

Audit and Governance Committee Report

Report of Head of HR, IT & Customer Services

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Business continuity update

Recommendations

That the Audit and Governance committee:

- a) notes the progress made in developing and improving business continuity arrangements to meet the needs of shared working between South and Vale and the associated revised management structure.
- b) considers and approves the revised reporting frequency of business continuity and risk management updates.

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide committee with an update on our business continuity arrangements.

Relationship with corporate plan

2. Having effective business continuity arrangements in place will help the councils in meeting their shared strategic objective of 'managing our business effectively'.

Background

3. In compliance with the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 and accompanying regulations, we are required to 'assess the risk of an emergency occurring and to maintain plans for the purpose of ensuring that if an emergency occurs, the councils are able to perform their functions'. In other words, we need to ensure that we would be able to continue to deliver our services to residents in the event of a disruption.

4. Following management team's decision to rationalise South and Vale's approach to business continuity, we produced a joint business continuity strategy and presented it to this committee. Executive approved it on 5 February 2010. The reporting timetable brought to this committee in September 2009 requires us to provide update reports on our business continuity arrangements every six months.

Progress to date

5. Following the fourth tier management restructure, it was evident that the existing business continuity plans needed a complete update. To address this, we conducted a council wide business impact assessment (BIA). The purpose of this assessment was to differentiate between critical (urgent) and non-critical (non-urgent) organisation functions/activities, given that the council will never have sufficient resources to restore everything immediately, or it would be too costly to maintain such back-up services.
6. We involved service managers and heads of service in the BIA to ensure we had a council wide view of all our functions. Through a series of workshops we identified the critical activities of each service, the recovery resources required (people, workspaces, IT systems and equipment) and we also gathered additional data to inform each of the plans such as names of the members of the business recovery team. We also prioritised each function by assessing how quickly we would need to restore it in the event of a disruption. This assessment took into account the needs of the public and the timescale on which the service is normally delivered. For example, the assessment concluded that the council's benefits service needed to be restored within 2 days, whereas the determination of planning applications should be recovered within 5 days, given that this is a small proportion of the normal eight week period and would not cause immediate hardship to residents.
7. Since completing the BIA we have made significant progress and have:
 - drafted business continuity plans for each of the services containing the results from the business impact assessment
 - designated plan owners (head of service) in place for each service with their own business recovery teams
 - appointed plan administrators for each service to co-ordinate the quarterly reviews
 - started work on creating a joint crisis management plan
 - produced two flowcharts, one for the strategic crisis team to follow should the plans need to be invoked and one for plan owners to follow should this happen
 - automated the updating of staff contact details through the HRPro system (which contains the council's employee records), ensuring the details remain confidential.

Next steps

8. In order to implement the strategy fully, we now need to refresh the 'detailed business continuity arrangements' document. The need for this document arises because unlike the strategy, which is available to the public, this document is not for publication as it contains detailed information in relation to our arrangements which could be compromised if they were publicly known.
9. Also, as some of our services are outsourced it is important that the business continuity arrangements of our suppliers are part of our plan. We do have a policy, implemented for new contracts during the tendering process, that requires key suppliers to have business continuity arrangements in place. The pre-qualification questionnaire used for all major

procurements asks suppliers for details of their business continuity arrangements and we assess this information as part of the tender evaluation. We consider it necessary to introduce a process where we have the details of suppliers' arrangements available for review at any time and intend to develop this process in the next few months.

10. We are working with the plan owners of our own business continuity plans and the Strategic Crisis Team (owners of the crisis management plan) to fully embed our own business continuity arrangements within the council, so that everyone in this team is aware of whether and when to invoke the crisis management plan and what everyone then needs to do. We are also planning a training event to ensure the Strategic Crisis Team is aware of when and how to implement the crisis management plan if the need arises.
11. To make sure our plans are viable and staff are rehearsed in the role they may need to take in the event of a disruption, we will carry out an annual test of the plans. We are currently researching any good practice in this area and intend to develop a testing schedule that will demonstrate the effectiveness of our arrangements, but without causing major disruption to services while the test is in progress. Previously, management team has decided not to carry out a 'live' test (e.g. by temporarily closing the building) as this would be too disruptive to residents. However, we are now considering the use of 'walk-through' simulated disruptions.

IT disaster recovery

12. The aim of this is to restore essential computers, systems and telephony services, either on-site or at a remote disaster recovery site in the event of a disruption. Depending on the nature and duration of the disruption, the council could experience downtime for a number of days. The council has an IT disaster recovery plan which is managed by the IT operations team.
13. The council, along with South, has a contract with Adam Continuity (a specialist provider of disaster recovery services) who will provide us with replacement IT hardware e.g. computers, telephones and cabling, through their mobile 'Ship-to-Site' service in the event of a disruption. We can specify where the hardware is set up and use it for up to 16 weeks following a disruption. The decision on the set up location can only be taken when the exact nature and extent of the disruption has been ascertained.
14. Management team has decided that a full scale live test of our disaster recovery (or business continuity) arrangements would be potentially too disruptive to public services, so our contract with Adam Continuity includes five test days per year, which allows us to test our disaster recovery plan in a controlled environment. We performed an IT disaster recovery test in October 2008 and we will test the plan again in quarter three of 2010/11.
15. In April 2009, internal audit completed a review of our disaster recovery arrangements and issued a 'full assurance' opinion meaning that they consider there to be 'a sound system of internal control designed to meet the system objectives and the controls are being constantly applied'. One of the objectives of the review was to ensure that we periodically tested the disaster recovery plan for its relevance and effectiveness, and we identified training needs / recovery weaknesses and dealt with them appropriately. Although two low risk recommendations were made following the review, neither related to the testing of the disaster recovery plan.

16. In their report, internal audit stated that adequate briefing meetings prior to the test exercise could be evidenced with key officers and their responsibilities being identified within the briefing documents. Adam Continuity and IT produced the test rehearsal reports following completion of the test exercises that provided an overview of the test, the results of the recovery and identified issues and resolutions.
17. The above arrangements demonstrate that there are effective IT disaster recovery arrangements in place.

Revised reporting frequency

18. Over the last year we have embedded risk management and business continuity within the council's processes, and improved efficiency by harmonising arrangements between the two councils. As this process is almost complete, and both risk management and business continuity follow an annual cycle, we propose to change the reporting frequency to one report on each subject per year.

Financial, legal and any other implications

19. There are no financial or legal implications arising from this report, other than to note that by having business continuity arrangements in place, the council is meeting its obligations under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004.

Conclusion

20. We have made significant progress in updating our existing business continuity plans by carrying out a business impact assessment. The assessment took into account the recent management restructures and captured all critical activities of the council. As a result, we have an up to date business continuity plan for each service.
21. Work is currently ongoing to create a joint crisis management plan and there is guidance available to the Strategic Crisis Team and plan owners should the plans be invoked. The planned training event will ensure that the Strategic Crisis Team will know when and how to implement the crisis management plan should the need arise.

Recommendation

22. We invite Audit and Governance committee to note the progress made in developing and improving business continuity arrangements to meet the needs of shared working between South and Vale and the associated revised management structure.
23. We invite Audit and Governance committee to consider and approve the revised reporting frequency of business continuity and risk management updates.

Accompanying papers: None