

TITLE	Scrutiny of WBC's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee on 21 October 2020
WARD	None Specific
DIRECTOR	Graham Ebers, Deputy Chief Executive

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

Scrutinising the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic to date will help to identify which issues were handled effectively and any lessons which can be learned as the Council continues to deal with the pandemic over the winter months ahead.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Committee:

- 1) consider progress made by the Overview and Scrutiny Committees in scrutinising the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic;
- 2) consider further evidence submitted to the Committee on the Council's ongoing response and the impact of the pandemic on poverty in the Borough;
- 3) consider the key issues to be addressed in the Committee's report to the Executive on the Council's response to the pandemic;
- 4) ask the Chairman to write to the Chief Executive to request that Council staff be thanked for their outstanding efforts in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

At its meeting on 24 June 2020, the Committee considered a report which gave details of the Council's initial response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The report stated that the Council had played a key role 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 a 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. The report 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.

The Committee asked each of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees to look at key themes relating to the Council's response and to report back on its findings. This report starts the process of drawing those findings together with a view to producing a composite report for submission to the Council's Executive.

Background

At its meeting on 24 June 2020, the Committee considered a report which gave details of the Council's initial response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

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, children's services, community safety and support and advice 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 services, such as the on-line libraries offer.

Scrutiny Programme

Having considered the Chief Executive's report, the Committee agreed the framework for its Scrutiny review. It was agreed that each of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees would review a number of themes relating to the pandemic. Feedback from the three Committees would then be fed back to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee. As well as considering a number of themes itself, the Management Committee would then produce a composite report for submission to the Council's Executive.

The Scrutiny programme allocated to each of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees is set out below.

Theme	O&S Committee
Care Homes	Health O&S (HOSC)
Effectiveness of Health Partnerships	HOSC
Schools & Children's Services	Children's Services O&S
Impact on Mental Health	Children's Services (with HOSC)
Finance & Business	Community & Corporate O&S
Community Response	Community & Corporate
Community Safety/Localities	Community & Corporate
Communication & Engagement	Community & Corporate
Recovery	O&S Management Committee
Test & Trace	Management Committee
Poverty – impact on the poorest, the unemployed and the homeless	Management Committee
Maintaining Democracy	Management Committee

The Management Committee also approved Key Lines of Enquiry relating to 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? 	HOSC
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 	HOSC
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.) 	Children's Services

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 contact with, how is Children's Services preparing for a spike in demand? • 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 + HOSC
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? • 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 & Corporate
Community Safety/Localities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti-social behaviour • Crime • Domestic Abuse • Effects on housing quotas 	Community & Corporate

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact on the Local Plan Update • Planning concerns - i.e. more office conversions? • Service continuity • Fly tipping • Waste 	
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
Test & 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 homeless	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact Covid-19 has had on poorest • 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 	Management Committee
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

Structure of the O&S Review

In carrying out the Scrutiny review, the Overview and Scrutiny Committees received a number of reports and briefings. In addition, feedback was sought from a range of stakeholders including Town and Parish Councils, the Borough's four M.P.s, health

providers, care homes and voluntary sector organisations. The Council also carried out a public consultation exercise which asked residents for feedback on key elements of the Council's response.

In considering the evidence submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Committees, Members addressed a number of overarching questions, including:

- Were the Council's emergency plans effective in its initial response?
- How did partners work together to deliver better outcomes?
- How did the Council identify, assess and mitigate risk?
- Which residents and groups were worst affected and why?
- How effective was the Council in identifying and communicating key messages?
- How have services been adapted to meet ongoing and future challenges?
- How effective was the Council's decision making process?
- How successful has the Council been in its response?
- How has the Council dealt with the financial challenges relating to the pandemic?
- How well is the Council placed in terms of response to future spikes or a second wave of Covid-19, including local/national lockdowns?
- What does the "new normal" look like for residents, businesses, the community and voluntary sector and other stakeholders across the Borough?

Themes

As set out above, each of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees has scrutinised a number of themes relating to the Council's response to the pandemic. Appended to the report are copies of briefing papers and minutes of discussions at the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committees, arranged as follows:

Appendix 1 – Care Homes and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE);

Appendix 2 – BME Forum, Business and Economy and Operational Housing;

Appendix 3 – Property Investment, Staff Redeployment, Communications, Community Safety and Community Response;

Appendix 4 – Virtual Meetings

Appendix 5 – Outbreak Management Plan.

The Committee is requested to consider progress made in scrutinising the themes agreed at the June 2020 meeting and the information provided in relation to the key lines of enquiry. Members are also requested to highlight any key issues to be addressed in the Committee's report to the Executive.

It should be noted that transmission of the coronavirus has started to increase significantly in recent weeks. This means that some of the data in the report may require updating as the Council and partner organisations gear up for the next phase of the pandemic.

From the evidence considered to date it is clear that Council staff and partner organisations made outstanding contributions to the response to the pandemic. It is suggested that the Chairman write to the Council's Chief Executive to request that a message be sent to WBC staff expressing sincere thanks from Overview and Scrutiny Members for their commitment, flexibility and positive approach.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	0	N/A	N/A
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	0	N/A	N/A
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	0	N/A	N/A

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

The Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee is carrying out detailed Scrutiny of the development of the Council's 2021/22 Budget. This will include an assessment of the impact of the pandemic.

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2

None

Public Sector Equality Duty

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on equalities is a key theme running through the Scrutiny process.

List of Background Papers

Set out in appendices to the report.

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CARE HOMES

NOTES FROM A PRESENTATION TO HOSC ON THE COUNCIL'S RESPONSE RELATING TO CARE HOMES, PPE AND FINANCES 15 SEPTEMBER 2020

Present

Ken Miall, Rachel Bishop-Firth, Jenny Cheng, Jim Frewin, Guy Grandison, Clive Jones, Abdul Loyes, Adrian Mather and Alison Swaddle

Also Present:

Madeleine Shopland – Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist

Neil Carr - Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist

Wesley Hedger – Assistant Director People Commissioning

Charles Margetts, Executive Member Health, Wellbeing and Adult Services

PRESENTATION

- Wesley Hedger provided a presentation on care homes, explaining what was meant by a 'care home.'
- Wokingham had a large number of care homes; 52 in Wokingham Borough compared to 33 in Reading and 46 in West Berkshire. 95% of care homes in the Borough inspected by the Care Quality Commission (CQC) had been rated as 'good' or 'outstanding.'
- Care homes in Wokingham were usually run by private or voluntary sector service providers. There were complexities around the nature of the privatised care home market and how that affected all the various interfaces. Members were reminded that care homes were autonomous with their own policies, governance and staff.
- Care homes were monitored by the CQC who held them to account on matters including the prevention and control of infections and related guidance.
- Care homes accommodated both Council funded and self-funding clients. The Council had the smaller market share at approximately 25%.
- The type and physical structure of a care home had had a significant impact on its ability to manage an outbreak and subsequent infection control.
- Adult Social Care had been working with local care homes to facilitate mutual aid across the sector and had extended its offer to support the sector, beyond statutory requirements. This had included an improved funding deal for care homes the Council contracted with, prepayments to support with cash flow, plus the ability to apply for additional temporary funding.
- Other support had included:
 - Help with supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).
 - Regular advice and guidance including financial sustainability and infection control.
 - Offer of access to staff in an emergency Infection Control hotline established.
 - Spiritual and emotional support available through the Community Hub.
- Financial support to care homes was discussed.

- The total spent by the Council to date on supporting providers in response to Covid 19 was approximately £4.1m
- The Council had a statutory duty to monitor the market and ensure that it was paying a fair price for care. Members were informed that at the start of the pandemic, the Council had offered a pre-payment to its providers, which was intended to supplement an uplift on fees in 2020/21. The uplift had been benchmarked against the sector in Wokingham and sufficient funding had been provided to meet the increase in the National Living Wage.
- Inflationary uplifts for ASC Statutory Services were awarded at 3% (Residential, Supported Living and Day Opportunities) and 3.4% (Home Care) for 2020/21. The uplift had been applied to all commissioned providers up to an appropriate ceiling rate. Not all providers had taken up this pre-payment. It was confirmed that this would be recouped in future.
- A Service Sustainability Fund to support providers in maintaining service continuity had been established. Between April and June, 59 providers had been supported with a total of £424,000 in additional funding. This included 27 care homes and £276,000 in additional funding to the sector.
- The Council had been allocated approximately £1.9m from the Adult Social Care Infection Control Grant, which had been provided as two equal instalments directly to the local authority.
- 75% of the initial funding received had been passed straight to care homes within the local authority's geographical area for use on infection control measures, including to care homes with whom the local authority did not have existing contracts. The funding was distributed to Care homes in June 2020 on a 'per bed' basis. The remaining 25% of the initial payment was passed on to other commissioned adult social care providers, including home care and supported living, and utilised to support locally procured and distributed PPE.
- It was noted that the Grant was subject to a number of conditions and that the second payment was subject to the provider satisfactorily completing the NHS Care Home Tracker and providing evidence that funding had been spent in accordance with the Grant conditions. One provider chose not to take up the funding.
- Wesley Hedger provided a timeline for the provision of PPE by the Council.
- The Council had engaged early on with providers and had had discussions about potential issues.
- With regards to PPE, it was ultimately the responsibility of the provider to source sufficient PPE provision for their service.
- In March, providers had reported a lack of adequate supply from central government and an insufficient supply chain, creating a shortfall in PPE supplies for the sector. Smaller providers in particular had struggled to establish sufficient supply chains.
- In April, the Council had begun to proactively purchase PPE based on Public Health England guidance. A weekly distribution had been put in place for care providers in the Borough (and other commissioned providers). The Council had begun to receive regular PPE supplies from the Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum, and one-off donations had been received from local companies and schools. However, they had been insufficient to meet need.
- Charles Margetts indicated that the Council had been determined not to run out of PPE and had issued a public appeal for further supplies. He had contacted the local MPs who had tried to assist in providing suppliers.

- Reading and West Berkshire Councils had not initially actively purchased PPE and had relied more heavily on central government.
- Wesley Hedger indicated that the Council had calculated a 'burn rate' with regards to the supply of PPE that it had purchased.
- In June, a PPE portal (Clipper) had been launched by the government to provide weekly emergency supplies for social care and primary care providers. Care providers had been informed that future PPE distribution from the Council would be emergency supplies only and support with accessing hard to find items, such as clear masks for customers who lip read.
- Clive Jones commented that the government guidance should have been clearer, and produced earlier.
- Jim Frewin asked how dissatisfaction with the central government response could be fed back and how good practice could be shared. Charles Margetts indicated that whilst a formal indication of dissatisfaction would need to be made, Adult Social Care was currently focusing on continuing to respond to the pandemic. Wesley Hedger indicated that concerning best practice, the Council was working with the Local Government Association (LGA) and NHS. A care homes tracker had been established and Wokingham had been identified as a high and consistent performer.
- Wokingham Borough Council had spent £473,000 on PPE since March 2020. 317,450 items had been received from the Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum, 200,000 items had been received by way of private donation and 1,315,967 had been from the Council's contribution. The total stock was approximately 1,833,417 items. The Council had had to make sure that donations were of sufficient quality before they were accepted and distributed and some had had to be disposed of.
- It was noted that a pair of gloves were counted as two units of PPE.
- 502,266 pieces of PPE had been distributed by the Council, 39,296 of which had been distributed in May, the busiest month for PPE distribution. Distribution by the Council was tailing off and providers were becoming more secure in their own provision.
- Members and Officers praised the excellent work of the care homes and their staff.
- An Infection Control Task Force made up of Adult Social Care and key providers had been established and would stay in place whilst the pandemic continued.
- Charles Margetts advised that there were currently two care homes with Covid outbreaks and these cases were primarily amongst staff.
- Adrian Mather asked about future risks, and if the Council had enough resilience in place should a second wave of the pandemic occur. Wesley Hedger commented that the Council was in a better place to respond to any future issues. Testing, and managing access to tests for those that needed them was a national issue. Other risks included occupancy rates for the care homes and ensuring financial sustainability. Charles Margetts emphasised that those with Covid symptoms should phone NHS 111 and only book a test if so advised. There was a need to learn lessons as the situation developed.
- Adrian Mather questioned whether there would be further funding from central government. Wesley Hedger indicated that the Council had not been notified of such. However, Charles Margetts commented that this would be lobbied for.
- Jim Frewin asked whether the funding received from central government would need to be repaid and was informed that it would not as it was a grant. The

money provided to the providers as a pre-payment would be retrieved in a measured way.

- Jim Frewin went on to ask whether receiving information was an issue as the care homes were autonomous. Wesley Hedger indicated that relationships had improved. In addition, the receipt of the Infection Control Grant was subject to completion of a care home tracker. A 100% response rate had been achieved locally. In addition, the Council had direct access to the portal information and a weekly analysis was made of the data. This was then considered by the Adult Social Care leadership team and any actions taken forwards through the Task Force. Domiciliary care providers were not paid to complete the tracker and the response rate was approximately 40%, in line with the national picture. Information covered matters such as death rates, infection rates and payments made to staff on sick leave.
- Alison Swaddle questioned whether Adult Social Care team officers had been based in Shute End and was informed that there had been cover across the team for the weekly distribution of PPE.
- Alison Swaddle questioned what additional pressure flu season might cause. Wesley Hedger commented that this was not known but that flu season was more a known entity. Infrastructure was in place to support the care homes. Public Health ran an annual flu jab programme.
- In response to a question from Clive Jones regarding care home financial sustainability, Wesley Hedger commented that it was not within the Council's best interests for homes to fail and that they would support them as best as possible. However, should a care home fail, clients would be placed elsewhere. A provider of last resort relationship was in place with Optalis and the Adult Social Care leadership team reviewed care home occupancy rates on a monthly basis, which helped to align financial support provided.
- A Sustainability Strategy was being produced.
- Clive Jones questioned what consideration had been given to planning for other possible pandemics in the future. Wesley Hedger stated that Public Health supported in the planning against pandemics. The Infection Control Task Force continued to be active. Charles Margetts added that this was something to which consideration was starting to be given.
- Rachel Bishop-Firth asked about testing for Covid-19. Wesley Hedger emphasised that testing and the ability to access it was a national issue. Locally it had been agreed that Berkshire-wide testing would be re-established. Front line staff and their families would have access to testing facilities if they had displayed symptoms within the last 72 hours. Charles Margetts stated that Wokingham was not a priority area for mobile testing as it has low incidents of Covid and Track and Trace was good (approximately 90%). Access to mobile testing may become available in November.
- A care home could register for whole home testing via the portal.
- Abdul Loyes asked how care homes were coping should the infection be brought into the home via staff. Wesley Hedger commented that there had been two outbreaks involving staff. Members were reminded that those who tested positive could often be asymptomatic and that whole home testing could help to identify these cases. Care homes were aware how to manage infection control.
- In response to a question from Abdul Loyes, Wesley Hedger stated the occupancy rate for care homes was usually 89% and was currently less than that. There was capacity within the system to manage any increase in referrals. Work was undertaken with the CCG to ensure the best outcome for those being discharged from hospital.

- Guy Grandison questioned whether the Council was more satisfied with the supply of PPE. Wesley Hedger commented that the Council had moved from proactive distribution to a more emergency response. He felt that the Council had an adequate supply at present and would know where to go if further PPE was required.
- Guy Grandison asked whether the expiry dates of the PPE were recorded and was informed that they were and that there was a quality assurance mechanism in place. Guy Grandison went on to ask whether any feedback had been received from the care homes regarding the Clipper portal. Wesley Hedger stated that initially there had been an issue with some homes registering with the portal. There had been some reports that registration was a lengthy process and that supply had been minimal and took some time to arrive.
- In response to a Member question, Wesley Hedger clarified that if other councils had residents who were at risk and in need of PPE and the home authority was unable to assist, the Council could help. However, it would not supplement other authorities' stock as a matter of course.
- Clive Jones questioned whether the cost of testing was the responsibility of central government or the local authority. Charles Margetts indicated that testing was funded by Government; however, the Council could decide to go over and above what was provided and purchase its own stock of tests.
- A survey had been sent to the care homes, asking for their views on the Council's support during the Covid 19. So far, only 12 responses had been received but responses had been overwhelmingly positive.
- Members were of the view that officer had responded very well to the pandemic with regards to care homes, particularly in the face of confusing and ever-changing Government guidance. Clive Jones praised the decision not to admit those discharged from hospital without a Covid test, and commented that this success should be celebrated.
- Adrian Mather suggested that the Task Force should continue to be funded going forwards to enable a robust response to any future pandemics.
- The Committee felt that the presentation had been very helpful and proposed that they receive a further update in 3 months' time, should the timing be appropriate.

BME FORUM – BUSINESS & ECONOMY – OPERATIONAL HOUSING

**MINUTES (EXTRACT) OF A VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE
COMMUNITY AND CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON 27 JULY 2020**

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)

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 proactive 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.

**PROPERTY INVESTMENT – STAFF REDEPLOYMENT – COMMUNICATIONS –
COMMUNITY SAFETY – COMMUNITY RESPONSE**

**MINUTES (EXTRACT) OF A VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE
COMMUNITY AND CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON 22 SEPTEMBER 2020**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Guy Grandison (Chairman), Shirley Boyt, Paul Fishwick, Graham Howe, Clive Jones and Abdul Loyes. Pauline Helliard-Symons attended the meeting as a substitute.

Executive and Deputy Executive Members Present

Councillors: John Kaiser (Executive Member for Finance and Housing) and Michael Firmager (Deputy Executive Member for Environment and Leisure)

Officers Present

Dave Allen (Communications, Engagement & Marketing Manager), Nick Austin (Interim Assistant Director – Customer and Localities), Neil Carr (Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist), Joelle Cooper (Senior Specialist, HR), Graham Ebers (Deputy Chief Executive), Damon Emes (Head of Investments), Bernie Pich (Assistant Director – Strategic Property and Commercial Assets), Martin Sloan (Head of Service – Community Care Services), Sarah Swindley (Lead Specialist, HR) and Callum Wernham (Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist) and Callum Wernham (Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist)

32. PROPERTY INVESTMENT GROUP - COVID 19 IMPACT

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 5 to 14, which outlined the initial impacts to Wokingham Borough Council's (WBC's) Property Investment Group (PIG) as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The report outlined the basis for PIG, including the origins of the group and the decision making process. The report stated that the commercial investment fund represented about half of the Council's overall property business. Historically the Council's property exposure had been relatively modest compared to many other local authorities but it had grown significantly in the last 5 years through delivery of the Regeneration and Commercialisation agendas. The Commercial Property Team was currently responsible for managing approximately £8m p.a. rental income split across the three key portfolios: Regeneration, Operational and Investment.

Around 75% of investments (approximately £3.3m per annum) were secured against institutional calibre tenants who were thriving at present. With all debt taken into account, WBC would see approximately a £400k per annum profit based only on institutional calibre tenants when secure debt was subtracted from the overall figures. Any surplus was used to fund other Council services. WBC's approach was validated by reputable external agencies who looked at assets and performance. WBC only invested

for the long term and the situation, as presented within the report, would only get better with the current holdings, as debt would reduce towards 0 over a 40 year investment period.

PIG focussed on prudent investments, with tenants such as supermarkets. There was a targeted return of 5% on 1000 homes built by WBC over a 5 year period. This was an example of how the PIG could be used to regenerate parts of the Borough in a positive way, whilst allowing for a financial return to fund other Council services.

John Kaiser (Executive Member for Finance and Housing), Graham Ebers (Deputy Chief Executive), Bernie Pich (Assistant Director – Strategic Property and Commercial Assets), and Damon Emes (Head of Investments) attended the meeting to answer Member queries.

During the ensuing discussions, Members raised the following points and queries:

- Were smaller, independent units within the Wokingham Town centre covering the interest on the investment debt with their rents? In addition, how many units had to become vacant for the loan interest to no longer be covered by rental income? Officer response – At present, the rental income was covering the interest on the loans. It was felt that Wokingham deserved to be different with a variety of smaller firms within the town centre. Many other areas had an abundance of units, and Wokingham was currently bucking the trend in terms of vacant units. Specific information regarding vacancy rates and rental returns would be circulated to the Committee after the meeting.
- What was balance of the Council's rental income from the three different portfolios? Officer response received after the meeting –

WBC Commercial Property Rental Income (£ p.a.) by Portfolio, September 2020

Investment	£4.6m	50%
Regeneration	£2.9m	32%
Estates	£1.7m	18%
TOTAL	£9.2m	100%

Note: the report to O&S Committee included a figure of approx. £8.0m taken from the Council's Covid Rent policy document published March 2020. Since then the Investment portfolio has added one new asset with 6 new income streams, the Regen team had completed a number of new agreements/leases and the Estates team had continued to actively manage multiple income streams across four trading estates. The picture was constantly moving, in the right direction.

- Had WBC purchased, or were in the process of trying to purchase, any additional commercial units? Officer response – This was a commercially sensitive area, however officers were always looking to discharge the work of the policy.
- Was the food store property referred to on agenda page 8 classed as an institutional level client? Officer response – Careful covenant checks had been carried out, and in this instance the client had sold a variety of properties and leased them back to inject liquidity into the business.

- £85m had been invested to date, when would the remaining money likely be invested? Officer response – Officers were not under compulsion to commit further funds at any particular time, and the underlying Council policy was to enhance the Council’s income stream.
- Was there any concern with regards to the uncertainty of the property market? Officer response – This was a complex area, and the circumstance of each business was taken into account on an individual basis.
- Were there any concerns regarding turnover based businesses providing rent? Officer response – Only one turnover based business was within the scheme, and this was the WBC owned Denmark Street car park. Although this was performing poorly at the moment, it was hoped that this would pick up in future.
- How many leases were at risk at present? Officer response – There were a number of portions of income streams of tenants under leases. The focus was on supporting tenants throughout this difficult period through to the other side.
- Was the scheme formed of investments that could withstand these difficult times? Officer response – In the context of the wider economy, PIG and its investments were in a solid position, and officers were currently pleased and in a position to keep making positive forward steps.
- To what extent were retail units expected to sustain rents of pre Covid-19 levels? Officer response – High street units were key areas of concern, however people still wanted physical interaction with certain products and there was a place for these retailers post Covid-19.
- To what extent was increased Government interest in Local Authority investments a concern for WBC? Officer response – It was fair to say that the Government had a heightened interest in Local Authorities’ commercial investment schemes, as some Local Authorities had practiced a more extreme approach towards their investments. WBC practiced a safe and prudent approach towards our investments, and WBC were most certainly at the prudent end of all Local Authorities who were commercially investing. Most recently the Government had stipulated that you could not borrow outside of your boundaries. WBC were already borrowing using our own money, and there was not an intention to invest outside of the Borough in future. Investing within the Borough boundaries allowed WBC more control, and allowed development of schemes such as affordable housing for our residents.
- What was the debt recovery strategy for tenants who were not currently paying? Officer response – During the pandemic, it became unlawful for landlords to use conventional recourses to get tenants to pay their rent. This had severely reduced the powers WBC had to encourage tenants to pay rent. The current approach involved creating and maintaining positive relationships with our tenants, whilst constantly assessing the risks. Currently, over 80% of rental collection was still being maintained.
- Could more detail be provided regarding the term “flight to quality”? Officer response – This term referred to investors moving towards food stores and logistics companies as very popular investments. These industries were at the core of WBC’s portfolio and this could be seen as a positive benefit at present.

- Should loan interest rates be increased, what effect would this have on WBC? Officer response – The Public Works Loan Board had increased rates by 1% overnight. However, it was probable that, in the long term, interest rates would go down. WBC were in a flexible position by having access to multiple sources of funding, in addition to our own internal funds.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) John Kaiser, Graham Ebers, Bernie Pich, and Damon Emes be thanked for attending the Committee;
- 2) Information regarding the balance of the Council's rental income from the three different portfolios, and information regarding the regeneration income to debt query be included in the minutes;
- 3) The report, questions, and responses be used within the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee's overall report on WBC's initial response to the C-19 pandemic.

33. COVID-19 RESPONSE - STAFF REDEPLOYMENT

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 15 to 24, which outlined the staff redeployment process put in place as part of Wokingham Borough Council's (WBC's) initial response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The report stated that a cross-directorate approach was taken, by quantifying and identifying the key needs within the organisation. A framework document was created, and the project was supported by the Corporate Leadership Team. The key to the whole process was all directorates working together, whilst understanding the needs of each specific service and redeploying staff from service areas which had capacity. Training support was provided to staff prior to redeployment where required. At the peak, 107 members of staff were redeployed across the organisation, and going forwards WBC now had a framework and skills tracker in place should the need arise once more.

Graham Ebers (Deputy Chief Executive), Sarah Swindley (Lead Specialist, HR) and Joelle Cooper (Senior Specialist, HR) attended the meeting to answer any Member queries.

During the ensuing discussions, Members raised the following points and queries:

- The Committee wished to thank all members of staff who had been redeployed, thereby ensuring service continuity for WBC and its partners;
- Were there any plans to continue collaboration with third party organisations post Covid-19? Officer response – This was an area which officers were looking in to. During the pandemic, WBC had fostered some really strong positive relationships, and this would be continued as part of WBC's Continuous Improvement Programme;
- Were there any redeployed staff who may not return to their original role for some time? Officer response – There were currently four redeployed staff within the organisation, and officers were working closely to assess whether there was a

longer term need, and how to resource that need. These areas would be looked at under the Continuous Improvement Programme, and some permanent changes may be a positive outcome in the long term;

- How were the funds found for additional payments to staff operating in a role with a higher grade than that of their original role? Officer response – The budgetary areas were complex, and answers to issues such as this would be better answered during the Committee’s annual review of the Medium Term Financial Plan;
- The more WBC could do to maintain collaborative working, both internally and with our partners, the better the service that could be provided for our residents.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Graham Ebers, Sarah Swindley and Joelle Cooper be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) The report, questions, and responses be used within the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee’s overall report on WBC’s initial response to the C-19 pandemic.

34. COVID-19 - COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT RESPONSE

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 25 to 32, which outlined Wokingham Borough Council’s (WBC’s) initial response with regards to communications and engagement to the Covid-19 pandemic.

This report summarised how WBC sought to support the community through the pandemic with timely and targeted communications, including a focus on particular groups such as the elderly, the BAME community, and people with underlying health conditions. Methods of communication included social media, printed flyers, and direct contact with voluntary and community organisations.

David Allen (Communications, Engagement & Marketing Manager) attended the meeting to answer any Member queries.

During the ensuing discussions, Members raised the following points and queries:

- Why was the offer of printed flyer distribution via political parties discounted? Officer response – There was an issue with getting full delivery coverage of the Borough via these means. WBC were very grateful for all volunteers who helped out with delivery of the printed flyers. If possible, Royal Mail would be used in future as they were more consistent and had coverage of the entire Borough.
- What was the feedback from the communications placed in the local papers? Officer response – Local papers allowed for particular demographics to be targeted, who may otherwise be missed using other means such as social media and online communications. All communications placed within local papers were also published online, to allow as many people as possible to receive the same information.
- Were there any potential changes to future communications based on lessons learned from the first wave of Covid-19? Officer response – In future, officers would

endeavour to target particular groups of people. This could be achieved by working with specific organisations such as universities.

- It was noted that the Leader and Deputy Leader held regular briefings with opposition Group Leaders throughout the first wave. This was very useful and much appreciated, and was a different experience that seen in some other Local Authorities.
- It was noted that going forwards, WBC needed to be able to target younger demographics, perhaps by engaging with 6th forms and informing students why restrictions were being put in place and how people should be acting. Should a second wave fully take hold, it was noted that further efforts should be made to locally reach out to the elderly, BAME groups and vulnerable groups. Officer response – Throughout the national lockdown, improvements were made to the way WBC communicated with BAME and vulnerable groups of people. WBC had direct contacts within the BAME communities, and more written communications would be put in place moving forwards. Officers would look to improve communications with the elderly, and hope that the community would continue to look out for each other via a fostered community spirit.
- It was noted that WBC now had a list of approximately 4,500 clinically vulnerable individuals who could be contacted when required.
- How many individuals from the BAME communities were within the 4,500 clinically vulnerable individuals? Officer response – Officers did not have ethnicity data on hand. However, this would be looked into.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) David Allen be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) The report, questions, and responses be used within the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee's overall report on WBC's initial response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

35. COVID-19 RESPONSE - COMMUNITY SAFETY

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 33 to 40, which outlined Wokingham Borough Council's (WBC's) initial response with regards to the community safety response to the Covid-19 (C-19) pandemic.

The report outlined a range of issues, including domestic abuse, parks and open spaces, play areas, fly tipping, and bonfires in addition to a range of other issues and topics.

The report concluded that the national lockdown had presented a range of new and unexpected challenges, in addition to exacerbating issues traditionally seen within holiday periods. WBC would therefore continue to work with its partners on a range of challenges in order to deliver key services to residents.

There had been some frustrations regarding the understanding of what powers a Local Authority had to deal with some of the issues outlined within the report, and there

needed to be expectation management with regards to these issues as many of them had to be dealt with by the police service.

Michael Firmager (Deputy Executive Member for Environment and Leisure) and Nicholas Austin (Interim Assistant Director – Customer and Localities) attended the meeting to answer Member queries.

During the ensuing discussions, Members raised the following points and queries:

- How effective were dispersal orders? Officer response – A number of these orders had been made during lockdown. The main goal was to engage with repeat underage offenders in order that positive changes could be made.
- There had been a large increase in the amount of bonfires throughout lockdown, which had generated a number of complaints. Were there any additional powers available to WBC to help enforce this? Officer response – Should black smoke be present at a bonfire, then an environmental notice could be served should the appropriate officer attend the scene. A communications release did ask residents to be considerate with their usage of bonfires throughout lockdown. However, in the absence of black smoke or continual bonfires then only advisory communications could be made. There was not a blanket solution. With regards to commercial bonfires, these could often release toxic fumes into the environment. WBC were in the process of being very strict with commercial sites using bonfires to get rid of their waste, and fines of up to £5,000 could be issued on the second offence.
- What could be done to assist with the increasing numbers of domestic abuse victims? Officer response – A home refuge service was available which allowed for individuals to get away from their abusers, and WBC worked closely with Berkshire Women’s Aid to reach out to victims. The key was about getting individuals to feel confident about referring themselves and getting the appropriate support.
- Were anti-social behaviour problems being dealt with effectively? Officer response – There were a number of particular ‘trouble’ areas within the Borough, which therefore had more support to deal with any issues. Anti-social behaviour was an acute problem which was difficult to deal with due to the sporadic nature of the incidents.
- It was noted that the management of play areas was handled very well throughout the closure and reopening phases, and thanks went out to the police and WBC officers for their support.
- Was the illegal encampment that settled within the Borough during lockdown dealt with? Officer response – Yes, the encampment was moved on and clean-up costs were issued to those responsible.
- It was noted that a good effort had been made to reduce incidences of fly tipping within the Borough. Officer comment – Members and residents should report phone numbers seen on flyers for suspicious waste removal services to help fill in the information gap.
- It was noted that the ‘Prevent’ training leaflet associated with the ‘Channel Panel’ would be circulated outside of the meeting.

- It was requested that WBC had both a Member and officer presence on the Wokingham Independent Advisory Group forum.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Michael Firmager and Nicholas Austin be thanked for attending the Committee;
- 2) The 'Prevent' training leaflet associated with the 'Channel Panel' be circulated outside of the meeting;
- 3) Officers investigate options so that WBC had both a Member and officer presence on the Wokingham Independent Advisory Group forum;
- 4) The report, questions, and responses be used within the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee's overall report on WBC's initial response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

36. COVID 19 - COMMUNITY RESPONSE

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 41 to 66, which outlined Wokingham Borough Council's (WBC's) initial response with regards to the community response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The report outlined that the ambition was to support vital community services and deliver public health advice for a consistent response. Communications were critical in enabling an effective response throughout the lockdown, whilst supporting the Borough's vulnerable residents. WBC proactively telephoned the most vulnerable residents within the Borough as a welfare check, to make sure they had access to vital services and resources.

WBC ran the community hub to provide access to food for residents who were in need. Personal protective equipment (PPE) was also provided to the voluntary sector as and when required. A mobility programme was undertaken in order to allow shielded residents to regain any lost mobility as a result of lockdown shielding. All aspects of the community response were regularly reviewed and adjusted.

Regarding the Wokingham Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), it was stated that a large part of the response was down to assistance from WBC officers, and the CAB was very thankful to Martin Sloan and a range of other WBC officers for their support. The 'one front door' system helped over 3200 clients' access a range of services and support. The CAB had received a 180% increase in employment related inquiries throughout the lockdown period. Calls were received for help with food and prescriptions, and other needs such as housing were identified during these calls. Feedback on the support offered via the CAB was received and monitored throughout lockdown.

Martin Sloan (Head of Service – Community Care Services) and Jake Morrison (Chief Executive – Wokingham CAB) attended the meeting to answer Member queries.

During the ensuing discussions, Members raised the following points and queries:

- It was noted that the overall community response had been fantastic, and a job well done. The 'one front door' system worked very well as it allowed residents needs to

be picked up in a central place. Members were keen to make sure that the CAB was properly funded to allow for the same level of service to be delivered going forwards.

- How long would it take to set up the food hub again if required? Officer response – The plan was that the food hub would not be required to be set up again, as there were now better avenues to distribute food to those in need. If a food hub was required, the Borough leisure centres would need to be closed and volunteers would need to be sought. If necessary, the hub could be opened within days. However, it was likely that other avenues would provide better options.
- Would WBC be reimbursed for PPE given out to voluntary organisations? Officer response – The Government has told Local Authorities to provide PPE to suitable organisations for the time being, and hopefully grant funding would be forthcoming.
- It was noted that the national food parcel scheme was not particularly effective, and this would be better delivered on a local level. WBC was prepared to deliver this within the Borough if required.
- Was the voluntary sector mental health contact funded by WBC? Officer response – Mental health issues were identified and signposted and approved via the Integration Board through the ring-fenced Better Care Fund. This filled the gap in the service that WBC offered, and allowed for other parts of the voluntary sector to receive the appropriate training.
- It was noted by Jake Morrison that the CAB wanted to see if the ‘one front door’ system could offer additional help, by tracing whether wellbeing of service users was better after 3 to 4 weeks from the first point of contact. This would allow the CAB to view the bigger picture and thereby achieve better outcomes for clients. There were studies which showed plenty of links between other issues and mental health, and this was therefore a priority.
- It was noted that WBC had been ahead of the curve in several areas, including requiring those entering care homes from hospital to have had a negative Covid-19 test, and providing PPE to those organisations in need before the Government made this a policy. In addition, WBC managed to find housing for all those homeless individuals who wished to have housing provided. WBC would continue to bid for additional funding to cover services where available.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Martin Sloan and Jake Morrison be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) The report, questions, and responses be used within the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee’s overall report on WBC’s initial response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

VIRTUAL MEETINGS

MINUTES (EXTRACT) OF A VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE COMMUNITY AND CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 2 SEPTEMBER 2020

Committee Members Present

Councillors: Guy Grandison (Chairman), Oliver Whittle (Vice-Chairman), Shirley Boyt, Paul Fishwick, Graham Howe, Clive Jones and Abdul Loyes

Officers Present

Neil Carr (Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist), Andy Glencross (Assistant Director – Highways & Transport), Anne Hunter (Lead Democratic & Electoral Services Specialist), Aivaras Jasiunas (Senior Specialist, Asset Management) and Callum Wernham (Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist)

26. VIRTUAL MEETING REVIEW

The Committee considered a report, set out in agenda pages 25 to 30, which outlined the implementation of virtual Council meetings, and potential next steps moving forwards.

The report stated the initial options considered during the beginning of national lockdown, and the reasons behind why some options were not implemented. A standard Microsoft Teams meeting was chosen, and broadcast using the Open Broadcasting Software (OBS) facility. This allowed the ‘flow’ of a virtual meeting to be as close to that of a standard physical meeting as possible.

The report also outlined the next steps in Wokingham Borough Council’s (WBC’s) approach to holding Council meetings, including the possibility of hybridised meetings. Hybrid meetings would provide several logistical and technical challenges, however officer were working to provide solutions to be able to run these meetings in the future, in a safe and professional manner.

The report stated a selection of achievements associated with the running of virtual meetings, including running the full schedule of meetings for the past few months, and the livestreaming of all public meetings on WBC’s YouTube page.

Anne Hunter (Lead Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist) and Callum Wernham (Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist) attended the meeting to answer any Member queries.

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

- Should hybrid meetings go ahead, Members within the Council Chamber would need to see and hear the same as those within the virtual call. Officer response – This was agreed, and several tests would be carried out internally prior to any public

meeting being held. Participants, whether virtual or within the Council building, would see and hear as close to the same content as was possible.

- The running of virtual meetings had meant several other benefits had occurred, including reduced heating of the Council offices for evening meetings. This in turn met the Council's Climate Emergency objectives, in addition to allowing participants to join the meeting from wherever was convenient. Hybrid meetings could present additional issues, including the cleansing of the Council chamber after meetings, additional travel to and from the Council offices, and additional heating of the building for evening meetings. Officer comment – Officers had been asked to look into the possibility of running hybrid meetings as there had been an appetite to do so from some Members. Hybrid meetings would not be run unless they were safe for all attendees. Going forward, the plan was to webcast all meetings whether virtual, hybrid or physical. The positive climate benefits of holding virtual meetings were acknowledged by officers, in addition to the logistical benefits of being able to join a meeting from somewhere convenient.
- How many people could attend a hybrid meeting safely? Officer comment – Subject to ongoing government guidance, twenty people could be accommodated safely within the Council Chamber using a two metre separation distance. For now, only the Council Chamber could be considered for hybrid meetings due to the capacity of the room and the implementation of technology in order to enable hybrid meetings.
- Going forward, were there any plans to offer additional support to Members in terms of participating in virtual or hybridised meetings? Officer response – Any Members wishing to have additional training with Microsoft Teams could approach Democratic Services for a training slot to be arranged. Any Chairman who would be chairing a hybridised meeting would be offered additional training.
- Could the virtual meeting protocol be reinforced for attendees that were not following the procedure? Officer response – Attendees could be reminded of, and referred to, the virtual meeting protocol as agreed by Council.
- Was there the ability to mute participants and turn off participants' video during a meeting? Officer response – Democratic Services officers were able to mute participants that may have forgotten to turn off their microphone. Officers would message a user who may have forgotten to turn off their video, asking them to do so. A last resort would be the removal of the participant from the call, and this would only occur after several reminders and persistent disruptive behaviour.
- Had an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) been carried out with regards to the holding of virtual meetings? Officer response – An initial EQIA had been carried out, and was appended to the virtual meeting protocol report as agreed by Council. The EQIA identified a 'no/neutral' impact in 6 of the 9 protected categories, and a low impact in the remaining 3. Subtitles were available on the YouTube video to give viewers a good representation of the discussions at the meetings.
- Were there any voting modules associated with Microsoft Teams? Officer response – Currently, only the 'hands up' feature was integrated within teams to allow for voting.

- The Chairman proposed that a letter be written to the Minister for Local Government, asking that the regulations allowing for specific virtual meetings to take place be made permanent, at the discretion of each Local Authority. It was noted that some meetings may not be appropriate for virtual attendance in perpetuity, and these details could be agreed by each Local Authority at a later date should regulations permit. This proposal was agreed by the Committee. Officers commented that it was hoped that a consultation regarding virtual meeting regulations would be carried out by the Government.
- Regarding meeting broadcasting, how many officers were undertaking this task? Officer response – Originally, one Democratic Services officer undertook the broadcasting of all meetings. After a short time, a further two colleagues situated within the IT department have also been broadcasting Council meetings. The limiting factor was the required upload speed available at the homes of staff members. Many broadband providers were inundated with requests for upgrades and maintenance, making it difficult for staff members to upgrade their connection to the required level. It was hoped that further staff members would have the required upload speed in future.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Anne Hunter and Callum Wernham be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) Members contact Democratic Services with any practical suggestions on how virtual meetings may be improved in the future;
- 3) Members continue to work alongside Democratic Services to enable effective Council meetings to be held;
- 4) A letter be sent to the Minister for Local Government, asking that the regulations allowing for specific virtual meetings to take place be made permanent, at the discretion of each Local Authority. The most suitable route for this communication, be that from the Committee, the Executive, the Council, or from the Chief Executive, would be explored outside of the meeting.

OUTBREAK MANAGEMENT PLAN

MINUTES (EXTRACT) OF A MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE HELD ON 22 JULY 2020

Committee Members Present

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

Other Councillors Present

Councillors: Emma Hobbs

Officers Present

Nick Austin, Assistant Director, Customer and Localities
Nigel Bailey, Assistant Director, Housing and Place Commissioning
Neil Carr, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist
Susan Parsonage, Chief Executive
Meradin Peachey, Public Health Consultant

16. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

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

16.1 Caroline Smith asked the Chairman the following question:

One of the alarming statistics to come out since the beginning of the Covid 19 pandemic is that certain ethnic minorities are disproportionately represented in the number of deaths. What is Wokingham doing to help understand why this is happening and going forwards, trying to reduce this aspect in the event of a second wave of Covid-19?

Answer

Public Health England published a report in June 2020, titled **Beyond the data: understanding the impact of Covid-19 on Black and Minority Ethnic Groups**.

The report confirmed that death rates linked to Covid-19 were higher for Black and Asian ethnic groups when compared to White ethnic groups.

The report made a number of recommendations around improved data collection, community research, health impact assessments and occupational risk assessments. It also emphasised the importance of targeted education and prevention campaigns and ensuring that Covid-19 recovery strategies actively aim to reduce inequalities caused by the wider determinants of health such as educational attainment, income and housing.

The Council will be working with Public Health England, other health partners and the BAME community to understand and address local issues in order to mitigate the impact of any future Covid-19 outbreaks.

In the meantime, the Council has designed an individual risk assessment to support its BAME employees in considering any additional measures that may be needed to ensure that they are protected and supported.

17. WOKINGHAM BOROUGH COVID-19 OUTBREAK MANAGEMENT PLAN

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 19 to 34 and the supplementary Agenda, which gave details of the Borough's Covid-19 Outbreak Management Plan.

Susan Parsonage (Chief Executive) and Meradin Peachey (Public Health Consultant) attended the meeting to present the plan and to answer Member questions.

The Plan aimed to establish a clear process for controlling any further Covid-19 outbreaks and to minimise any impacts on the Borough's residents. Achieving this aim would require a whole system approach across local and national government, the NHS, businesses, the voluntary sector, community partners and residents.

The Outbreak Management Plan focussed on settings and population groups where there were particular risks relating to Covid-19. The plan focussed on a number of key themes, viz:

- Care settings and schools;
- High risk workplaces, communities and locations;
- Mobile testing units and local testing approaches;
- Contact tracing in complex settings – led by Public Health England;
- Data integration – used to identify hotspots and target responses;
- Vulnerable people – support for diverse communities;
- Local Boards – managing outbreaks through Incident Control teams.

In the event of a Covid-19 outbreak, a range of measures could be implemented, including:

- Specific advice on Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), infection prevention, control measures and contact tracing;
- Testing of people with and without symptoms;
- Restricting attendance at an outbreak site;
- Cancelling events;
- Closing community facilities and other premises, if required;
- Alert messaging.

The Outbreak Management Plan confirmed that the Director of Public Health retained primary responsibility for the health of the local community, working closely with other professional and organisations such as WBC. The Plan would be triggered when there were suspected or confirmed Covid-19 outbreaks in any setting type, or significant community spread. Public Health England would work with partners, including the Council, to gather intelligence via the national Test and Trace service, laboratory results and local partner feedback. Public Health England would conduct a risk assessment with the setting, provide infection control and advice on testing as appropriate. The

Council would provide support to the outbreak setting and additional capacity for contact tracing, as necessary.

The Plan stated that strong engagement and communication with the local community was essential. A Local Outbreak Communication Plan would focus on two key areas:

- Preventative measures – building confidence in the NHS Test and Trace service, observing social distancing measures, maintaining good hand hygiene, wearing face coverings in specific locations and supporting people who are medically vulnerable, self-isolating or shielding.
- Targeted messages in response to local outbreaks – supporting high risk settings, responding to public enquiries, explaining any restrictions in place and keeping residents up-to-date as restrictions change or lift.

Given the likelihood that Covid-19 outbreaks would spread beyond local authority boundaries, it would be important to develop good communication links with neighbouring councils. It was confirmed that key contacts had already been established with the Council's neighbours.

It was confirmed that the Plan would be updated on a monthly basis following Government policy changes and the outcome of scenario testing. Some elements of the Plan already required updating following recent Government announcements.

In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following issues:

A resident had complained about a hairdressing outlet in Wokingham which appeared not to be complying with social distancing requirements. Should this be reported? It was confirmed that a key element of local intelligence was feedback from residents about issues such as this. If reported, this issue would be followed up with a discussion with the business causing concern.

What was the PHE/Council involvement in the recent Tesco cases of Covid-19? It was confirmed that the Plan and supporting systems had been in a developmental phase which meant that all new cases were not reported. Going forwards, the aim was to ensure that as many new cases as possible were reported through the contact tracing system set out in the plan. (Note: it was subsequently confirmed that Public Health England were not initially made aware of the local Tesco cases).

Following the national reporting on the increased risk from Covid-19 to vulnerable communities, such as BAME and the elderly, how were the Council's communications tailored to educate and support these groups? It was confirmed that communications were targeted at specific groups and this would be maintained, as described in the Plan. Discussions were being held with the Borough's BME Forum to explore the issues set out earlier in the response to Councillor Smith's Member question.

Was the Community Hub still operating and, if so, how had it changed since the height of the pandemic? It was confirmed that the Community Hub was still open for business but had been scaled back in recent weeks. It was noted that the voluntary sector had provided enormous support to the community response to the pandemic.

The Plan referred to the creation of class “bubbles” in schools, made up of no more than 15 children and up to two adults. It was understood that whole class bubbles were now in place. It was confirmed that the statement in the Plan had been superseded by Government advice. This was an example of the changing environment and the reason why the plan would be update each month.

Feedback following the recent lockdown in Leicester indicated that Leicester City Council had received key information from the local newspaper. Has the quality and quantity of data improved? It was confirmed that data was much improved and would facilitate early decisions. More specific data was now available on the exact location of cases and the breakdown of cases by age group.

The wearing of face coverings was now mandatory in shops. What enforcement took place if members of the public did not comply? It was confirmed that discussions were ongoing with shops and businesses about social distancing requirements. Essentially, enforcement was a police matter, but Council staff were providing advice and support.

In relation to communication with the public, was there a risk of information fatigue resulting in key messages not being absorbed? It was confirmed that there was no local evidence of information fatigue. The Local Outbreak Communication Plan aimed to build on existing activity and deliver effective messaging on prevention and targeted messaging in the event of local outbreaks.

There were concerns about social distancing at Dinton Pastures and the availability of hand sanitising facilities when the café was closed. It was confirmed that, following investigation, a written response would be provided on these issues.

What lessons had been learned from the Leicester lockdown in relation to the BAME community, for example in relation to gatherings and risk assessments for local mosques? It was confirmed that further consideration would be given to these points.

In relation to the role of Members in supporting local residents and reporting on local intelligence, could more guidance be provided? It was confirmed that consideration would be given to the development of specific guidance for Members to support them in their work in the local community.

RESOLVED That:

- 1) Susan Parsonage and Meradin Peachey be thanked for attending the meeting to present the Outbreak Management Plan and answer Member questions;
- 2) Susan Parsonage be asked to thank Officers from WBC and the relevant partner agencies for the significant amount of work carried out in developing the Plan;
- 3) responses be provided to the specific issues raised by members of the Committee;
- 4) Officers consider the production of specific guidance for Members to inform their work in supporting local communities.