

**MINUTES OF A VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE
COMMUNITY AND CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON 27 JULY 2020 FROM 7.00 PM TO 9.28 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Guy Grandison (Chairman), Keith Baker, Shirley Boyt, Paul Fishwick, Graham Howe, Clive Jones and Abdul Loyes

Other Councillors Present

Councillors: Parry Batth

Officers Present

Nigel Bailey (Interim Assistant Director – Housing & Place Commissioning), Neil Carr (Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist), Keeley Clements (Director: Communities, Insight & Change), Mark Redfearn (Head of Localities Service) and Callum Wernham (Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist)

Others Present

Ramnik Saund (BME Forum Chairman)

13. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Oliver Whittle.

14. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

A declaration of interest was submitted from Paul Fishwick. Paul stated that he had a prejudicial interest in agenda item 18, on the grounds that he was a Director of a business within the Borough and had received a business grant as part of the business relief response relating to the Covid-19 pandemic. Paul stated that he would leave the meeting for the duration of this item, and take no part in the discussion or vote for this item.

A declaration of interest was submitted from Abdul Loyes. Abdul stated that he had a personal interest in agenda item 17, on the grounds that he was a member of the BME forum. Abdul stated that he would keep an open mind regarding this item, and was open provide an insight into the working of the forum for the benefit of the Committee.

15. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions.

16. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

There were no Member questions.

17. BME FORUM UPDATE

The Committee received and received a report, set out in agenda pages 9 to 18 and supplementary pages 3 to 6, which gave an update on the work carried out by the BME forum.

Mark Redfearn, Keeley Clements, Parry Batth (Vice Chairman of the BME forum), and Ramnik Saund (Chair of the BME forum) attended the meeting to answer Member queries.

The report set out the work and achievements of the forum since its inception including celebrating black history month, promoting health and wellbeing within the BME community, liaison with the Local Police Area Commander to answer questions and

queries from the BME community on an annual basis, and monitoring of performance of BME pupils within Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) schools.

The direction of the forum was driven by the forum Members, and the forum acted as a critical friend to the Council. The forum met 4 times annually, and celebrated all BME cultures within the Borough. The forum provided WBC with an insight into the diversity of its residents within the Borough, including a number of smaller communities throughout the Borough. There was a danger of grouping a variety of individual groups together, and the forum aimed to promote how each individual community could contribute to the wider Borough community and celebrate the individual aspects of each specific community. The Council's new Arts & Culture strategy worked to enable both WBC and the BME forum to celebrate black history month in a greater capacity than before.

During the ensuing discussion Members raised the following points and queries:

- The forum had been 'hiding' its really good work that had been carried out throughout the years, through no fault of its own. Over the years the winter edition of the Borough News had not featured an article on black history month, with only three covers out of thirty featuring a person within the wider BME community. What would be done in future to further promote the good work of the BME forum, including a feature on black history month within the Borough News, and having more representative features on the front covers of the Borough News. Response given – The forum had a desire to raise its profile, and hoped to work more closely with WBC's Communication, Engagement, and Marketing (CEM) team in the future. The forum wanted a healthy representation of Members, and hoped that increased engagement with WBC could inspire further people to join the forum and contribute. The Leader of WBC and WBC's Chief Executive Officer had attended the most recent BME forum meeting, which was an unprecedented step and gave hope of a closer working relationship between the forum and the Council, thereby raising the forum's profile. It was proposed that an article be included within every Borough News edition, promoting a different culture or community within the Borough, in addition to an annual feature on black history month.
- Could the forum make use of WBC libraries to further publicise art and black history month? Response given – Black history month exhibitions had been displayed in WBC libraries previously, however a bigger focus would be made to promote these exhibitions across the Borough to reach as many communities as possible.
- Could WBC tap into the previous 'Healthy Lifestyle' scheme once more? Response given – Funding for this scheme had been awarded for a three year period, however the funds had been preserved for a longer period of time until the funds eventually ran out in 2018. The scheme was much valued by the community, and the service was happy to reinstate this scheme should funding be found.
- How would community groups be supporting the BME community as part of the ongoing response to the C19 pandemic? Response given – Local data regarding particular groups of people affected by C19 had not been gathered up until this point, however data was being gathered going forwards which would allow a more precise local picture to be presented, allowing a more focussed local community response. WBC had been in contact with approximately 10 BME organisations for the past two months, to ascertain issues and concerns within these communities. Specific issues included concerns around collective faith activities not being allowed as lockdown

measures were eased. Details of these conversations were shared with groups such as the citizens' advice bureau in order to allow more specific support.

- Would the BME forum make use of the town and parish Councils, specifically the ones with larger facilities, to host forum meetings? Response given – It would be good to have forum meetings in a variety of Borough venues, such as the town Council venues.
- Had the BME forum focussed on equality opportunities in the workplace, to understand what blockages to career progression might be present for members of the BME community? Response given – This had been looked at in the past however not for some time. This would be a good time to look at this topic in a detailed way.
- How regularly did the local police force liaise with the BME forum? Response given – The police area commander attended the forum on an annual basis. The police regularly supported the forum, and were in contact with other community focussed groups.
- What could be done to promote a greater calendar of cultural celebrations within the Borough? Response given – Officers would look into ways in which a wider calendar of cultural celebrations might be promoted.
- Could the BME forum attend a full Council meeting to make all Members aware of the work the forum does? Response given – The forum would welcome the opportunity to update full Council on their work. Committee Members would liaise with the appropriate officers to get an item on a future Council agenda.
- Would the forum be looking to include other groups within the community, such as those from Eastern Europe, within the forum? Response given – To be representative of the community within Wokingham the forum needed a wide representation. Some specific groups had been approached however they appeared to not want to join the forum at this time. Offers to these groups needed to be specific and relevant in future. Work had been done on a wider scale such as with the Pakistani community centre in Reading, and other groups may be able to be contacted by reaching outside of the Borough. The Executive Member would sit down with officers and try to formulate different approaches to engage with these groups going forward.
- What could WBC do to continue to support the BME forum and the communities that it served? Response given – Mark Redfearn and the team were very supportive to the forum, and the recent attendance of the WBC Leader and Chief Executive was a very positive move. The forum was looking at how to further improve the relationship between itself and WBC. It was proposed that an update be scheduled to return to the Committee in around six months' time, approximately February 2020.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Mark Redfearn, Keeley Clements, Parry Batth, and Ramnik Saund be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) The WBC CEM team continue to help promote the BME forum's work and achievements, and look for ways to expand this partnership going forwards;

- 3) Options be explored to include an annual article in the Borough News to celebrate black history month;
- 4) Options be explored to include an article in regular editions of the Borough news to celebrate different cultures within the Borough;
- 5) WBC work with the BME forum to look at ways of hosting forum meetings at suitable venues around the Borough such as Town and Parish Council facilities;
- 6) A review be undertaken into equality opportunities in the workplace, to understand what blockages to career progression might be present for members of the BME community;
- 7) Officers look into how a wider calendar of cultural celebrations might be promoted;
- 8) A presentation from the BME forum to full Council be considered, and scheduled if agreed;
- 9) The Executive Member in conjunction with the appropriate officers liaise with the BME forum in order to try and formulate different approaches to engage with other groups within the community;
- 10) An update on improvements regarding communication and promotion of the forum, in addition to any matters arising, come to Committee in approximately 6 months' time.

18. COVID-19 RESPONSE - BUSINESS & ECONOMY AND OPERATIONAL HOUSING

The Committee received and reviewed a report, set out in agenda pages 9 to 18, which gave an update on the Council's Business, Economic, and Operational Housing Response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Nigel Bailey attended the meeting to answer any Member queries.

The report outlined that Wokingham Borough Council's business and economic (WBC's) response had so far been very reactive, as when advice from the Government had been released suitable responses needed to be quickly and effectively implemented. WBC was part of the Berkshire recovery group, who were developing a strategic recovery plan across the Berkshire area. This would allow for a more pro-active approach to be carried out across the Berkshire area. WBC had engaged in a range of dialogue streams with its partners, which would be maintained and expanded going forwards. In addition, a business taskforce had been set up to work alongside businesses within the Borough.

Regarding operational housing, the report outlined that 13 additional properties had been taken over during the pandemic, and a number of hotels had been used as emergency accommodation. 28 rough sleepers, or those at risk of becoming rough sleepers, had been housed within 48 hours of WBC becoming aware of their situation. 4 individuals had lost contact with WBC, but there was no indication of harm and it was assumed that these individuals had moved on from the Borough. 2 rough sleepers had not taken up WBC's offer of accommodation and WBC officers were in contact with these individuals to try and meet their needs and maintain a dialogue. The 'Housing first' strategy was starting imminently, which would help with WBC's long term policy on addressing rough sleeping within the Borough.

During the ensuing discussion Members raised the following points and queries:

- What work was being done to financially support the three Town Council's within the Wokingham Borough? Response given – The officer in attendance had not been involved in this aspect of the pandemic response, and would ask that the relevant officers look into this issue. The wider action plan would incorporate the effects felt by Town and Parish Councils, and this would be shared with Members.
- What response had been received thus far to the 'Business Health Check' offer? Response given – 159 responses had been received, to which 80 had received a direct follow up from WBC officers. The low response rate could be due to a number of reasons, including a fatigue of survey completion considering how many surveys were in circulation for businesses to complete. WBC had seen a similar response rate to neighbouring authorities, and the main group of businesses responding were within the retail and hospitality sector.
- Why was Wokingham predicted to have a higher unemployment rate than other neighbouring authorities? Response given – It was predicted that there would be higher levels of unemployment across the Berkshire area due to several major business redundancy programmes. WBC was working alongside the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) to ascertain why unemployment was predicted to be higher in these areas. Officers were watching closely as the furlough scheme came to a close over the coming months and would look to see what factors were driving unemployment in the area.
- The Committee praised Nigel Bailey, his officers, and the wider finance team for getting the business and discretionary grants paid so quickly and efficiently.
- What support was available to businesses to assist them with digital transformation? Response given – The business growth hub offered one to one conversations with businesses to cover a range of needs and requirements. Enabling businesses to embrace technology was a priority for both WBC and the LEP. Many businesses within the Borough now had a strong social media presence.
- Why was Wokingham predicted to face a substantial hit to its GDP compared to other areas? Response given – This would need to be properly researched and assessed. New data from the LEP was expected shortly, which would give a greater insight into this issue.
- What was the average business size that received a discretionary business grant? Response given – Data regarding this would be gathered and shared.
- Was there sufficient funding to keep the rough sleeping strategy going? Response given – Relationships had been built up to allow a more coordinated response, such as meeting the needs of the rough sleepers in terms of their mental and physical wellbeing Funding was available for the next 2 to 3 years minimum.
- How much grant funding was available for rough sleepers within the Borough? Response given – Officers would seek this information and feed back to the Committee Members.

- Had more rough sleepers appeared in the Borough as a result of the pandemic? Response given – The strategy covered a wider group of people, including ‘sofa surfers’ and those at risk of becoming rough sleepers. True rough sleepers were a proportion of the full number of individuals in contact with WBC in order to provide support and housing.
- With a potential rise in evictions expected once landlords were permitted to do so again, what steps were WBC taking to help support those effected? Response given – The team were gearing up to provide support to those who would require it. It was difficult to assess potential numbers until eviction notices were actually served, however WBC was working closely with landlords to gather information as soon as possible.
- Would those in Council accommodation be at risk of eviction? Response given – Although Council housing could not be commented on, WBC’s housing companies were not looking to evict any tenants unless it was a last resort. The support network in place meant that there were relatively few evictions in Wokingham.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Nigel bailey be thanked for attending the Committee;
- 2) The appropriate officers be liaised with regarding financial support for Town and parish Councils;
- 3) The wider action plan be shared with Committee Members when available, and include a section on the impact faced by Town and parish Councils;
- 4) Officers monitor unemployment within the Borough after the cessation of the furlough scheme, and assess what was driving the predicted high percentage of unemployment within the Borough;
- 5) Officers assess why Wokingham’s GDP was predicted to suffer substantially, in conjunction with the LEP;
- 6) Details on the average size of businesses that have received discretionary grant be shared with the Committee Members;
- 7) Figures regarding the amount of grant funding made available for rough sleepers be provided to Committee Members;
- 8) Officers liaise with housing companies to alleviate the risk of evictions after the August date for evictions passes, and update the Committee with any concerns regarding an influx of at risk persons as a result of eviction from private or Local Authority housing.

19. UPCOMING MEETING WORK PLAN

The Committee reviewed the draft programme for their net to meetings, set out in agenda pages 19 to 20.

The Committee were updated that the following meetings would be required to focus on the Medium Term Financial Plan for 2021-24:

| Scrutiny Meeting Date | Main Meeting Focus |
|------------------------------|--|
| 13 Oct 20 | Strategic overview |
| 28 Oct 20 | Revenue – Children’s and Adult’s Services |
| 23 Nov 20 | Revenue – 3 non-care related Directorates |
| 22 Dec 20 | Capital/Special Items/updated revenue position |
| 19 Jan 21 | Capital/Revenue final discussions |

*Private Committee Member briefing on 12 Oct 2020 to focus discussions and develop preliminary KLOE

**Report of the CoSC to budget Council on 18 Feb 2021

The Committee were advised that an item related to the implementation regarding virtual meetings was on the agenda for 2 September. It was agreed that the discussion was not to drift into specific constitutional points, but to instead focus on the technology behind they meetings, and consider which meeting might be suitable to be hybridised in the future. It was suggested that the Chairman of the Constitution Review Working Group be invited to the meeting.

The Committee were advised that a Member briefing had been scheduled for 20 August 2020 regarding the Council’s Community response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The briefing would allow Members to develop initial key lines of enquiry. A full public item relating to this and other aspects of the Covid-19 response was scheduled for 22 September.

It was suggested that the item on the community response to the pandemic look at all areas in the Borough and not just focus on a centric viewpoint, for example liaising with areas such as Woodley, Hurst, Whitegates, and Earley amongst others.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) The timetable of meetings to assess the 20201-24 MTFP be agreed;
- 2) The item related to virtual meetings be scheduled for 2 September, and not focus on specific constitutional issues. The Chairman of the Constitutional Review Working Group also be invited to this meeting;
- 3) A Member briefing be held on 20 August 2020 to develop some initial Key Lines of Enquiry regarding Wokingham’s community response to the Covid-19 pandemic, ahead of a public item on this and other areas of the pandemic response on 22 September;
- 4) The item on the community response to the pandemic look at all areas in the Borough, and not just focus on a centric viewpoint, for example liaising with areas such as Woodley, Hurst, Whitegates, and Earley amongst others.