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Business as usual during extreme weather

Monday, January 25, 2010

The snowy weather made it a week to remember in public services for Manchester City Council's new strategic director adults Liz Bruce. Here's a round-up of her week:

**Monday**

I arrived in Manchester as strategic director adults just as the heavy snow and severe temperatures arrived armed with my first 'hundred day plan' and filled with pride that I am now working for Manchester City Council.

My plans were set aside as the snow came down and 'business continuity' kicked in – all the preliminary induction type meetings were replaced by pragmatic planning for 'business as usual' and customer needs.

Tuesday

I walked from my new city centre apartment in inches of snow to the town hall past trees and buildings laden with snow and was met by the executive member needing to be briefed on what we were doing to ensure vulnerable people were safe. The business continuity plan included all known customers on a traffic light system linked to needs and risks and we contacted 3000 'red' customers who where at high risk.

My PA arrived later having walked eight miles in the snow, concerned that as a new strategic director I needed her support. By late morning senior management team (my first meeting) was called to plan for emergencies and we covered the management of schools, roads and gritting, home care, day care and meals on wheels along with communications to members and the press.

Just as I was leaving I picked a call from an independent provider which caused concern as they hadn't followed the traffic light system so customers hadn't been checked. Our staff worked together to check missed customers into the late evening and key managers offered to stay in the city to ensure their assistance in the morning – what a team!

Wednesday

I set up my own department meetings to ensure we were aligned with the formal emergency planning (via Resilience Forum and Civil Contingencies) and that we had a grip on all the information. Day Centres were shut because transport couldn't get through safely and staff were helping to check on red and amber customers and to get hot meals out. I had to balance the duty of care to staff against operational delivery because public transport was badly affected – ensuring no gap between daytime support and out of hours support was essential. A power cut came which affected 400 customers, meaning older people being left without light and heat in the severe weather. So my staff worked with housing colleagues to check all 400 customers, carrying flasks and sleeping bags to residents in need.

Next was planning ahead for a reduced workforce as schools closed to ensure our customers were covered as the weather worsens. This involved offering a week's supply of meals on wheels in advance and offering respite beds for those who needed it. Next time we will lease 4 x 4s and try to do a deal with local businesses.

Gritting was being targeted to priority schools and care facilities and working

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together as 'one' became essential. The minus temperatures were really causing concern.

Thursday

I agreed to do live radio interviews to community stations on keeping safe, well and warm and asking communities to be good neighbours and watch over each other. I set up an 'on call team' ready for weekend (included myself in that) and social workers increased proactive hospital discharges to avoid problems in A&E. Our social workers offered to work over the weekend and we had no office closures and no reduction in frontline social work.

Friday

I conducted my radio interviews and sent thanks to staff from executive member and myself for outstanding support. I finalised all 'on call' arrangements and contacts for weekend and hoped my husband (yet to relocate) makes it through the snow in Newcastle upon Tyne to Manchester.

It was a baptism of fire (or ice) and I hit the ground running (or skating) but I look forward to the challenges ahead as the new strategic director adults with Manchester City Council.

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