

TITLE	Officer Response to the Recommendations from the Overview and Scrutiny Report - WBC's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	The Executive on Thursday, 25 February 2021
WARD	None Specific;
LEAD OFFICER	Chief Executive - Susan Parsonage
LEAD MEMBER	Leader of the Council - John Halsall

PURPOSE OF REPORT (INC STRATEGIC OUTCOMES)

This report sets out the Officer response to the 10 recommendations set out in the report of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee – Wokingham Borough Council's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic (November 2020).

RECOMMENDATION

That the Executive:

- 1) note the Officers' responses and agree the recommendations as set out in the Overview and Scrutiny report and contained within this report;
- 2) note the Officers' responses and agree the two additional recommendations submitted by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee at its meeting on 20 January 2021.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At its meeting on 24 June 2020, the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee considered a report from the Chief Executive which gave details of the Council's initial response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The report set out a timeline of key events relating to the pandemic and the Council's 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.

Having considered the Chief Executive's report, the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee agreed the framework for Scrutiny reviews to be undertaken by each of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees. Over the following four months the Overview and Scrutiny Committees considered reports and received evidence from a range of stakeholders on issues such as care homes, health partnerships, schools and Children's Services, mental health, finance and business, community response, communication Test and Trace and the impact of the pandemic on the most vulnerable groups in the Borough.

The overall findings of the Overview and Scrutiny process was that the Council's response to the pandemic had been very positive, with effective decision making, good

communications and outstanding partnership working. The Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee made a number of recommendations to the Executive which are set out in this report, together with the Officer responses.

Since the completion of the Overview and Scrutiny report, in November 2020, the Council has continued to respond to the pandemic as the Borough has moved into new lockdown arrangements. Officers have continued to work proactively in areas such as the One Front Door (led by Wokingham Citizens' Advice), Test and Trace, support to care homes, schools and businesses and supporting local GPs in the roll-out of the vaccination programme.

At its meeting on 20 January 2021, The Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee agreed two additional recommendations for submission to the Executive alongside the 10 recommendations in its original report. These are included for consideration by the Executive.

BACKGROUND

At its meeting on 24 June 2020, the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee considered a report from the Chief Executive 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, working in partnership, to support and implement the Government's response to the pandemic in areas such as health and social care, children's services, community safety and support for local businesses.

The report set out a timeline of key events relating to the pandemic and the Council's 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.

Having considered the Chief Executive's report, the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee agreed the framework for reviews to be undertaken by each of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees. Over the following four months the Overview and Scrutiny Committees considered reports and received evidence from a range of stakeholders on the following issues:

- 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.

Following the completion of the reviews, evidence from each of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees was compiled into the composite report at Annex A.

The overall findings of the Scrutiny process were that the Council's response to the pandemic had been very positive. Emergency planning systems and communications were effective and the Council's partnership approach had been outstanding. Scrutiny Members also commended the Council's constructive work with the Borough's MPs and the way in which it challenged the Government on issues such as the discharge of patients into care homes without effective testing for Covid-19.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committees commended Council staff for their dedication and flexibility and noted the outstanding contributions from voluntary sector partners and the large number of community volunteers across the Borough. In addition to the decisive response to the pandemic, the Council maintained key universal services and developed new methods of service delivery.

The Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee report made a number of recommendations which are set out below, together with the Officer response, for consideration by the Executive.

At its meeting on 20 January 2021, The Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee agreed two additional recommendations for submission to the Executive alongside the 10 recommendations in its original report. The additional recommendations, with Officer comments, are set out in the table as new recommendations 11 and 12.

O&S Recommendations with Officer Responses

Recommendation	Officer Response
<p>1 That the Executive notes the outstanding response to the Covid-19 pandemic in the Borough to date and commends the efforts of staff, Members, partners and community volunteers.</p>	<p>Noted. The Covid-19 pandemic has delivered a huge challenge to the Council in relation to its leadership, systems, partnerships and the resilience of its staff. We are pleased to note that the challenge has been met. The dedication and professionalism of our staff has been matched by the generosity and enthusiasm of our residents and the hard work of our partner organisations across the Borough.</p> <p>We have worked in partnership to safeguard the most vulnerable whilst ensuring that key universal services are delivered and local democracy continues to function. Much has been achieved, but we recognise the ongoing challenges as we work through the latest lockdown and support the vaccination programme which offers hope in the months ahead.</p>
<p>2 That the Executive advise local care homes to review risk assessments and ensure, for the duration of the pandemic that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff do not work in more than one setting, with the exception of workers with specific skill sets, such as prescribing or issuing medication; • Appropriate social distancing applies for people who work in or visit their homes. 	<p>Care homes have a vital role to play in Wokingham, especially during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Wokingham Borough Council actively support our providers to manage the outbreak of COVID-19 to ensure the best outcomes for our residents.</p> <p>Care Home in Wokingham are usually run by private or voluntary sector service providers. Wokingham Borough Council has a responsibility to support the needs of the individual and maintain the financial sustainability of the social care market. It does not have a direct responsibility to manage an outbreak within a Wokingham Care Home but has continued to support providers to manage outbreaks during the pandemic.</p> <p>From the start of the pandemic the Council has worked proactively to deliver support and advice to the care homes and other care settings in the Borough. Adult Social Care has provided support to care homes, through its Care Home Task Force, providing guidance on infection control, support with PPE, distribution of Government grant funding and immediate, targeted support in the event of Covid-19 outbreaks.</p>

	<p>A key aspect of our successful approach has been a focus on partnership and risk management. We will continue to work with care homes to identify and mitigate risks, including the specific risks identified in the Overview and Scrutiny report.</p> <p>The Council is also supporting the roll-out of the vaccination programme, organised by the West Berkshire CCG. By mid-January 2021, vaccinations had been delivered to 60% of the over 80s and to a significant number of the care home staff in the Borough.</p>
3. That the Executive highlight the importance of supporting all aspects of WBC staff welfare as the Council enters into the next phase of the pandemic.	<p>Agreed. Staff welfare has been a key priority throughout the pandemic. For example, in relation to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), health and safety and risk assessments. There is a dedicated section on the staff intranet with information and tools to support welfare. Staff can also access the Employee Assistance Programme which has a 24/7 helpline and we are currently training 45 employees to become mental health first aiders. We also produce a daily staff update which highlights the latest developments relating to Covid-19 and signposts staff to the key welfare resources available. The Chief Executive has met with UNISON on a regular basis to share information and receive feedback on issues affecting staff.</p>
4 That the Executive address the relative sparsity of data on domestic violence and abuse and emphasise the need for explicit recognition and action in response to reported rising levels during the pandemic.	<p>Agreed. The Council recognises the “hidden harm” caused by domestic abuse and its impact on adults and children across the Borough. At its meeting on, 28 January 2021, the Executive considered plans to procure a new domestic abuse support contract and noted a MTFP growth bid to fund the response to increasing demand for domestic abuse services. These measures will make the service more resilient and enable compliance with the new statutory responsibilities set out in the Domestic Abuse Bill which is currently progressing through Parliament. One of the requirements in the Bill is the establishment of a multi-agency Domestic Abuse Local Partnership Board. The Council has also established a dedicated Domestic Abuse Coordinator role to increase coordination and joint working across the organisation.</p>
5 That the Council, in view of the multi-dimensional nature of “poverty”, in all discussions, data, policy and action, focus on all who are	<p>Agreed. The Council is working to strengthen its strategic approach to addressing poverty. This body of work will include mapping the pathways into, through and out of poverty in order to understand the different types and levels of hardship. This analysis</p>

suffering different types of rising and significant levels of hardship.	will help to inform policy development and the Council's future response to tackling poverty across the Borough.
6 That the Executive urgently re-examines the issue of 21 to 25 year old care leavers paying Council Tax, for the remainder of this financial year.	Agreed. The issue of 21 to 25 year old care leavers paying Council Tax has been reviewed. At the Council meeting on 19 November 2020, the Executive Member for Finance and Housing announced that it had been agreed that an exemption would be applied to this cohort of care leavers. Due to Budget constraints, the new arrangement will come into effect in 2021/22.
7 That the Council commits to co-produce an anti-poverty strategy.	Agreed. As set out in 5, above, the Council is working to strengthen its strategic approach to addressing poverty in the Borough. This includes the development of an anti-poverty strategy. In developing the strategy we will involve our partners in the community and voluntary sectors and will seek the views of our residents.
8 That the Council limit the use of comparative data and benchmarking narrative, such as being ranked the least deprived upper tier authority, when talking about poverty, to avoid minimising the difficulties faced by residents.	The Council recognises that, given the complex and multi-dimensional nature of poverty, it is important to consider a range of indicators in order to gain a full understanding which can inform future actions. Data and benchmarking information should be set in appropriate context, including communicating with compassion and understanding the range and complexity of the challenges faced by residents.
9 That the Council continues to focus on the specific impacts of Covid-19 on different community groups and to tailor its communication and engagement activities accordingly.	<p>Agreed. The Council continues to focus on the specific impacts of Covid-19 on different community groups. In addition to the communication and engagement channels previously deployed to reach residents (social media, email bulletins, news releases, website and regular updates to community / voluntary groups including those representing the BAME community – all of which are continuing) – WBC has developed methods for improved targeting of messages at specific groups affected by the pandemic:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographic targeting: Case data showed higher Covid prevalence in specific, largely urban areas and those areas bordering Reading Borough. Communication has been sent to town and parish councils, ward members and community groups, highlighting the higher numbers in those areas. • Translations: In order to support engagement with all residents, translations on all Covid-19 advice is

	<p>available on the WBC website and is promoted in social media and e-bulletin communications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covid Community Information Champions: This scheme has been set up in order to help target messages in to all community groups. Community champions are provided with information to disseminate through their communities. Anybody can sign up to be a champion, however WBC has targeted specific community groups (such as those at greater risk) to encourage sign-up. • Specific messaging for younger people: With the rise in the number of cases among younger people, Public Health commissioned research into what messages would be important to them. An example message that came from this research was a clearer explanation on self-isolation, as a gap in understanding had been highlighted. <p>Although targeted messaging is being used to communicate on Covid-19, it is important that WBC's key message remains that all residents are at risk and the rules and guidance apply to everybody equally.</p>
<p>10 That the Executive notes the results of the Covid-19 Residents' Survey which indicated that 96% of residents were either very satisfied, satisfied or had no opinion on the Council's response and set out residents' views on future priorities for the Council:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting local businesses and employment; • Supporting mental health; • Reducing social isolation and loneliness in vulnerable people. 	<p>Noted. The positive feedback from the survey on the Council's response to the pandemic is noted. Residents' views on future priorities will be used to inform current service delivery and the Council's longer term response.</p> <p>In relation to the future priorities identified in the survey:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council continues to provide support and guidance to local businesses through the distribution of Government discretionary grants and business rate relief. We have also joined the Government's Kickstart scheme which means that we will be creating new job opportunities for young people on Universal Credit who are at risk of long-term unemployment. • In relation to mental health we have concluded an arrangement with Oxfordshire Mind who will provide a new mental health service in the near future for residents. We have also recognised the impact of the pandemic on Council staff and are currently training a group of in-house mental health first aiders.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We have focussed on social isolation and loneliness through our One Front Door approach (led by Wokingham Citizens' Advice) and making contact with vulnerable residents to discuss their individual situation and any outstanding needs.
<p>Additional Recommendations agreed by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee at its meeting on 20 January 2021</p>	
<p>11 That the Executive ensures that the improved partnership working between the Council and external organisations not only continues, but is further developed.</p>	<p>Agreed. As noted in the Overview and Scrutiny report, the Council's successful response to the pandemic was underpinned by a strong partnership approach. This involved working with the community and voluntary sector, health, police, schools, Town and Parish Councils and neighbouring authorities. Our approach has resulted in improved communications and the shared understanding of the benefits of working together across the Borough.</p> <p>We aim to build on these improved relationships in order to deliver better outcomes for all our residents. This is already a core theme of our existing Community Vision 2020-2024 which will continue to inform our forthcoming actions, and a key theme of our existing key strategies e.g. the Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy 2020-25 and the Adult Social Care Strategy 2020-25.</p>
<p>12 That the Executive ensures that the lessons learnt from operationally managing the pandemic are not only continued, but are further developed and supported.</p>	<p>Agreed. The Council's response to the pandemic has required both agility and innovation. We have continued to deliver essential frontline services whilst, at the same time, developing new ways of working within the constraints imposed by the pandemic. Our staff have embraced home working and have continued to support the most vulnerable members of the community.</p> <p>Where face-to-face service delivery was constrained, we have explored the potential for on-line delivery whilst recognising that some residents require additional support. As a learning organisation we are committed to building on these new ways of working to ensure that we deliver excellent value for money combined with excellent customer service.</p>

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	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

There are no specific financial implications relating to this report. The Executive will continue to tackle the pandemic and take appropriate measures. The financial impact of these measures will be reported via the regular Budget Monitoring reports submitted to the Executive. Impacts on the Medium Term Financial Plan will be agreed at the Budget Council meeting in February 2021.

Stakeholder Considerations and Consultation

Further Resident Surveys will be undertaken in due course.

Public Sector Equality Duty

Due regard to Public Sector Equality Duty is given and equality impact assessments are undertaken in relation to specific elements of the Council's response to the pandemic.

Climate Emergency – *This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030*

The Council's response to the pandemic has included reference to the Climate Emergency Action Plan.

List of Background Papers

Overview and Scrutiny Report and Recommendations – November 2020

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