

SERVICE HIGHLIGHT REPORT – COVID-19 AND KEY SERVICE UPDATES

SERVICE AREAS:	Law & Governance
REPORT AUTHOR:	Fiona McMillan
REPORTING PERIOD:	January 2021
LOCAL AUTHORITY:	Cambridgeshire County Council and Peterborough City Council

Part 1 - COVID-19

NEW GUIDANCE AND IMPACT

Due to new lockdown and team members with children of a school going age (with up to 3 children) are now having to balance home schooling and working – capacity may be affected as a result. Other members of team have recently contracted COVID-19.

NEW CHALLENGES AND ACTIVITY

RECOVERY ACTIVITIES

DECISIONS MADE SINCE LAST REPORTING PERIOD

NEW COVID-19 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS SINCE LAST REPORTING PERIOD

- PCC – Constitutional Services has 4 members working on Track and Trace programme. Salaries are continuing to be paid from the substantive posts budget area. The Track and Trace JD has now been evaluated and confirmed at a Grade 7 post. Two team members substantive posts are Grade 5 and therefore an increase in salary costs. Back pay will also be paid. This increase may incur a pressure on the salary budgets, although the overall budget costs may still deliver a saving.

WORKFORCE CHALLENGES

- PCC Electoral services - Review on a weekly basis, postal vote applications figures, if increase becomes unmanageable for the team, members of the team working on T and T may need to be returned to support the elections delivery.
- PCC Legal - lack of capacity across the board – may need to consider external support on key projects.

COMMUNICATIONS

Part 2 – BUSINESS AS USUAL ACTIVITY

KEY SERVICE UPDATES – INTERNAL / EXTERNAL

- PCC Democratic Services continue to prepare and plan all meetings virtually. Full Council is scheduled for 27 January 2021. Committee meetings commence from mid-January.
- CCC Democratic Services continue to prepare and plan all meetings virtually. Full Council is scheduled for 9 February. Committee meetings started this week.
- Electoral Services continue to plan for the forthcoming Elections in May 2021. Regular meetings are held with the Returning Officer (CE) and key staff to prepare.
- H & S Team are currently working on all polling station risk assessments.
- PCC Mayoral Services continue to support the Mayor. The Mayoral Services Manager is currently supporting members services, due to member of the team working on T and T.
- PCC Leaders Office continue to support the Leader and Cabinet. The Mayoral Services Manager is currently supporting this team, due to a member being off sick.
- All Constitutional Services team members are currently working from home.
- PCC Information Governance – continue to see FOI requests return to normal level at the same point as the close down over Christmas and now the impact of the new national lockdown. Have already seen education related FOI requests as a result of individual school decisions on levels of remote learning. The impact on the Education Service is being mitigated by team holding back FOI and SARS from them for two weeks at Director's request due to service overload.
- Child Protection legal team – monthly COVID meetings with the Designated Family Judge (DFJ) continue, chaired by the Senior Lawyer, and attended by Heads of Service for Family Safeguarding at PCC and CCC. The Senior Lawyer at CCC also attends, as does the Head of Service for CAF/CASS. Some of the local family Judges had started to indicate that legal representatives should attend Court in person. At the monthly meeting on the 5th of January 2021, the DFJ made it clear that all hearings are to be held remotely again, unless there is a particular need for Court attendance. Guidance from Senior High Court Judges is that attendance at Court should be kept to a minimum and that remote hearings will again be the norm. The lawyers in the team are now well able to deal with remote Court hearings.
- Child Protection team – an advertisement was placed for a replacement Legal Officer in December. The advertisement has closed with 52 applicants. Interviews will take place in due course, but as all the team work remotely, it will be a challenge to train a new Legal Officer remotely.
- All team members across Contracts/Procurements, Litigation and Land Charges are working from home. There has been a new officer start in Land Charges who has required training which is best delivered from another officer at SMH and this has taken place in an appropriately Covid safe way.
- One officer in Litigation has started her maternity leave and there have been some issues in covering the post. This is now going to be resolved with another officer from the team increasing her working hours (from part time) to cover some additional workload.
- Planning has commenced for the cover of another officer who will go on maternity leave at the end of March 2021.

FINANCIAL ISSUES

- New ICT equipment purchased for Leader of the Council due to issues with current equipment.
- Child Protection team – several Judges and District Judges retired or moved on in the middle of 2020, but the Designated Family Judge has been proactive in seeking additional judicial availability. The Peterborough and Cambridge Courts, therefore, currently have 4 Circuit Judges, which means that there is no delay now in cases being heard. However, it does mean that, on some days, as many as 6 Court hearings can be listed before different Judges. This can result in the additional use of Counsel as lawyers often have hearings listed at the same time, on the same day, but before different Judges.

PERFORMANCE ACTIVITIES AND CHALLENGES

- PCC – continued support from Democratic Services, to deliver virtual meetings during the working day and in the evenings. The same for CCC Democratic Services.
- PCC – more Task and Finish and working groups have been agreed, requiring more support from officers.
- PCC – Information Governance team will see a dip in performance due to the impact of the pandemic on services ability to respond
- PCC Child Protection team – all the lawyers and Legal Officers are working from home full-time, but still dealing with legal and statutory meetings, as well as Court hearings, remotely.

UPCOMING ISSUES & HORIZON SCANNING AREAS

- Increase in Postal Vote applications.
- Further sickness due to Covid and potential of a longer lockdown than anticipated as the new strain is rampant.

POSTIVE NEWS STORIES

- Register of Electors published on 30 November 2020.
- PCC IG Team got an excellence award in December.
- The Designated Family Judge personally thanked the Child Protection lawyers at the COVID meeting in December for their hard work in ensuring that Court cases continued to be heard as much as possible, albeit remotely, with 87.7% of cases being heard during March to December 2020, and the average length of proceedings reduced during 2020, which was unexpected, as the DFJ expected the length of proceedings to increase significantly because of the initial difficulties with the technology around remote hearings.
- Planning Property & Highways Legal team - University Phase 1 completed on 24 December 2020
- CCC Democratic Services have recruited a new member of staff who will hopefully start on 18 January 2020.