

## MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE HELD ON 21 OCTOBER 2020 FROM 7.00 PM TO 10.40 PM

### **Committee Members Present**

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

### **Other Councillors Present**

Councillors: John Halsall

### **Officers Present**

Laura Callan, Strategy and Planning Manager, Insight and Change  
Neil Carr, Democratic and Electoral Services Specialist  
Susan Parsonage, Chief Executive  
Meradin Peachey, Public Health Consultant  
Simon Price, Assistant Director, Housing, Income and Assessment  
Sally Watkins, Assistant Director, Digital and Change

### **40. APOLOGIES**

There were no apologies for absence.

### **41. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 16 September 2020 were confirmed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman at a later date.

### **42. DECLARATION OF INTEREST**

Declarations of interest were submitted from:

- Andy Croy – volunteered at the Wokingham Foodbank and the Woodley Lunch Bunch and his mother volunteered at Citizens Advice;
- Paul Fishwick – received a business grant as a Director of a small business and his wife volunteered at the Community Hub;
- Jim Frewin – volunteered to supply food for the maternity unit at the RBH;
- Guy Grandison – volunteered to produce PPE for distribution to charities and the NHS;
- Emma Hobbs – volunteered at the Community Hub and was a trustee of Citizens Advice;
- Sarah Kerr – volunteered at the Community Hub;
- Andrew Mickleburgh – volunteered at the Community Hub;
- Alison Swaddle – volunteered at the Community Hub.

The Chairman thanked Members for their efforts in contributing to the community response to the pandemic.

### **43. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no public questions.

### **44. MEMBER QUESTION TIME**

There were no Member questions.

#### **45. UPDATE ON COVID-19: CORPORATE RECOVERY/RESIDENT SURVEY/TEST & TRACE**

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 13 to 24, which provided an update on the Council's Covid-19 recovery activity. The report also gave details of the feedback provided by a Residents' Survey and outlined progress relating to Test and Trace and the Borough's Outbreak Management Plan.

Susan Parsonage (Chief Executive), Sally Watkins (Assistant Director, Digital and Change) and Meradin Peachey (Public Health Consultant) attended the meeting to present the report and answer Member questions.

The report stated that the Council's Covid-19 recovery activity was a co-ordinated programme of work which supported Council services and the community in reconstruction of economic infrastructure and restoration of emotional, social and physical wellbeing for residents across the Borough. In addition, the process had identified strategic opportunities which went beyond traditional ways of working, aiming to achieve longer term benefits for the community.

The Corporate Recovery Programme (CRP) was initiated by the Council's Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) in May 2020. The programme aimed to address four key themes:

- Impact – to ensure that WBC understood the impact of Covid-19 on the community and the Council (services, staff, budgets);
- Options – to identify options to harness the innovation which arose during the initial response phase;
- Co-ordination – co-ordinating services and the community in the reconstruction of economic infrastructure and restoration of emotional and physical wellbeing;
- Restoration – establishing a framework of support for businesses and any affected areas in the Borough.

The CRP initially comprised ten workstreams which aligned with individual service recovery activity, with CLT having overall responsibility for the Recovery Co-ordinating Group. The ten workstreams included community engagement, community wellbeing, test and trace, communications, business and economy, staff and accommodation and contracts and finance. By working alongside partners such as Town and Parish Councils, the voluntary sector and other community groups, the Council was able to ensure a community voice in the recovery planning process.

In order to assess the impact of Covid-19 on residents, businesses, partners and WBC staff, the Council undertook several engagement activities including an online residents' survey, a workshop for internal and external partners and interviews to develop deeper insights on service delivery.

The residents' survey garnered 1,477 responses and produced the following headline messages:

- 67% satisfaction with the Council's overall response to the pandemic;
- Ability to connect with family, friends and community, stress and anxiety and diet/eating habits were the top three issues residents struggled with during the lockdown period;

- Supporting local businesses/employment, mental health and reducing social isolation and loneliness in vulnerable people were seen as the biggest future priorities for the Council;
- The biggest positive impacts of Covid-19 were the environmental impact, time spent indoors, sense of community and willingness to help each other, time spent with immediate family and work-life balance.

The report stated that Test and Trace at the local level had two main components – outbreak management and case tracing. These areas, led by the local Public Health team, connected to the national response to Covid-19. Governance of Outbreak Management consisted of:

- Gold Command – comprising CLT and Public Health;
- The Local Outbreak Engagement Board (LOEB) chaired by the Council Leader;
- The Outbreak Management Group – led by WBC Public Health and including WBC Assistant Directors;
- The Incident Control Team – led by Public Health England – attended by local Public Health Teams and WBC senior managers.

The report gave details of the recent launch of local contact tracing which aimed to supplement the NHS Test and Trace system. Where contact could not be made through the national system, resident data was provided to the Council. The Council would then use local intelligence to contact those residents with positive test results. A team of contact tracers had been developed. The team could be flexed as required, depending on the number of positive cases in the Borough.

**In the ensuing discussion, Members raised the following points:**

In relation to communications around the new QR codes made available for hospitality and leisure, why was there a delay in the Council's press release? Sally Watkins undertook to check on the initial communications and provide feedback.

WBC Case Tracing – what were the resource implications and which services would be impacted by the redeployment of staff? Sally Watkins stated that the Council had sought volunteers to carry out this work. The Council's involvement had commenced on 13 October 2020. Modelling had been carried out in order to assess the resource implications based on 50 cases per day, up to 400 cases per day. As redeployment happened an assessment would be made on which services to pause. In the meantime, the Council was seeking to take advantage of the Kick Start scheme in order to bring in additional resources.

In relation to the Residents' Survey – what was the intention, what was the Council's response to the feedback provided and were there plans to carry out further surveys? Sally Watkins commented that the survey had provided useful information on the impact of the pandemic on residents and their concerns and challenges for the future. At the moment there was no specific date for a follow-up survey. A more targeted follow-up, for example in relation to mental health, would provide useful information. Mental health was an issue of specific focus for the Council.

A key issue was the impact of the pandemic on Council staff in relation to fatigue, stress and mental health. Susan Parsonage stated that the wellbeing of staff was very important. Support measures were in place for staff working remotely and managers were looking out

for signs of stress and burn-out. The absence of face-to-face meetings added a new range of issues to be monitored and managed.

What was the impact of the Berkshire Recovery Group? Sally Watkins stated that the group had been initiated through the Berkshire Chief Executives' group. The aim was to share learning and work together where possible, for example by working with the Local Enterprise Partnership to address the needs of business and make contact with hard to reach companies and local businesses.

The number of Covid-19 cases in the Borough was increasing towards the threshold for Tier 2 restrictions. How confident was the Council that it could avoid moving through Tier 2 into Tier 3? Meradin Peachey confirmed that infection rates were increasing in the Borough (currently 77 per 100,000). To date the Council and partners had been very effective at managing outbreak, so there was some confidence that Tier 3 could be avoided. Susan Parsonage commented that the Borough's residents had, to date, been largely compliant with the Government guidelines. The Council was working hard to develop better data and local intelligence about the potential sources of community transmission of the virus. This data would help to shape the Council's future actions and help to keep infection rates as low as possible.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) Susan Parsonage, Meradin Peachey and Sally Watkins be thanked for attending the meeting to provide the update on current activity relating to the Covid-19 pandemic;
- 2) the updates on corporate recovery, residents' survey and test and trace be noted;
- 3) the Committee receive further updates on the latest developments relating to the Covid-19 pandemic at future meetings.

#### **46. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PEOPLE WITH LOW INCOME THE UNEMPLOYED AND THE HOMELESS**

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 25 to 200, which gave details of the impact of Covid-19 on poverty in the Borough, specifically individuals and families with low incomes, unemployment and homelessness.

Laura Callan (Strategy and Planning Manager, Insight and Change) attended the meeting to introduce the report. Also in attendance were Simon Price (Assistant Director, Housing, Income and Assessments), Emma Cantrell (First Days Children's Charity), Annette Medhurst (Wokingham Foodbank) and Jake Morrison (Citizens Advice Wokingham).

The report stated that, whilst the Borough had consistently been one of the least deprived unitary authorities in England, there were individuals and families living on low incomes and there were challenges to ensure that opportunities were available for every resident. The End Child Poverty report indicated that, after housing costs, 17% of children in the Borough were living in poverty.

The Covid-19 pandemic had had a significant impact with the shut-down of large sections of the economy. The impacts included:

- A 223% increase in claims for out of work benefits between February and August 2020;
- Furloughing of 21,700 people in the Borough as at August 2020;
- A disproportionate impact on workers from the BAME community, women, young workers, low paid and disabled workers;
- 120 young people at risk of not being in education, employment or training (NEET), significantly up on previous years;
- Increase in demand for support from Citizens Advice;
- 220% increase in people accessing the Wokingham Foodbank during March-August 2020, compared to 2019;
- 479% increase in children eligible for free school meals between March-August 2020, compared to 2019.

The report stated that the Council had worked with partners to deliver a number of interventions, including:

- Operation of the Citizens Advice “One Front Door”;
- The “All In” policy which supported rough sleepers into accommodation;
- Financial support to providers in the community and voluntary sector;
- Flexible repayment plans for Council Tax and the Council Tax Hardship Fund;
- Support to residents through the Community Engagement Team;
- Support for Council tenants delivered by the Tenancy Sustainment Team.

The report stated that, whilst there were a number of intervention points available to the Council, not all issues could be resolved locally. In some instances, the Council was restricted by Government policy or may not be best placed to deliver the appropriate solution. The Council would continue to monitor data and local intelligence, working with partners to understand and need and to establish the most effective intervention points to support individuals and families.

### **In the ensuing discussion Members and guests raised the following points:**

It was important to use language carefully when talking about poverty. The Borough was frequently referred to as being one of the healthiest and wealthiest in the country. However, as the report indicated, there were over 7,000 children living in relative poverty.

Jake Morrison stated that Citizens Advice Wokingham were working on a report for the Borough, Town and Parish Councils which would give details of deprivation levels, broken down into local areas. Citizens Advice was also running national campaigns relating to fair and safe employment and improvements to Universal Credit. Jake commented that joint working through the pandemic had taken partnerships to a new level. Citizens Advice were providing training for front-line WBC staff on issues such as mental health. Any support from Members relating to the Citizens Advice national campaigns would be welcome.

Emma Cantrell stated that First Days was keen to work in partnership with the Council and other stakeholders. Effective partnership working was not always about funding. Working together may drive innovation which could actually make services more targeted and efficient, thereby save money. Emma agreed that the co-production of an anti-poverty strategy would be a positive step forwards.

Annette Medhurst stated that, although the number of people accessing the Wokingham Foodbank had returned close to pre-pandemic levels, there was likely to be an increase as

Government support reduced and unemployment increased in the Borough. Annette was now in a regular dialogue with senior leaders at the Council which was a positive development.

Andy Croy raised the issue of care leavers who, currently, were required to pay Council Tax between the ages of 21 to 25. Andy referred to a discussion at the recent Corporate Parenting Board meeting and suggested that the Committee may wish to consider making a recommendation to the Executive on this issue. Susan Parsonage commented that this issue should be considered as part of the Budget process as there were already overspends within Children's Services budgets.

What was the local impact of the pandemic on poverty levels in the BAME community? Jake Morrison commented that there had been a positive response to the BAME community, helped by the One Front Door approach. This had been supported by the Council's regular communications. Citizens Advice were aiming to work with specific groups within the BAME community to improve awareness and understanding of support available locally. The stated aim of developing greater local intelligence would support this process. The Council's community engagement officers were also working in local communities to support individuals and families.

Was there a link between zero-hours contracts and poverty? Laura Callan commented that insecure employment did have an impact as people may not be able to work enough hours each week to earn enough to take them out of poverty.

As a result of the pandemic, were local schools able to provide hot lunches for their pupils? Laura Callan commented that the Council did monitor the contract with local schools. Whilst, initially, a number of schools had moved to packed lunches, there was a movement back to the provision of hot meals. Further information on this point could be shared with Members.

In conclusion, Susan Parsonage stated that the Council was committed to working in partnership. The discussion tonight had highlighted the importance of more detailed local intelligence and insight. The Council wanted to work with key stakeholders to understand the experience of individuals and families in the Borough. Improved knowledge about local needs would inform the Council's strategic direction for example through the co-production of an anti-poverty strategy. As the discussion illustrated, effective partnership working was not necessarily about funding. It was about working together to develop new ideas and new opportunities which may actually save money in the long run. Covid-19 had led to a greater focus on the impact of the pandemic on the poorest members of the community. However, the Council was committed to working in partnership to tackle this issue, regardless of the pandemic.

**Following the discussion, the Committee considered appropriate recommendations to the Executive, as follows:**

It was moved by Andrew Mickleburgh and seconded by Sarah Kerr that:

“the Executive, in view of the multi-dimensional nature of “poverty”, in all discussions, data, policy and action, focus on all who are suffering different types of rising and significant levels of hardship.”

On being put to the vote the proposal was **agreed**.

It was moved by Andy Croy and seconded by Sarah Kerr that:

“the Executive urgently re-examine the issue of 21 to 25 year old care leavers paying Council Tax, for the remainder of this financial year.”

On being put to the vote the proposal was **agreed**.

It was moved by Andy Croy and seconded by Sarah Kerr that:

“The Executive instruct Officers to urgently engage with poverty facing charities to formalise 1) communications and 2) support offered by Wokingham Borough Council to these charities”.

On being put to the vote the proposal was **not agreed**.

It was proposed by Sarah Kerr and seconded by Paul Fishwick that:

“This Committee recommend to the Executive that this Council will co-produce an anti-poverty strategy;

On being put to the vote the proposal was **agreed**.

It was proposed by Sarah Kerr and seconded by Pauline Helliar-Symons that:

“this Committee recommend to the Executive that this Council will limit the use of comparative data and benchmarking narrative, such as being ranked the least deprived upper tier authority, when talking about poverty, except when making specific reference to reduction in poverty.”

On being put to the vote the proposal was **agreed**.

**RESOLVED** that:

- 1) Laura Callan, Simon Price, Emma Cantrell, Annette Medhurst and Jake Morrison be thanked for attending the meeting;
- 2) the Committee recommend to the Executive that the Council, in view of the multi-dimensional nature of “poverty”, in all discussions, data, policy and action, focus on all who are suffering different types of rising and significant levels of hardship;
- 3) the Committee recommend to the Executive that it urgently re-examines the issue of 21 to 25 year old care leavers paying Council Tax, for the remainder of this financial year;
- 4) the Committee recommend to the Executive that this Council will co-produce an anti-poverty strategy;
- 5) the Committee recommend to the Executive that this Council will limit the use of comparative data and benchmarking narrative, such as being ranked the least deprived upper tier authority, when talking about poverty, except when making specific reference to reduction in poverty.

#### **47. SCRUTINY OF WBC RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

The Committee considered a report, set out at Agenda pages 201 to 234, which provided an update on the Overview and Scrutiny Committees' review of the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The report stated that, at its meeting on 24 June 2020, the Committee had considered a report on the Council's initial response to the pandemic. 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 their findings. The key themes were:

- Care homes;
- Effectiveness of health partnerships;
- Schools and Children's Services;
- Impact on mental health;
- Finance and business;
- Community response;
- Community safety/localities;
- Communication and engagement;
- Recovery;
- Test and Trace;
- Poverty – impact on the poorest, the unemployed and the homeless;
- Maintaining democracy.

Appended to the report were copies of minutes and briefings from the Overview and Scrutiny Committees which provided evidence of the issues considered and the findings to date.

#### **In the ensuing discussion Members raised the following points:**

In relation to the transmission of the virus between young people (18 to 35) and the over-60s, what could the Council do to increase awareness and support appropriate behaviours? Meradin Peachy commented that work was ongoing to understand the perspective of young people and any factors which prevented adherence to the guidelines. This was especially important for young people in the care system. A lot of work had been done in relation to vulnerable children in local schools. Another issue was the risks relating to university students, especially those who worked in or visited care homes. This should be factored in to the risk assessments carried out by care homes.

The Chairman confirmed that the intention was to bring the findings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees together in a report to the Executive. A draft of the report would be submitted to the meeting of the Committee on 25 November 2020 for consideration.

#### **RESOLVED** That:

- 1) the progress reported by the Overview and Scrutiny Committees in scrutinising the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic be noted;
- 2) the Committee consider a draft report on the Scrutiny review of the Council's response to the pandemic at its meeting on 25 November 2020;

- 3) the Committee recommend to the Executive that local care homes be advised to review risk assessments and ensure appropriate social distancing for young people who work in or visit their homes;
- 4) the Committee's report to the Executive highlight the importance of supporting all aspects of WBC staff welfare as the Council enters into the next phase of the pandemic;
- 5) the Committee's report to the Executive highlight the relative sparsity of data on domestic violence and abuse and emphasise the need for explicit recognition and action;
- 6) the Chairman write to the Chief Executive to request that Council staff be thanked for their outstanding efforts in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, alongside the outstanding work of community volunteers;
- 7) Members receive an updated Council organogram setting out the roles of Officers (down to 3<sup>rd</sup> tier), including any changes relating to the pandemic.

#### **48. CONSIDERATION OF THE CURRENT EXECUTIVE AND IEMD FORWARD PROGRAMMES**

The Committee considered a copy of the Executive Forward Programme and the Executive Member Decision Forward Programme, as set out on Agenda pages 235 to 240.

**RESOLVED:** That the Executive and Individual Executive Member Decision Forward Programmes be noted.

#### **49. O&S COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMMES**

The Committee considered its forward Work Programme and that of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees as set out on Agenda pages 241 to 252.

During the discussion, Members raised the following points:

- Sarah Kerr requested that an item on the development of the proposed co-produced anti-poverty strategy be added to the Work Programme to ensure O&S input into the process;
- Sarah Kerr suggested that the Committee consider adding an item on effective partnership working with charities and other organisations tackling poverty at the meeting on 25 November 2020;
- Sarah Kerr suggested that the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee consider adding an item on the impact of inequality on children and measures to address it at its meeting on 5 November 2020;
- Ken Miall confirmed that Health Overview and Scrutiny items relating to ambulance response times, self-harm and suicide prevention would be timetabled for a meeting of the Committee;
- Guy Grandison confirmed that the Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee would be considering the first tranche of growth bids as part of the

development of the Council's 2021/22 Revenue Budget, at its meeting on 28 October 2020. Further growth bids would be considered at the meeting on 23 November 2020.

**RESOLVED** That:

- 1) the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programmes be noted;
- 2) an item on the development of the proposed co-produced anti-poverty strategy be added to the O&S Management Committee Work Programme to ensure O&S input into the process;
- 3) the Committee consider adding an item on effective partnership working with charities and other organisations tackling poverty, at the meeting on 25 November 2020;
- 4) the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee consider adding an item on the impact of inequality on children and measures to address it, at its meeting on 5 November 2020.