the Council is well run. That's why, as I have discussed with opposition members, I recommend that we ask Audit, Governance and Standards Committee to look at this further. They will be tasked with seeing what more we can learn, and we will make sure any learning will be implemented. I will also ask the Committee to look at the role of those Members involved in the scrutiny at the time to ascertain what they knew and what had or had not been agreed with them. Aware of the next motion which stands in my name, I will ask the Chief Executive as Head of Paid Service to lead on the work with the Committee, and to thoroughly investigate the role of Officers at the time and to recommend any changes that might be made as a result.

Finally, I would like to thank the officers who have worked diligently over the last month or so - and have demonstrated to myself and my fellow Members just why we should be so rightly proud of the incredible work they do. This remains one of the most financially competent councils in the country, and I am proud to Lead an organisation whose staff are dedicated to supporting our residents to thrive.