

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE EXECUTIVE
HELD ON 17 DECEMBER 2020 FROM 7.00 PM TO 7.45 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: John Halsall (Chairman), John Kaiser, Parry Batth, UllaKarin Clark, Charlotte Haitham Taylor, Pauline Jorgensen, Charles Margetts, Stuart Munro and Gregor Murray

Other Councillors Present

Laura Blumenthal
Lindsay Ferris
Pauline Helliard-Symons
Abdul Loyes
Barrie Patman

60. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor Wayne Smith.

61. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received.

62. STATEMENT FROM THE LEADER OF COUNCIL

This is the last Executive Meeting of 2020. It has been without doubt a tumultuous year. I would like to start this meeting recalling all those who have sadly passed away this year including:

- The 189 residents who have died with Covid;
- The horrific Forbury murders of James Furlong and his friends; and
- James Box's sudden and unexpected death.

Please could you join me in just a moment's silence.

As we prepare for a Christmas that will, due to Covid, be like no other any of us can recall, I want to take a brief moment to look forward with some hope to 2021.

This has been a terrible year and I do not wish to downplay the suffering people have gone through. Whether you have lost a loved one, struggled with illness, stress or anxiety or have been financially hit by this pandemic. My thoughts are with you and the Council is here to help.

We also have a rising number of cases in the Borough and so must be vigilant and sensible. Keep to the Covid-19 rules and limit the number of people we meet. We were moved into Tier 3 today with the additional restrictions that brings.

As a result of significant data analysis, we have identified and will identify six Wards; the hot spots. Today they are Winnersh, Shinfield, Bulmershe and Whitegates, Loddon, Emmbrook and Sonning where the incidence of Coronavirus at the moment is the highest and will be concentrating our efforts and messaging there. Councillors and residents are asked to work with us to change behaviour. This list of hotspots will change from week to week.

It is vital, therefore, that we remember and keep to the Covid rules and, in particular at this time of year, remember that the more social interaction we have, the more we risk spreading infection.

However, there are reasons to be optimistic in Wokingham Borough thanks to our fantastic voluntary organisations, health and care workers and diligent Council Officers we are coping with Covid-19 collectively, compassionately and with much innovation.

Today we launched one of the first lateral flow testing services in the country, I believe it to be the first, that will help people visit residents in care homes at Christmas. The tests are being offered at Shute End to those with loved ones in those homes that have signed up to the scheme. In this way, we are adding peace of mind to people who want to visit the homes but who, understandably, want to minimise risk of taking infection with them.

We will be assisting schools to introduce lateral flow testing in the New Year. Our support for the NHS's local tracing service is proving effective, with 90% contact tracing success in the Borough. This is in part thanks to our introduction of text message tracing and door-knocking to follow-up on contacts.

We are also helping the NHS with its vaccination programme, with care workers in the Borough among the first to get the jab. As 2020 has been the year of Covid-19, it must be hoped that 2021 is the year of the vaccine. As I have mentioned, our cases are rising, and the vaccination programme will take time to roll out and so it is no panacea: but it is a cause for optimism and that is an important commodity right now.

I am delighted to announce that Wokingham Borough Council is launching an 18-month pilot scheme to help people with mental health issues in the Borough funded by a generous donation from a resident. The scheme will be run on the Council's behalf by mental health charity Oxfordshire MIND, giving our GPs very valuable help. Among the areas it will focus on are recognising mental health issues early and intervening to prevent conditions deteriorating, ensuring timely referrals to specialists, coordinating the support available for those with mental health issues and promoting awareness of the issues in the community.

The pilot service will be inclusive, ethically and able to meet the wellbeing and mental needs of a diverse range of residents of the Borough. It will develop a way to support those with mild to moderate mental health needs, for instance including non-medical interventions such as social prescribing, self-management, peer support, signposting, and activities. It is estimated that it will support about a thousand people each year.

Apart from Covid, we have other reasons for optimism in the Borough.

Despite the pandemic and resulting economic problems, our regenerated Wokingham town centre is attracting new businesses that are prepared to invest at this difficult time because we have been prepared to invest in the Town. The new homes in the town centre, built as part of the regeneration, are selling fast and the retail and business units are being snapped up. Earley, Woodley and Twyford are also vibrant. This, along with our other prudent investments are providing a sound financial base to underpin our services and improve our schools, leisure centres, roads and other community facilities.

As a sign of confidence in our Borough I am delighted to announce plans to develop the "largest purpose-built film studio" in the UK have been put forward in Wokingham. US company Blackhall Studios and the University of Reading want to build the new £150m studios at Thames Valley Science Park in Wokingham. Blackhall said the move would "bring major Hollywood film productions to the UK" and create up to 3,000 jobs.

Notwithstanding a very challenging year, our finances are strong and our Finance Team second to none. Whilst there is some incomprehensible and, may I say, uninformed concentration on our gross borrowings, our net borrowings are extremely low and interest rates are pegged for up to 50 years. We will be presenting a balanced budget which continues to be ambitious in our aim to:

- Enrich lives;
- Safe, strong communities;
- The right homes in the right places;
- A clean and green Borough;
- Keeping the Borough moving;
- Changing the way we work for you, to be the best that we can in serving our residents.

The issue of housing numbers has been overshadowed by Covid but it is vitally important to our future. You will recall that, during the summer, the Government proposed a new methodology for allocating housing that would have buried our Borough under an avalanche of concrete, with developers able to build at will. At the time, I felt that I was a lone voice. We campaigned hard against this and we have been successful. Our housing numbers at 759 (30 below the standard method of 789) are still too high but considerably more achievable than the 1,635 the white paper proposed. This is as a direct result of all those who lobbied for a different approach among whom we were a major voice and I would like to thank all the Councillors, our very hard dedicated MPs and residents, for their support.

Therefore, despite the ongoing pandemic, I believe we can look forward to 2021 with some cautious optimism. Covid-19 has not gone away and we must remain careful, in particular over Christmas, but the foundations are in place for the Borough to recover strongly from this awful year.

Please observe the rules rigorously especially during the Christmas period. Help us to slow down the increase and to reverse it.

May I thank all the Directors and Officers who have been throughout the year flexible, innovative and dedicated. Thank you for your considerable commitment to the wellbeing of our residents.

May I thank my Executive team for their hard work and all the Councillors for their support.

Lastly may I wish you all a merry Christmas and a happy new year.

63. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no public questions submitted.

64. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

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

64.1 Barrie Patman asked the Executive Member for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Services the following question:

Question

What is the sequencing for inoculation?

Answer

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation has recommended that the aim of the first phase of the vaccination programme has got to be the prevention of mortality and the maintenance of the health and social care systems. As the risk of mortality from Covid-19 increases with age, the prioritisation is primarily based on age.

In answer to your question directly the priority list is:

1. Residents in a care home for older adults and their carers
2. All those 80 years of age and over and frontline health and social care workers
3. All those over 75 years old
4. All those 70 years old and older and extremely clinically vulnerable individuals
5. All those 65 years of age and over
6. All individuals 16 years to 64 years with underlying health conditions which put them at higher risk of serious disease and mortality
7. All those 60 years of age and over
8. All those 55 years of age and over
9. All those 50 years of age and over

It is estimated that taken together these groups will cover 99% of preventable mortality from Covid-19.

The next phase of the vaccination programme after this will seek to reduce further hospitalisation and provide targeted vaccination of those at high risk of exposure or those delivering public services. The planning of this second phase is ongoing with more detail expected in Spring 2021.

Supplementary Question

Do you think that us moving to Tier 3 is going to have any impact on the process of this at all?

Supplementary Answer

It is difficult to know because it only happened today. What I would hope to see, and we will be lobbying hard for, is further support from Central Government in terms of getting hold of as many vaccinations as possible and any support they can offer us increasing testing for the Borough so we can drive down case rates and get ourselves into a better position.

64.2 Pauline Helliard-Symons asked the Executive Member for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Services the following question:

Question

How will we be asked when we are due for a vaccination?

Answer

The NHS is offering, and priority is being given with the Covid-19 vaccine, to the people who are most at risk from coronavirus.

The vaccine is being offered in some hospitals across England and, from this week, hundreds of local vaccination centres run by GPs. You are probably aware that it is being issued from the practice in Wargrave and it started this week in Finchampstead and other parts of the Borough will follow next week.

The order in which people will be offered the vaccine is based on advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation.

The NHS recommends that all eligible residents should wait to be contacted for a Covid vaccination. Do not turn up speculatively at your local surgery because it will not be there and obviously those who need it need to be prioritised. Residents will be contacted by their local GP practice when the vaccine is available.

Practices will select the communication channel which they normally use to contact patients. This may include, but is not limited to, phone calls, text messages, Emails or printed letters. Again, I would repeat, we need the vaccination teams to be focussed on doing their job and all residents are advised not to phone GP practices or other NHS services with general queries. The NHS will get to everybody as quickly and as efficiently as it can, in the order I set out in answer to the last question.

At present it is difficult for us to know how soon they will get through all of the first few lists but we will be keeping as much pressure on to get it done as soon as possible.

Supplementary Question

You might not know the answer to this Charles but do you happen to know whether those of us whose surgeries are in different boroughs will have all of that same applied?

Supplementary Answer

You are talking about if you have got a surgery for example in Bracknell Forest? I would imagine so but I do not know the answer is the truthful response. I would imagine that they will be following the same principles, which I read out earlier, because they are nationwide and Bracknell Forest is obviously in Berkshire East. I was present at the Health and Wellbeing Board last week when Berkshire West was discussed, which includes obviously West Berkshire and Reading, and the same principles have been put in place there so I see no reason to believe that Berkshire East would be any different.

64.3 Lindsay Ferris asked the Leader of the Council the following question:**Question**

There will be a considerable amount of work required by Wokingham Borough Council to ensure that there is a coordinated and speedy route to enable our local Health Services to administer the long awaited Covid-19 Vaccines to our residents in the Borough. This action is likely to require additional financial resource as well as the need for additional staff to provide these functions. The Liberal Democrat Group on WBC support such action. It is

also important that WBC continue to provide as many of our local services during this period as possible.

We recommend that WBC find someone with experience in logistics/programme management or project management to ensure these capabilities are provided in a cost effective and efficient manner. This work will be complex and it is essential that these actions are implemented in an expedite manner.

As time has been short, the information within the Executive paper will by definition be limited. Can the Leader of the Council provide additional information on this project at the Executive meeting and will he continue to provide updates on a regular basis, so that all parties can be made aware of what has been achieved and what still needs to be completed?

Answer

The Council has successfully managed its Covid-19 response since March by standing up and using its emergency planning governance to oversee planning and delivery. This is chaired by the Chief Executive and includes all the directors. The 'Gold' meeting, as it is called, meets as often as needed and was meeting daily at the height of the pandemic. As part of this function the Council draws on all of its resource and expertise as needed from around the Council, included in this is access to qualified and experienced programme management.

This meeting tonight is to finalise plans to release additional funding that will support several initiatives across the Council's Covid-19 response. This includes the delivery of rapid tests to enable care home visits before Christmas, building upon its local contact tracing service and supporting the roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccination programme across the Borough.

Subject to approval tonight, £500,000 has been requested to support these initiatives and ensure they can run effectively. Significant work is already being undertaken, with Council employees working tirelessly on the planning and preparation of a local pilot that will support care homes with their rapid testing of visitors.

This is an important step and will mean that care home residents in the Borough could have face-to-face contact with loved ones before Christmas. To help local care home providers navigate rapid testing for visitors the Council has made the decision to manage the process and conduct these tests at its Shute End Offices. There will be a range of measures in place to ensure that the site is as safe as it can be possible.

Throughout the pandemic, our aim has always been to support our communities as much as possible, particularly our most vulnerable residents in local care homes. There are a lot of administrative and technical logistics involved with rapid testing, which could put an additional pressure on care homes that are already under a lot of strain. This is why we have decided to create a central test point at our Shute End Offices.

We will be one of the first Boroughs in the UK, actually I think we are the first, to undertake a pilot of this kind and a tremendous amount of effort has gone into its organisation. To be able to facilitate a rapid testing programme and enable residents to visit care homes before, during, and after the festive period is extremely rewarding. That said, we will continue to take extra precautions and for safety visitors will need to keep their distance and still wear full PPE when visiting loved ones.

In terms of other programmes identified, the Council has already been running a successful contact tracing scheme to support NHS Test and Trace, with the contact tracing success rate currently sitting at 90% across the Borough. It is proposed that additional funding will support the continuation of this service and develop a further element of self-isolation for those who need it.

In addition to this, Wokingham Borough has been allocated a limited number of vaccinations for care home residents and staff. While the roll-out of the vaccination programme is being led by the NHS, it is supported by local authorities, and in particular us, and it is expected that the Council will need to provide additional support to its partners as the programme expands. This will require additional resource to manage and coordinate the programme locally.

We are continuing to dedicate a huge amount of resource to our Covid-19 response and we are proud of those efforts. However, we must remember that it will be some time before we can see the impact of certain initiatives, such as the vaccine programme, on our case rates. Therefore, it is extremely important that we adhere to the rules and follow social distancing guidance to prevent a rise in community transmission rates during the rollout of these programmes.

I will always, as you know, endeavour to be open and transparent in how we support our residents and will happily commit to giving you regular updates as I have in the past.

Supplementary Question

As you know if there is something that I am prepared to support the Council with I will stand up and say so. This is one of those issues and I think is absolutely vital and fully support the actions. Have any grants or anything come from Government to support this or is this funded from within?

Supplementary Answer

It is a very difficult question because what the Government has done is given grants and said this is your lot until March 2022. So, the current presumption is that we are not going to get any more money but I suspect that will change because the new requirement for lateral flow testing for schools, which is not really completely developed, is going to require a huge amount of resource, particularly from us, to do it properly. So at the moment the answer is no but I suspect the future answer will be yes.

64.4 Gary Cowan had asked the Executive Member for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Services the following question but as he was unable to attend the meeting the following written response was provided:

Question

As Coronavirus infection rates across Berkshire continue to fluctuate but some neighbourhoods have seen a huge increase in cases, according to government statistics. Across Berkshire, cases have continued to surge in many areas, like Wokingham and College Town. Within Wokingham Borough, numbers continue to rise as a fairly high percentage. Wokingham West and South saw the highest percentage increase, and the greatest number of new cases overall throughout the Borough. The area now has the highest rolling infection rate, which has grown significantly in the last month. Arborfield and Garrison also have a high infection rate.

Is it possible to regularly reproduce the data from Berkshire Live on the Council's website?

Answer

As has been identified within the question, the best, most accessible, source of information for residents to find out the latest Covid-19 cases data for Wokingham Borough is the Public Health for Berkshire Covid Dashboard.

This website contains the most up to date Covid-19 data. It also includes data from each of the local authorities across Berkshire. There is also a more detailed data presentation prepared each week which is found in the information centre on the website. As this data is updated in 'real-time' it has been agreed that the most appropriate way for Wokingham residents to access the most up to date data is by visiting the website directly or by accessing through the links on the Wokingham Borough Council Website. This prevents there from being multiple versions of data which are updated at different times which risks causing confusion.

The website can be easily accessed at the web address www.berkshirepublichealth.co.uk or if you google "Berkshire Public Health" it is the first result that comes up. In addition the website is linked through the Wokingham Borough Council Website, from the home page/front page of the WBC website you need to click on the orange banner marked "find out the latest about coronavirus" this will lead you to a page of the latest Covid-19 updates from where you can click on the link "Covid 19 Dashboard" which will take you to the Berkshire Public Health website.

64.5 Laura Blumenthal asked the Executive Member for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Services the following question:

Question

What is the best source of information for residents to find out the latest Covid-19 case data for Wokingham Borough?

Answer

Good information on something like this is very important and the best, most accessible and most accurate, source of information to find out the latest Covid data for Wokingham Borough, and indeed all of West Berkshire, is the Public Health for Berkshire Covid Dashboard. This website has live updates from Government data sources so contains the most up to date information. It clearly shows the number of new cases on any given day, the weekly rate for an area, as well as mortality data. It also includes data from all of the local authorities in Berkshire. There is more detailed information prepared every week, which is found in the information centre on the website. This includes detailed local information about each ward and what is going on there. The web address is www.berkshirepublichealth.co.uk or just simply google "Berkshire Public Health" and it is the first result that comes up.

For those who want more data and more detail about the national picture the Government website www.coronavirus.data.gov.uk covers all the local authorities in the UK. If anybody wants to know what is going on I would firmly recommend going to that site. Do not accept what you see in the papers as gospel.

There is also the Zoe app, that is widely touted, and this has merits, but it tracks symptoms it does not track cases. So, if you want to know what is going on with cases that is the place to go.

64.6 Abdul Loyes asked the Executive Member for Finance and Housing the following question:

Question

Can you set out for me how the Council's finances will be impacted by the welcome spending of up to £500,000 to support the Council's Covid-19 response?

Answer

Obviously, this is a significant sum, and it is a credit to how well the Council has run and continues to run its finances under the careful stewardship of Graham Ebers and his finance team that we are able to meet this level of spending to support the response to the pandemic. The latest Revenue Monitoring I will be presenting at the Executive in January will show we have managed to turnaround the projected overspend due to Covid-19, and whilst there is more to do, there is every prospect of a final outturn on or around budget, even with the impact of the pandemic. That said, whilst the Council will be able to set a prudent, sustainable, and balanced budget next year, there remains uncertainties around future Government settlements which still represents a challenge.

Further to this the recent Mid-Year Treasury Management Report, presented to the Audit Committee and following on to the Executive next month, has highlighted the benefits to the local taxpayer of sound investments, including our commercial and regeneration portfolio, whilst maintaining sustainable debt that delivers Council priorities and the setting of prudent reserve balances. Allied to this is the recent 'myth-busting' release around the Council's financial position.

It is this careful and innovative financial approach that means we can afford to do this whilst still remaining at safe balances, unlike a lot of the Councils in the country.

As I keep on saying to everyone a council which is broke is no use to anybody.

65. ADULTS SOCIAL CARE COVID-19 RESPONSE

The Executive considered a report requesting a supplementary estimate of up to £500,000 to support the Council's response to Covid-19.

The Executive Member for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Services introduced the report and advised the meeting that the supplementary estimate would support a number of initiatives including:

- lateral flow testing for care home visitors which would support aged and vulnerable residents and enable them to have visits from their family including physical contact i.e. hold hands etc;
- the provision of additional contract tracing capacity and;
- support to assist the CCG deliver the Covid-19 vaccination programme which started last week in the Borough and which was expected to increase significantly early in the new year.

In response to a query about what the implications were for moving to Tier 3 Councillor Margetts acknowledged that there would be financial implications for people in the hospitality industry, who were having to close for the third time in less than a year, and also the difficulties faced by businesses. Councillor Margetts appealed to everyone to adhere to all Government guidance, including those relating to social distancing and the

wearing of masks, and also if anyone had any symptoms they should arrange a test and if asked to socially isolate do so in accordance with the rules.

With regard to a query in relation to when inoculations would be available across the Borough, Councillor Margetts advised that the CCG had split Wokingham Borough up into five PCN areas and inoculations would be offered in each of these areas by the end of December. Due to the specialised nature of the equipment that was required to administer the vaccine it was not be possible for all surgeries to undertake inoculations.

Members thanked the Director Adult Social Care, Matt Pope, and all the Officers involved in the Council's response to the pandemic for all their hard work which was much appreciated. In response Councillor Margetts stated that he was privileged to work with a very dedicated department who were solely focussed on doing everything they could to assist residents to get through this pandemic.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) a supplementary estimate, in support of the Council's response to Covid-19, of up to £500,000 be agreed;
- 2) it be noted that work has already started in preparation and funding for this has been released by the Deputy Chief Executive (CFO) under emergency powers.