

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE
HELD ON 24 JUNE 2020 FROM 7.00 PM TO 9.55 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Pauline Helliard-Symons (Chairman), Alison Swaddle (Vice-Chairman), Jenny Cheng, Andy Croy, Paul Fishwick, Jim Frewin, Guy Grandison, Sarah Kerr, Abdul Loyes, Ken Miall, Andrew Mickleburgh, Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey and Oliver Whittle

Other Councillors Present

Councillors: Lindsay Ferris

Officers Present

Susan Parsonage, Chief Executive
Graham Ebers, Deputy Chief Executive
Neil Carr, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist

5. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence.

6. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 19 February 2020 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Note:

1. Councillor Frewin stated that he would have commented on the accuracy of Minute 78: Unauthorised Traveller Encampments. However, as a further report on Traveller Encampments was due to be considered at the Committee's July 2020 meeting, he would raise his issues then.
2. Councillors Mickleburgh and Whittle were not members of the Committee in February 2020. Consequently, they abstained in the vote on this item.

7. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

Declarations of interest were submitted by the following Members in relation to Item 10 on the Agenda, Covid-19 Pandemic – the Council's Response:

- Andy Croy – volunteer at the Grub Club and the Community Hub;
- Paul Fishwick – Director of a small business;
- Guy Grandison – volunteer at Cisco, Green Park – producing face masks;
- Sarah Kerr – volunteer at the Community Hub;
- Ken Miall – Director of a small business;
- Andrew Mickleburgh – volunteer at the Community Hub;
- Alison Swaddle – Director of a small business and volunteer at the Community Hub.

8. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

9. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

In accordance with the agreed procedure the Chairman invited Members to submit questions to the appropriate Members.

9.1 Gary Cowan asked the Chairman the following question:

Wokingham Borough Council, in a press release on the 26th May, stated that it is working hard to monitor the impact that Covid-19 is having on the local Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) community. Evidence continues to emerge that the pandemic could be having a disproportionate impact on our BME communities with a higher proportion of Covid-19 deaths reported.

I very much welcome this very positive initiative so my question, therefore, is:

As Wokingham Borough Council must have access to Covid-19 information for all Wokingham's affected residents to be able to monitor its impact ranging from those with the disease including those who recovered, those who sadly passed away either in Hospitals, Care Homes or at Home, is it possible to publish a Borough Map showing areas where there are virus spikes as other authorities/countries have done?

In Councillor Cowan's absence, the following written answer was provided.

Answer

There is now a significant amount of information available to the public and professionals on the numbers of people with COVID-19, the death rates, age groups, socio-economic groups and ethnicity. Information is growing on understanding the pattern of this virus, the incubation period for different age groups, symptoms, and why it is disproportionately affecting BME communities and those in lower socio-economic areas.

Data is collated and distributed by Office for National Statistics (ONS) and Public Health England (PHE).

The Council receives information about the number of cases for Wokingham residents on a daily basis and weekly from the ONS on death rates for all residents and those in care homes. The Council publishes a report weekly on the council website:

<https://www.wokingham.gov.uk/health/public-health-campaigns/coronavirus/>

The Council does not receive any postcode data at the moment in relation to COVID-19. The lowest geography for all the data we currently receive is at a LA level.

The only exception is two published sets of deaths data (by ONS) at an MSOA level (the second data release was on 12 June for March to May). Middle Layer Super Output Areas (MSOAs) are constructed from groups of Lower SOAs and are designed to contain 5,000 to 15,000 residents and 2,000 to 6,000 households. The link is:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/datasets/deathsinvolvingcovid19bylocalareaanddeprivation>

The map from the InYourArea website, is the same map from the ONS (they have just embedded the code in their website). This reports on the MSOA, the local area:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsinvolvingcovid19bylocalareasanddeprivation/deathsoccurringbetween1marchand17april#middle-layer-super-output-areas> (section 6).

9.2 Lindsay Ferris asked the Chairman the following question:

How many residents of Wokingham Borough are known to have caught Covid-19; and of this total how many unfortunately died?

Answer

The Council produces a weekly report to help residents understand the impact of COVID-19 and what the various data sets mean. This is on the Council website:

<https://www.wokingham.gov.uk/health/public-health-campaigns/coronavirus/>

As of the 22 June 2020, 458 residents in Wokingham have been confirmed by testing as having Covid-19. There have been no new cases for the last 4 days. This is an underestimate of the true number of cases as, in the early stages of the pandemic, only hospital patients were tested. Now there is more widespread testing.

Up to 5 June there were, sadly, 143 deaths among Wokingham residents, with Covid-19 mentioned on the death certificate. This is also probably an underestimate, for the same reasons above, not everyone with symptoms were tested. The all-cause mortality is a better predictor of the impact of the pandemic as we can compare the expected number of death rates for the same point in the previous 5 years. Wokingham has been average compared to England for excess mortality since the beginning of March and is now back to normal expected levels of deaths per week.

Supplementary Question

Will this information and any lessons learned be included in the Council's Covid-19 investigation?

Supplementary Answer

Yes, it will be included. The Council's weekly report sets out the most recently available data. This information will be useful for Overview and Scrutiny Members as they carry out their review.

10. COVID-19 PANDEMIC - THE COUNCIL'S RESPONSE

The Committee considered a report, set out on Agenda Pages 15 to 133, which gave details of the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Susan Parsonage (Chief Executive) and Graham Ebers (Deputy Chief Executive) attended the meeting to present the report and answer Member questions.

The report stated that the Covid-19 pandemic had had a huge impact on the lives of every resident in the Borough. The Council had played a key role in supporting and implementing the Government's response to the pandemic in areas such as health and social care (for example by supporting vulnerable people and local care homes), children's services (by safeguarding vulnerable children and supporting home learning) and the provision of advice and support for local businesses.

Whilst the Council's response to the pandemic continued with significant workload for Officers, the reduction in community transmission and loosening of some lockdown measures provided an opportunity to take stock, assess the scale of the challenge and the way in which the Council had worked with a range of partners to respond.

The report set out a brief timeline of key events relating to the pandemic and the Council's strategic response, summarised the Council's emergency planning arrangements and detailed the way the Council mobilised resources in conjunction with other key players such as health, police, community and voluntary sector and the Town and Parish Councils.

In section 2, the report set out details of actions relating to key service areas and the data/feedback available to measure the effectiveness of the Council's plans and subsequent actions.

Finally, in section 3, the report considered some of the initial learning from the handling of the pandemic and suggested how the Committee may choose to scrutinise key aspects of the response in detail, over an agreed timeline.

Susan Parsonage highlighted the way in which the Council had responded quickly and flexibly in line with its emergency plans. Key areas of focus included:

- support for local care homes, including development of the infection control Task Force and provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE);
- support and advice for local schools during lockdown and the reopening process;
- the rapid deployment of the Community Hub/Food Bank;
- the Talking Buddies programme which supported vulnerable residents;
- support and advice for the local business community.

In addition to this work the Council had continued to provide universal services such as waste collection and had developed an improved on-line service, such as the on-line libraries offer. It had also continued to work on providing financial information for the Government and closing down the 2019/20 financial accounts.

Susan stated that the proposed Scrutiny of the Council's response would provide useful feedback for the Council's response to the Government on the impact of the pandemic. It would also generate feedback which could be incorporated into the Council's response to any future outbreaks of Covid-19. Whilst the Scrutiny process was welcomed, it was important to recognise that the Council was still responding to the pandemic and that Council Officers had been working under intense pressure for the past three months. Consequently, Scrutiny Members were requested to factor these issues into their timetable for scrutinising specific issues.

During the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points:

The pandemic had highlighted the Council's resilience and its effective partnership arrangements. It had also strengthened connections, for example with the business community and the Borough's vulnerable residents. It was important to maintain a focus on those connections and to ensure that lessons learned during the past three months were used to inform the Council's service delivery and to strengthen its "one team" approach.

What had been impact of the past three months on Council staff wellbeing and mental health? Susan Parsonage stated that the Council had put a number of measures in place to monitor wellbeing and mental health and that this would be an area of focus in the coming months. The vast majority of staff had worked remotely and many were redeployed into unfamiliar service areas. These factors, combined with individual circumstances under the lockdown would undoubtedly have had an impact on staff. The Council was currently surveying staff to gain a better understanding of the issues experienced during the lockdown. This information would then be used to inform future strategic thinking, for

example in relation to the costs and benefits of moving to greater levels of remote working. This would also link into the Council's wider response to the Climate Emergency.

What part did "stress testing" play in ensuring that the Council's response was effective and efficient? Graham Ebers stated that stress testing and risk assessment were integral elements in the Council's day-to-day activities. For example, the spending commitments in the Medium Term Financial Plan were routinely tested to ensure that they could be funded through existing financial resources. This, in turn, informed the level of Council reserves. Also, the development of the Covid-19 Outbreak Plan was based on scenario testing to ensure that test, track and trace would be effective.

What lessons had been learned at this stage in relation to the prevention of and response to a second wave of Covid-19? Susan stated that, as an example, the Task Force established to strengthen infection control in care homes would play a crucial role, alongside the stronger PPE supply routes which had been established. The Council had taken a strong position on support for care homes and had challenged Government policy. This was an example of the Council standing up for the interests of some of our most vulnerable residents. Moving forwards, the requirement for better/more timely data and early warning of emerging local issues would be important.

How had the pandemic impacted on the Council's financial position? Graham stated that the Council's finances were strong before the pandemic struck. This stood the Council in good stead during the past three months. Although the Council had taken a major financial hit on its reserves, it was not in the same position as a number of Council's who were in severe difficulties. Looking forwards, there was great uncertainty about a number of issues including future Government financial settlements, the impact of the pandemic on the local economy and the jobs market. It was important to develop a medium/longer term view rather than implementing reactive short-term measures.

What was the potential impact of the pandemic on the Wokingham town centre regeneration? Graham stated that the timing of the lockdown had been challenging but there was still optimism about the future and there was still interest in shop lets. Initiatives such as the Borough's Cultural Strategy and investment in new leisure facilities would also help to attract new visitors to the Borough.

There was some concern about the challenges of maintaining local democracy during the lockdown especially in the initial period when a number of public meetings had been cancelled. Susan stated that every Council in the country had been wrestling with this issue and the specific challenges of delivering public meetings on line. Inevitably, there had been a hiatus, but systems were now in place which enabled simultaneous broadcasting of meetings for the public allied to a robust level of security.

The Committee then considered the process for scrutinising the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Guy Grandison reported that the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee had met on 22 June and had agreed a number of priorities for investigation, including the Council's community response to the pandemic, the financial impact (as part of its Budget Scrutiny role) and the impact of Covid-19 on the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Community.

The Committee agreed to scrutinise the issues set out in the Chief Executive's report (beginning with an educative session) as set out below:

Theme	Educative Session	O&S Committee
Care Homes	Early July	HOSC
Schools & Children's Services	Early September (tbc)	Children's Services
Finance & Business	N/A	Community & Corporate
Community response	August	Community & Corporate
Recovery	September	Management Committee

It was then moved by Sarah Kerr and seconded by Paul Fishwick, that additional Scrutiny items be added, to produce a composite programme, as set out in the table below:

Composite Programme for Scrutiny of the Council's response to Covid-19

Theme	Educative Session	O&S Committee
Care Homes	July 2020	HOSC
Effectiveness of Health Partnerships	TBC	HOSC
Schools & Children's Services	September	Children's Services
Impact on Mental Health	TBC	Children's Services (with HOSC Members)
Finance & Business	Part of Budget Scrutiny	Community & Corporate
Community Response	July/August	Community & Corporate
Community Safety/Localities	TBC	Community & Corporate
Communication & Engagement	TBC	Community & Corporate
Recovery	September	Management Committee
Track & Trace	TBC	Management Committee
Poverty – the impact on the poorest, the unemployed and the homeless	TBC	Management Committee
Maintaining Democracy	TBC	Management Committee

Note:

- 1 All Overview and Scrutiny Committees to consider innovation as part of their investigations – what went well/what should be retained for the future;
- 2 Educative sessions to be open to all Members;
- 3 Community & Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee has also established a Task and Finish Group on Green Travel.

On being put to the vote, the Composite Programme was approved.

The Committee also approved Key Lines of Enquiry for each theme as follows:

Theme	Key Line of Enquiry	O&S Committee
Care Homes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Timeliness of response • Funding and financial stability • Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) • How will the sector hold up going forwards; what support is needed and what will the sector look like? 	HOOSC
Effectiveness of Health Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint working between WBC, Public Health England and the Clinical Commissioning Group, etc. • Impact on NHS provision and waiting lists • Royal Berkshire Hospital response 	HOOSC
Schools & Children's Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is WBC doing to help disadvantaged students catch up academically? • More generally, how are schools being supported? What is the near future looking like for the education of the borough's children? • Connectivity provision for remote working for children (laptops, internet, etc.) • Impact on children's future qualifications • Will this change how schools are measured? • Differences with LA and academy schools • Safeguarding – As schools and other services increase the number of children they come into 	Children's Services

	<p>contact with, how is Children's Services preparing for a spike in demand?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact Covid-19 has had on foster carer retention and recruitment and are there likely to be gaps in resource in this regard that need to be addressed. 	
Impact on Mental Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have services coped? • What do services require going forward 	Children's Services (with HOSC Members)
Finance & Business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact on the capital programme and regeneration • MTFP impact • Effects of extra spending and support from government now and in future • Impact on 2020/21 budget and planning for 2021/22 • Impact on revenue streams (including PIG and business rates) • Impact on reserves and investments • Where has extra spending happened • Risk audit • How the furlough scheme has worked, for local businesses and how the ending of the scheme will have an impact • Unemployment levels • Emerging jobs • Businesses that have and haven't been supported 	Community & Corporate
Community Response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How this ties in with the new voluntary sector strategy? • How is WBC going to retain the community aspect of this? 	Community & Corporate

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What has the one front door identified as being a priority for WBC going forward – i.e. what issues have been raised by the community 	
Community Safety/Localities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti-social behaviour • Crime • Domestic Abuse • Effects on housing quotas • Impact on the Local Plan Update • Planning concerns – i.e. more office conversions? • Service continuity • Fly tipping • Waste 	Community & Corporate
Communication & Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have communications reached specific demographics • How are we communicating with people not online? • Communication with elected Members 	Community & Corporate
Recovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Green recovery (carbon emissions and air pollution) • Outbreak Control Plan • Recovery plans for each department (children's, adult, localities, corporate) • Changing shape of the Council's services and workforce • How the organisational structure is changing. 	Management Committee
Track & Trace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is the council involved? • What additional resources are required? 	Management Committee
Poverty – impact on the poorest, the unemployed and the	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact Covid-19 has had on poorest 	Management Committee

homeless	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How Covid-19/lockdown has shaped poverty levels (increases?) • Unemployment level analysis and predicted with furlough scheme ending • How WBC and partner organisations will work to support those in poverty and help them out of poverty • Homelessness • People that have come to the council/CAB for financial assistance – Council Tax issues, housing issues, universal credit 	
Maintaining Democracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How has moving Council meetings online worked/not worked? • Involvement of elected Members in the decision-making process during the crisis • Involvement of the public in the democratic process and emergency response 	Management Committee

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Susan Parsonage and Graham Ebers be thanked for attending the meeting to present the report and answer Member questions;
- 2) on behalf of the Committee, Susan Parsonage be asked to thank the Council's staff for their exceptional commitment and skill in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic whilst maintaining the delivery of essential services;
- 3) the Composite Programme for Scrutiny of the Council's response to Covid-19 (as set out above) be approved;
- 4) the proposed Key Lines of Enquiry for each Committee, set out above, be approved;
- 5) each Overview and Scrutiny Committee be asked to develop its own work schedule in light of the ongoing demands on Executive Member and Officer time;
- 6) a Call for Evidence from residents, community groups and local stakeholders be published via social and print media.

11. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMMES 2020-21

The Committee considered a report, set out on Agenda pages 134 to 154, which discussed the proposed 2020/21 work programmes for the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee and the three Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

Appended to the report was a work programme tracker for 2019/20, a list of additional Scrutiny requests and a draft Work Programme for each of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

In light of the significant additional work programme items agreed in relation to Agenda item 10: Covid-19 Pandemic – the Council's Response, it was suggested that consideration of the 2020/21 Work Programmes be deferred to the Committee's July 2020 meeting to enable the new items to be incorporated.

RESOLVED: That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programmes for 2020/21, as amended, be considered at the Committee's meeting on 15 July 2020.