



# Co-operative Councils

## Innovation Network

## HEALTH & SOCIAL CARE

### C.Co working with Cheshire West & Chester Council

## Responding to COVID-19 – Bereavement Services

The C.Co mission is to deliver demonstrable value and insight to the public sector. So, when the coronavirus crisis hit all spare capacity, we had was immediately directed at supporting the sector with the coronavirus response.

We chose to volunteer our time with our local, Local Authority – Cheshire West and Chester Council. What struck us from the offset was the community-centred approach to planning and prioritising activity. Local and community-driven approaches to service delivery has been an aspiration of many Councils for a long time, but few have ever truly succeeded in planning, commissioning and delivering truly localised services. Seemingly overnight, Cheshire West and Chester, the 22<sup>nd</sup> highest populated local authority in England, had put in place mechanisms and developed relationships to respond to very localised and personal needs effectively.

Similarly, any red tape or over-bureaucracy was banished and replaced with agile and action focussed decision-making which appropriately utilised Cheshire West and Chester Council's existing management and member-led meetings. This robust and considered response was enabled by thematic Cells which were mirrored across public agencies up and down the country. Typical 9am-5pm, Monday to Friday, decision-making had no place, decisions were made speedily and with proportionate evidence attached.

We supported an area of the response effort which was planning for some of the most sombre aspects of the coronavirus impact, the 'Bereavement Services Cell'. This Cell was mobilised to ensure that facilities such as the local crematoria and mortuaries had sufficient capacity and were robustly managed and organised to cope with the anticipated significant increases in local deaths.

Within the Cell itself, the governance and structure that had been set up in incredibly challenging circumstances was action focussed and purpose driven by the highly skilled and motivated workforce that were supporting all of the necessary and sobering activity. Long days, intense timescales and disparate resources were not barriers to the joined up working that was occurring across this Council.



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The experience C.Co had in supporting this Cell got us thinking about key themes of positivity that were shining through in the context of an albeit increasingly real crisis. Cheshire West and Chester, as well as other Local authorities nationwide, can take real comfort from the seismic shift in how public services will operate for the better once this crisis is over and we return to a new way of 'normal'.

3. **Responsive and evidence driven decision making** – Fast paced content, priority driven agendas, daily briefings and informed decision making were the basis of the governance framework we experienced. Bureaucracy was cut through and governance was used to add diligence to the responsive and informed decision-making being undertaken. If this can work in a crisis scenario, it can be even better in a stable context.
4. **Technology enabled remote working** – Flexible and mobile working programmes exist in local authorities up and down the country, with Cheshire West & Chester (CWaC) being no exception to this, having in the last two years moved all staff to part-time remote-working. Often people will change working location but what doesn't change is the 'presenteeism' culture, or the reluctance to truly embrace the technology available. Over a matter of days CWaC successfully completed a roll-out of Windows 10, all meetings were undertaken via 'Skype' and people adjusted to working remotely from their homes. Whilst office working no doubt will still have a place, the cultural shift which has occurred to enable the embracing of technology has put down real roots and will remain.
5. **Multi-agency collaboration** – Historically challenging, and often project-based, true multi-agency collaboration is rarely ever business as usual. But over a very short space of time, the Local Resilience Forums became a major conduit to joined-up regional working.

But certainly, in Cheshire West and Chester's case, this was not the only factor at play. Through personal, operational and historical relationships, new working groups were formed and quickly became the enabler for regular data and intelligence sharing. This ensured consistency in decision making and assumption planning. This joined-up working was critical, not just to the Bereavement Service Cell we had first-hand experience of, but of the entire Coronavirus response.

The new and enhanced relationships that are being formed through this shared experience of the coronavirus pandemic will be the foundations for the future public sector.

These themes do not attempt to cover every positive response seen in the immediate reaction to Coronavirus but are certainly fundamental building blocks to new ways of working for the post pandemic norm. The challenge is going to be ensuring the positives are protected and that the immediate rebuild is not driven by what was considered 'good' before.

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