

Audit and Governance Committee Report

Report of Head of HR, IT & Customer Services

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To: AUDIT & GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

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Business continuity testing exercise update

Recommendations

We invite Audit and Governance Committee to note the findings of the business continuity exercise held on 2 May 2012 and the work we are undertaking to enhance our existing arrangements.

Purpose of report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide committee with a summary of the findings of the business continuity exercise (held on 2 May by Oxfordshire County Council's Emergency Planning Unit) and to give committee an assurance that we are taking the appropriate steps to enhance our existing 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. At the meeting of this committee on 21 March 2012, which followed our update report on the timescales for testing the council's business continuity plans, the committee asked for an update report on the findings of the testing exercise conducted by Oxfordshire County Council's Emergency Planning Unit (EPU). We intended to present an update report at the last meeting of 11 July 2012, however it was deferred until this committee meeting.

Testing exercise

4. Exercise Ping Pong was a business continuity and emergency planning simulated exercise conducted by EPU on 2 May 2012. The scenario involved a suspicious vehicle parked in a car park (located close to the council offices) which had been confirmed as a serious threat. A 400m cordon was set up around the vehicle which denied access to the council offices by unauthorised persons including council staff.
5. Phase 1 of the exercise tested the activation procedures (as part of emergency planning), phase 2 considered both the emergency response and the activation of our business continuity arrangements, due to the vehicle in the scenario exploding. Phase 3 challenged us to think about recovery issues.
6. The exercise was well executed, engaged all participants and encouraged them to think about their role in the event of an emergency and/or a disruption to our services.
7. EPU sought feedback from the participants at the end of the exercise and provided the council with a feedback report in which they made a number of recommendations.

Summary of findings

8. As the purpose of the exercise was to test both the emergency plan and our business continuity arrangements, the feedback we received suggested improvements for both so for the purpose of this report, we have focused on the improvements which have implications for our business continuity arrangements.
9. A point raised by participants related to which plan would have primacy in an emergency as it wasn't clear which plan should be used and when. There was also a concern that they two plans didn't dovetail into each other so to address this issue, the emergency planning officer has produced a checklist which can be used as a quick reference guide by the officer taking the initial call in the event of an emergency/disruption. The checklist will guide the officer to the correct plan as well as giving information on the next steps that they need to take. The emergency plan will include this checklist to prevent any further confusion.
10. Another observation of the participants was that plans contained out of date information. In this instance, they had obtained their own copies of the plans and in error, had not got the most recent version. In order to reduce the chances of this happening again, we now have a dedicated page on the intranet where the up to date versions of both the emergency plan and crisis management plan are stored. Please note that this is in addition to them being stored on the network and also remotely in case of disruption to the council's IT system.
11. EPU made ten recommendations and three referred to our business continuity arrangements:
 - amendment to the out of hours instructions to include reference to emergencies and contact officers
 - an amalgamation of emergency and crisis management plans – if the decision is to keep the plans separate, ensure common terminology is used in both
 - inclusion of a schematic of the escalation procedures and communication cascades.
12. The shared risk and information officer is responsible for implementing the recommendation relating to the amendments of the out of hours instructions. We sent the

out of hours service supplier a copy of the emergency plan and the crisis management plan with instructions on which officer to contact if they receive a call about an emergency and/or a disruption within the district. This recommendation was fully implemented at the end of August 2012.

13. The shared emergency planning officer and shared risk and information officer have already met to discuss the amalgamation of the plans and have agreed that the plans should remain separate. The emergency plan supports an emergency within the district and details what we need to do in our role as responders but the crisis management plan relates to a disruption to our services and the procedures are very different.
14. We have agreed to use common terminology in both and have updated the plans to reflect the new titles of the various management groups i.e. strategic management board for the chief executive and strategic directors.
15. The shared emergency planning officer has drafted a new 'flowchart' which sets out the escalation procedures and communication cascades and there is already one in place for the crisis management plan. Now finalised, they are included in both plans and are available to use as quick guide documents.
16. As this simulated desk-top exercise has now been completed and we are implementing the recommendations suggested by EPU, we can now consider the frequency and nature of future tests and training workshops. We will be consulting EPU on our proposals to ensure we are complying with good practice and seek further advice if necessary. It is intended that the testing and training proposal will be finalised by 31 October 2012.

Financial, legal and any other implications

17. 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

18. The findings of the test exercise suggest that our arrangements remain adequate and that there are no major issues relating to our plans. Work is ongoing to implement the improvements recommended by EPU which will enhance our arrangements even further.

Recommendation

19. We invite Audit and Governance Committee to note the findings of the business continuity exercise held on 2 May 2012 and the work we are undertaking to enhance our existing arrangements.