



WOKINGHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

WOKINGHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL'S RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

NOVEMBER 2020

Committee Members:

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

RECOMMENDATIONS

That:

- 1) 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;
- 2) the Executive advise local care homes to review risk assessments and ensure, for the duration of the pandemic that:
 - 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;
- 3) the Executive highlight the importance of supporting all aspects of WBC staff welfare as the Council enters into the next phase of the pandemic;
- 4) 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;
- 5) 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;
- 6) 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;
- 7) the Council commits to co-produce an anti-poverty strategy;
- 8) 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;
- 9) 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;
- 10) 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:
 - supporting local businesses and employment;
 - supporting mental health;
 - reducing social isolation and loneliness in vulnerable people.

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, 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 (WBC Chief Executive) 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;
- 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 service, such as the on-line libraries offer. It had also continued to work on providing financial information for the Government and closing down the 2019/20 financial accounts.

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 for 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 for 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.) • Impact on children's future qualifications 	Children's Services

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 • Impact on the Local Plan Update 	Community & Corporate

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 Overview & Scrutiny 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?

National Context

Covid-19 reached the UK in January 2020 with the Government imposing a national lockdown on 23 March which lasted for three months. On June 29, Leicester became the first city to impose a local lockdown following a significant rise in infections. Having negotiated the first wave of the pandemic, the UK has seen a resurgence of cases culminating in further national lockdowns. The current lockdown in England will run until 2 December 2020. The Government's current intention is that local areas will return to the three tier level or restrictions (medium, high and very high) in use prior to the national lockdown.

The Government's initial aim was to prevent the NHS from being overrun, as had happened in parts of Italy. From the start of the pandemic the NHS faced a number of critical issues which also impacted on the WBC response. These included shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE), protection for residents in care homes and the delivery of an effective testing and contact tracing programme.

There are three main ways in which the Covid-19 R number (R = reproduction) can be reduced. Lockdowns can slow the spread of the disease but can only remain in place for a limited amount of time without causing significant damage to the economy and to residents' mental health and wellbeing. Secondly, the use of social distancing measures, hygiene measures and barriers to transmission (the current Government "Hands – Face – Space" messaging). The third measure is an effective process to identify new cases and prevent the spread through a quick and thorough test and trace

system. A number of countries have managed to combine extensive testing programmes, providing rapid results, with speedy contact tracing and follow up action. Delivering an effective test and trace programme will be a major challenge for the Government and local authorities over the next six months.

The announcement, on 9 November 2020, of positive results from a final stage vaccine trial run by Pfizer and BioNTech offers hope that a return to something like “normal” may be possible in 2021. Early data from the trial indicated that the vaccine could deliver 90%+ efficacy which may offer at least some protection to all age groups. A further 320 potential vaccines are in development, several of them in advanced trials. Once a safe vaccine is available, every Government will face significant logistical challenges. The Pfizer vaccine, for example requires two doses and needs to be stored at -70 degrees C. However, the positive news on vaccine development offers a potential light at the end of the winter tunnel ahead of us.

Local Context

In relation to the Borough, as at 11 November 2020, 1,635 Wokingham Borough residents had tested positive for Covid-19 since the beginning of the outbreak (lab-confirmed cases), although it is expected that the true number is higher as many asymptomatic cases are undiagnosed. Up to 30 October 2020, there were a total of 164 deaths in the Borough relating to Covid-19. Of these, 75 occurred in hospital and 78 occurred in care homes.

In some respects, the Council should have been well placed to provide a positive response to the pandemic. Information from the Borough’s Joint Strategic Needs Assessment indicates that, in general, the Borough is affluent and healthy. The Borough is the second least deprived borough in England and its residents enjoy among the highest life expectancy and years lived in full health in the country. In 2018, less than 5% of working age adults were claiming benefits and nearly 80% of houses were owned by the occupants (outright or mortgaged) compared to 11% privately rented and 7% socially rented. In addition, the Council is one of the most financially stable local authorities in the country and the Borough has a strong community and voluntary sector.

As the Borough is relatively healthy and wealthy, it is important that the Council has a clear understanding of the impact of Covid-19 on various forms of inequality as economic and social conditions have played an important role in determining which groups were hit hardest. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has provided analysis on the impact of the pandemic on different economic, ethnic and social groups, as follows:

- Generally, in the years leading up to the pandemic, lack of pay growth and the impact of austerity had left poorer households in a precarious position and reduced the capability of the state to act as an insurer against future shocks;
- The economic shock delivered by Covid-19 interacted with many old inequalities. Excluding key workers, most people in the lowest tenth of earnings distribution were in sectors forced to shut down. 80% of workers were either in a shut-down sector or were unlikely to be able to do their jobs from home, compared to 25% in the highest earning tenth. Young people and those of Black, Pakistani or Bangladeshi ethnicity were affected more than other groups;

- Around 30% of low-income households, pre-pandemic, stated that they could not manage a month if they were to lose their main source of household income. Wealthier people were affected in a different way. Being unable to spend on the recreational activities which accounted for a relatively large share of their budgets actually forced them to save money;
- At the start of the pandemic female employment was at record highs, but school and nursery closures removed the childcare provision which made that possible. Additional childcare and housework during the pandemic has fallen more on mothers than fathers, especially among working parents. This may inhibit work and career progression when progress in closing the gender wage gap has already stalled;
- School shutdowns for the vast majority of pupils are likely to have accentuated the socio-economic divide in educational attainment. Children from better-off families are more likely to have received active engagement and more effective on-line support than children from the most deprived families.
- There have been significant differences in deaths from Covid-19 in the most deprived areas compared to the most affluent areas. Those on lower incomes are more likely to have underlying medical conditions which make them vulnerable to Covid-19. Some ethnic minority groups have had significantly higher death rates than the white British population.
- The pandemic is likely to leave a number of challenging legacies for inequality, especially as the Government's capacity to act will be constrained by record peacetime levels of debt. However, it may also bring opportunities, for example through the move to greater home working. We may also see changes in attitudes to the welfare system, the value to society of key workers and greater focus on inequalities such as those between ethnic groups.

The Council's Approach

The Council's strategic response to the pandemic can be summarised as follows:

- Utilising the Council's existing emergency planning processes to enact a coordinated, managed, and timely response to the crisis;
- Seeking to protect residents in care homes by taking action locally;
- Maintaining critical services for the most vulnerable residents, including children and young people and the wider community;
- Maintaining universal services such as waste collection, recycling, and highways;
- Providing financial support to local businesses and the local economy;
- Redeployment of WBC staff to those services and activities of greatest need to the community – during the first lockdown 107 staff were redeployed;
- Maintaining local democracy through "virtual" Council meetings, accessible by the public;
- Communicating regularly and clearly with residents, businesses, partners, elected Members and staff;
- Considering the impacts on particular parts of the community e.g. ethnic minority groups, vulnerable residents and young people;

- Identifying opportunities to positively impact the Council's Climate Emergency Action Plan;
- Identifying and monitoring the financial impacts of Covid-19;
- Using a risk based approach to decision-making;
- Planning ahead for the "Restart" and "Recovery" phases of the emergency.

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. The following sections summarise the Committees' findings on each theme.

Care Homes

There are 52 registered care home settings in the Borough, including residential, nursing and learning disability care homes. The majority of care homes in the Borough were run by private or voluntary sector providers.

The Government's initial strategy to protect the NHS led to elderly people being discharged from hospitals into care homes, to clear space in hospitals, without being tested for Covid-19. The Council became increasingly concerned about the lack of testing for residents moved into care homes and lobbied hard for this to be addressed. The Council lobbied the four local MPs, the Local Resilience Forum, Public Health England and the NHS. On 21 April 2020 the Council took the decision to suspend discharges from hospital into local care homes unless the patient had been tested or the home had appropriate infection control procedures in place and could isolate the new resident if necessary.

As part of the Council's proactive response it developed a protocol and set up a Task Force with input from health and social care. The Task Force aimed to work with care homes to minimise the risk of infection and ensure that they received all the support required, including adequate supplies of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). The Council also delivered improved funding to care homes with prepayments to support cash flow and access to additional temporary funding.

The Council carried out a survey of care homes to gain an understanding of their experiences and the level of support provided by WBC. The responses received were generally very positive about the Council's role and the level of support provided. As part of the national response to the pandemic, a care homes tracker had been developed. This indicated that WBC was a consistently high performer.

Clearly, the decisive action taken by the Council and the high level of support provided to local care homes is an example of best practice which, undoubtedly, helped to save the lives of some of our most vulnerable residents. Furthermore, the Council is carrying the learning from the past eight months into its ongoing support for local care homes, in so doing it is putting concern for care home residents at the centre of the decision making process.

We discussed the latest position relating to care homes at our meeting in October 2020. Meradin Peachey (Director of Public Health, Berkshire West) advised us that an ongoing risk related to the movement of individuals (especially young people) between

care homes and care settings. We agreed that it was vital that appropriate risk assessments and preventative measures were in place to ensure that residents and staff members were protected as the rate of infection increased over the winter months.

Effectiveness of Health Partnerships

The Care Quality Commission (CQC) published its annual assessment of the state of health and social care in England in October 2020. CQC reported that, pre-Covid-19, care was generally good but with little overall improvement and some specific areas of concern, including emergency care, maternity and mental health. The social care sector was fragile as a result of the lack of a long-term funding solution and needed more investment and workforce planning.

Over the summer, CQC reviewed the way health, social care and other services worked together in 11 areas of the country. They found evidence that the areas with established working relationships and a shared understanding of need were better able to care for the local population during the crisis. In relation to social care, CQC highlighted the need for a new deal for the care workforce, with clear career progression, upskilling and training and a greater recognition of the value of key workers.

HOSC members received evidence from Dom Hardy, Chief Operating Officer at the Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust (RBH). On behalf of the Trust, Dom offered thanks to all the residents, community groups and partners who had supported the hospital through the pandemic to date. This included making donations of money and food and the provision of services at no cost. The RBH had three main aims over the winter months:

- Dealing with Covid-19 activity – the impact of the second wave had not, so far, been as challenging as the first wave in March/April;
- Continuing to provide urgent care to patients who needed it, e.g. heart attacks, strokes and other emergencies;
- Continuing to treat patients who have been waiting for “routine care” – reducing the backlog by meeting targets set by the regulator.

In addition to challenges outlined above, the RBH had been able to sustain other pieces of work such as working on the strategic outline case for a new hospital development, either at the current site or at a new site.

Dom informed us that the RBH had strong working relationships with partners, including WBC. This had enabled the hospital to reach agreement with the Clinical Commissioning Group on new funding arrangements for local authorities. There was regular, positive contact and key plans were aligned.

We noted that the House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee had published a report in September 2020 entitled “Delivering core NHS and care services during the pandemic and beyond”. The report addressed a number of issues, some of which are relevant to the Scrutiny review of the WBC response. The issues considered include:

- Communication with patients – relating to delays, cancellations and access to medical services and potentially confusing medical guidance, such as that relating to “shielding”;

- Managing waiting times and the backlog of appointments – while the NHS prioritised urgent Covid-19 related care, there has been a substantial increase in the number of missed, delayed and cancelled appointments across critical non-Covid-19 services;
- Issues facing NHS and care staff – relating to access to PPE and routine testing of staff. We noted that WBC had procured additional supplies of PPE and Covid-19 tests to ensure that care homes and staff working in front-line settings would be able to access supplies and tests as necessary;
- Issues affecting NHS and care staff relating to “burnout” – ensuring that measures are in place to tackle workforce stress and fatigue and to provide mental health support to staff;
- Lessons to be learned for the future – including the introduction of an expanded 111 dial service to support A&E departments, investigating how technology (telemedicine) can be used without digitally excluding those already disadvantaged and retaining capacity and resources from the independent sector in the long term.

Schools and Children’s Services

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the Council’s Children’s Services team amended its service delivery to ensure that children and staff were safe, schools and settings were supported, risks were mitigated and statutory duties were met. The changes were informed by Government guidance and changes to legislation as well as advice from Public Health.

During the first lockdown in March 2020, staff were able to move quickly into new ways of working, predominantly working from home. Government guidance and changes to legislation enabled services to be delivered differently. So, for example, the Targeted Early Help offer moved to virtual delivery as Children Centres were closed.

Services were delivered in line with six underlying principles set out by the Government:

- Child-centred – promoting children’s best interests;
- Risk-based – prioritising support and resources for children at greatest risk;
- Family focussed – harnessing the strengths in families and their communities;
- Evidence-informed – ensuring that decisions were proportionate and justified;
- Collaborative – working in partnership with parents and other professionals;
- Transparent – providing clarity and maintaining professional curiosity about a child’s wellbeing.

We were informed that the majority of child protection visits remained face-to-face (97% in June 2020). We were also pleased to hear that the Bridges Resource Centre has remained open throughout the year. Bridges offers respite care for children with disabilities and was able to carry on delivering this vital service following consultation with Public Health England about changes to practice and the effective use of PPE.

We were also pleased to hear that the recruitment of foster carers continued, with the Fostering Panel meetings held virtually. There was an increased use of social media in the recruitment process, supported by the Council’s Communications team. The key message was that the recruitment of foster carers was ongoing in spite of the pandemic. This resulted in a continuous flow of enquiries. For example, in June 2020 there were 11 enquiries compared to eight in June 2019.

In order to assess the quality of services being delivered an audit tool was developed. This tool assessed areas such as risk assessment, visiting and the level of child-centred focus. 33 cases were reviewed including children in need, looked after children and care leavers. In parallel, parent/carer views and a child's voice audit were also undertaken. The analysis indicated a number of positive outcomes:

- Arrangements for social care visits and meetings were clearly recorded in the majority of cases (76%);
- Multi-agency meetings were continuing to take place within statutory timescales (78%);
- Quality of direct work was considered to be good in most cases (82%);
- All children in care were being supported appropriately to have meaningful contact with birth families;
- Reasons for children not attending school were recorded clearly, with evidence of social workers actively promoting school attendance where possible.

In order to measure learning and progress from the first audit, a second audit took place in June 2020. The audit tool from the previous project was adjusted accordingly to reflect updated practice standards, and was then used to audit a further 23 cases during a period from March until mid-June. Again the tool focused in particular on the approach to risk assessment, visiting, ensuring child centred work and was accompanied by parent/carer views and a child's voice audit.

The findings from the second audit provided some important assurances about the strength of practice as the pandemic continued:

- Almost all cases reviewed (96%) had a Covid-19 risk assessment placed on the child's file by the required date;
- Relevant health information to inform our Covid-19 risk assessments was clearly recorded in the majority of the cases reviewed (83%) - indicating a clear improvement from the previous audit;
- Almost all children (87%) were seen within statutory timescales, compared to 61% in April 2020, again indicating a clear improvement in practice;
- The audit report authors felt that in 82% of cases families had received a high level of practical support and appropriate advice, including signposting to and liaison with key external agencies or services.

The second audit report also evidenced an evolving approach to visiting children as the national lockdown restrictions had begun to ease, with 65% of children being last seen face-to-face, in comparison to 45% in April 2020.

In line with the first audit, a service-wide action plan was developed in order to seek further improvements in practice and outcomes. A further audit is being planned for January 2021 in order to maintain focus and provide quality assurance for the service as the pandemic continues.

In relation to schools, we were aware of the national research about poorer outcomes for children from disadvantaged families and were keen to hear the approach taken to support schools across the Borough.

We were informed that preparation for the reopening of schools to the wider pupil population in September 2020 commenced in the summer term. School leaders were supported with round table sessions to help understand the requirements of the DfE guidance including the Public Health requirements for safe operation of schools from September onwards. This work continued over the summer holiday period with work undertaken on home to school transport arrangements to ensure that pupils could make the safest possible journey to school and for these journeys to reflect the revised operating times and entrance and departure arrangements being made by individual schools.

As schools recommenced fully from September attendance has been high at around 90%, which is better than the national picture, but comparable with the South East attendance ranges. Schools provide a daily return to the DfE detailing attendances, which is then shared with the local authority to assist in our planning and support. We noted that, currently, the attendance data could not be broken down into specific groups such as gender, ethnic minority, etc. which made it more difficult to analyse the impact on inequalities in the Borough.

Schools have been able to remain open throughout the pandemic period and no Wokingham Borough school has closed. Whilst there have been Covid-19 cases in local schools, the systems in place have prevented onward transmission.

We noted that a Children's Services Taskforce had been set up to bring together staff who were able to proactively plan and take action to mitigate the impact of further Covid-19 cases, but also continue to ensure responses where necessary (either to positive case notifications or general queries from schools and settings).

The Taskforce would undertake a range of activity including:

- Monitoring of Covid-19 prevalence and attendances within schools and settings;
- Ensuring contact with all schools, settings, and provider services (children's residential homes, independent schools, further education provision, etc.);
- Providing call handling and risk related support for settings;
- Working with commissioned services on responding to Covid-19 related incidents;
- Ensuring that services were operating, and supporting others to operate, within the context of national guidance and local intelligence;
- Managing communications to schools and settings (in liaison with the Council's Communications team);
- Setting up and co-ordinating IMT (communication) activity as required;
- Providing daily updates to schools and settings.

Impact on Mental Health

We noted the findings of national research into the impact of Covid-19 on mental health. Good mental health is an asset and is also linked to good physical health, both of which support positive social and economic outcomes for individuals and society as a whole. Mental health disorders account for almost a quarter of the total burden of ill health in the UK. Poor mental health is strongly associated with social and economic circumstances including living in poverty, low quality work, unemployment and poor quality housing. There is also a well-documented burden of mental health disorders following disasters, including evidence from previous viral outbreaks. One impact of the

pandemic has been to reduce access to coping mechanisms and to mental health treatment.

We were informed that 15% of the Borough's residents had a formal diagnosis of depression with more than 40% of GP consultations relating in some way to mental health issues. A key aim of the Borough's community response had been to reach out to isolated and vulnerable residents. The Council's Adult Social Care team had carried out over 6,000 initial welfare checks with a further 16,000 follow up welfare calls via the Link Visiting Scheme. There were also 4,000 calls to the One Front Door service.

In response to the increasing mental health challenges facing residents the Council had launched a pilot mental health programme in partnership with Earley Plus PCN and Citizens Advice. The programme encouraged residents to contact the One Front Door if they were concerned about deteriorating mental health or wellbeing. Citizens Advice would try to resolve underlying issues causing depression and anxiety such as relationship problems or financial hardship. They could also signpost other specialist mental health services or other voluntary organisations. The Council had set up a mental health recovery college which helped residents to understand mental health issues and manage mental health in a positive way. The Council also worked with the Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust to deliver community mental health services, with specific provision for residents from ethnic minority and LBGTQ+ groups.

In relation to the mental health of children and young people, it was reported that there had been a period of suppressed demand during the first lockdown (March-June 2020). Demand began to increase again once the lockdown ended. In September 2020, for example, the CAMHs rapid response team received 70% more referrals compared to September 2019. There was also concern about an increase in eating disorder patients presenting at community and acute settings both locally and across the South East.

The Council had worked with health partners to review the way in which emotional health and wellbeing support was provided to children and young people. The new model of support included:

- Access to emotional health assessment, triage, advice and referral via a single "front door";
- A central point of contact (hub) for individuals, families and professionals to access services and/or discuss concerns;
- Evidence-based direct support and stepped care interventions;
- Evidence-based training;
- Professional consultation;
- Access to evidence-based self-help information;
- Access to the Wokingham Mental Health Support Team service offer.

An improved training offer was also being rolled out for schools and Children's Services staff. The aim was to provide enhanced support for professionals who worked with children and young people. The identification of mental health needs at an early stage would help to facilitate early interventions thereby leading to better outcomes and a more effective use of resources in the system.

We welcomed the introduction of Kooth, the on-line youth counselling service which was already achieving good results. In August 2020, for example, there were 87 new registrations. Kooth had been jointly commissioned by the Berkshire West CCG and the

three local authority partners. Kooth offered a self-service area along with a chat function enabling young people to talk to a professional about issues or concerns. The new service helped to address some of the challenges faced by young people as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic – interruption of schooling, separation from friends, health issues, social isolation and being at home with family members who may be worried about work, finance and other relatives. We noted that Kooth had already been successful in other parts of the country, supporting over 130,000 children and young people in 2019/20.

In relation to the impact of the pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of Council staff, we noted that a number of positive initiatives had been put in place. These included:

- The employee assistance programme (EAP) – providing access to confidential advice and support 24/7. EAP provides short-term, solution-focussed counselling and information services;
- Exercise and body – NHS exercise programmes, healthy eating tips and NHS guidance on how to live well during the winter;
- Mindfulness and meditation – guidance, podcasts and SoundCloud tracks;
- My Learning and WBC eLibrary – eLearning modules and eBooks on subjects such as stress awareness, emotional intelligence, personal resilience and healthy lifestyles.

Finance and Business

Members considered a briefing which outlined WBC's business and economic recovery response to the pandemic. WBC was part of the Berkshire Recovery Group, which was developing a strategic recovery plan across the Berkshire area. This would allow for a more pro-active approach to be carried out. 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.

At the Executive meeting in October 2020, it was reported that the net financial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic to date had been £2.629m. This was an improvement on the figure of £5.732m reported to the Executive in June 2020. The improved financial position had arisen from additional emergency Government funding and reimbursement of lost income. The second national lockdown will generate additional costs and see a further reduction in income from services such as leisure and car parking. Many Councils were experiencing serious financial challenges as a result of the pandemic. WBC also faced a number challenges, but, depending on the severity of further lockdowns was reasonably placed to set a realistic, safe Budget for 2021/22.

In relation to the Business Health Check offer, 159 responses had been received, of 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. The main group of businesses responding were within the retail and hospitality sectors.

Members noted that the Borough was predicted to have a higher unemployment rate than other neighbouring authorities. 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 initial furlough scheme (now extended to March 2021) came to a close over the coming months and would look to see what factors were driving unemployment in the area.

Government data published in October 2020 indicated that 9% of the Borough's workforce had been furloughed during the first wave of the pandemic. The data related to the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) and the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) up to 31 August 2020. The data indicated that there were 85,800 eligible employments in the Borough, with 8,100 of these being furloughed (9%). There were also 7,700 people eligible for SEISS with a total of 4,900 claims made. Nationally, by mid-October, there had been 9.6m jobs furloughed. The 9% furlough rate was similar to Bracknell Forest, Reading and West Berkshire. Windsor and Maidenhead had a 12% furlough rate.

Members congratulated officers on the support provided to the local business community and achieving the payment of the business and discretionary grants so quickly and efficiently.

We also noted that 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.

Members received a further briefing on the operation of the Council's Property Investment Fund and the Property Investment Group (PIG). Whilst the pandemic had had an immediate impact across property markets, this had not caused the Council to deviate from the fundamentals of its investment strategy which was based on:

- Careful selection of resilient buildings and locations;
- Length and quality of the income stream;
- Strength of tenant covenant/commitment;
- Prospects for tenant renewal/replacement;
- Alternative asset strategies to underpin capital value;
- In-Borough opportunities to deliver multiple policy objectives.

The Council had built its investment portfolio on a number of early key purchases of high quality institutional calibre stock let to strong covenants. In relation to the additional risks generated by the pandemic, we were informed that the WBC investment fund exposure to capital risk was low as there was no need or intention to sell any assets, its debt was comfortably serviced by long term rental income and the rental income was secured from a range of strong tenants with long leases.

In relation to revenue, approximately 60% of the investment fund's income was secured on leases with unexpired terms of at least 10 years. 75% of the fund's income was delivered by institutional calibre tenants such as Stapletons, Waitrose, Wickes and Tesco. A small number of tenants had found themselves in challenging circumstances and the Council had been able to support them in the short term whilst maximising income in the longer term.

Community Response

Members considered a report which outlined WBC's 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 through a well signposted and consistent response. The Council met with voluntary sector groups in March 2020 and agreed the following aims:

- To provide Wokingham Borough residents with the support, help and guidance they need during the Covid-19 pandemic;
- To ensure that all residents have access to food, essential supplies and medication;
- To proactively identify and contact the most vulnerable residents in the Borough to check on their welfare and understand their needs;
- To work in partnership with the voluntary and community sector to effectively deliver the services residents need during the pandemic.

The Council worked with a wide range of partners including Citizens Advice, the Link Visiting Scheme, Age UK, Involve, First Days, Wokingham Volunteer Centre, Wokingham Foodbank, Churches Together, Just Around the Corner, Norreys Church food hub, Home Start and the Borough's Town and Parish Councils. As local community groups were established across the Borough they were contacted and became part of the community response.

Communications were critical in enabling an effective response throughout the lockdown, whilst supporting the Borough's vulnerable residents. WBC staff proactively telephoned the most vulnerable residents within the Borough as a welfare check, to make sure they had access to services and resources.

The community hub provided access to food for residents in need. PPE was also provided to the voluntary sector as and when required. All aspects of the community response were regularly reviewed and adjusted.

We were pleased to hear about the mobility project run during the summer aimed at rebuilding the confidence (both physical and mental) of older vulnerable residents across the Borough. The scheme was a joint project between the WBC sport and leisure and adult social care teams and groups such as the Link Visiting Scheme and Age UK Berkshire. It supported more than 130 residents in their homes with a range of exercise sessions as sessions run by organisations such as day centres had to be cancelled during the first lockdown.

Citizens Advice Wokingham confirmed that a large part of the response was supported by assistance from WBC officers. The One Front Door system helped over 3,200 clients access a range of services and support. Citizens Advice received a 180% increase in employment related inquiries throughout the lockdown period. Calls were received for help with food, prescriptions and social contact. Other issues, such as housing, benefits and debt advice were identified during these calls.

The evidence confirmed that the overall community response had been very good. The One Front Door system worked very well as it allowed residents' needs to be addressed in a central location. Members were keen to ensure that Citizens Advice was properly funded to allow for the same level of service to be delivered, as necessary, in the future.

We noted that the food hub would not necessarily be required 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. It was noted that the national food parcel scheme was not particularly effective, and this could be better delivered on a local level. WBC was prepared to deliver this service within the Borough if required.

Jake Morrison (Chief Executive, Citizens Advice Wokingham) confirmed that Citizens Advice wanted to see if the One Front Door system could offer additional help, by tracing whether the wellbeing of service users had improved after three to four weeks from the first point of contact. This would allow Citizens Advice to view the bigger picture and thereby achieve better outcomes for clients. There were studies which showed a number of links between a range of other issues and mental health, and this was, therefore, a priority.

In October 2020, as Covid-19 cases began to increase significantly, the Council launched the “In It Together” campaign in order to remind residents of the Government guidance and help to slow the spread of the infection. Officers wrote to the residents who “shielded” in the Spring to remind them of the latest Government guidance. The Council also worked with partners to ensure that there were locally accessible testing sites, with units visiting Cantley Park and Prospect Park in Reading.

Feedback on WBC’s response to the pandemic was sought from the Borough’s 17 Town and Parish Councils. The feedback included the following points:

- Jan Nowecki (Town Clerk at Wokingham Town Council) attended the daily WBC community response meetings and was able to provide a daily briefing to each of the Town and Parish Councils – this was well received;
- Redeployed WBC staff working within various charities was very positive;
- The voluntary and community sector felt that, through the pandemic, the sector had been treated as a partner, with a genuine dialogue;
- The Wokingham Borough Community Response had been recognised as very good way to work through the crisis;
- There was a recognition that the speed of the response was helped by the existing strong relationships between WBC and the voluntary and community sector;
- WBC should consider the possibility of organisational shadowing in the future to promote the continued understanding of the different sectors involved in our communities;
- There was some frustration around the understanding of the position of the Food Bank – this would be the subject of further discussions and clarification;
- Covid-19 Community/Neighbourhood groups were new to the landscape. They were diverse and it was hoped that some would remain and continue to offer expertise and support back to the community;
- The Citizens Advice One Front Door was a great strength. It was recognised that Wokingham Borough stepped forward in a way other local authority areas did not;
- Gaps had been identified and addressed, mental health capacity in particular;
- There was a recognition that the management of data was challenging, particularly the interface with national data;
- Going forwards, we should ensure that BME groups are actively involved together with representatives of young people in the area;
- Cooperation on the opening up of local centres went well, with help being offered to those Towns and Parishes with shopping areas;

- Meetings with WBC officers about the re-opening of local businesses were productive and support was well received;
- Generally, communications were felt to be good. It was appreciated that getting the message out was not always easy;
- One parish gave an example of challenges with anti-social behaviour and commented that it would have appreciated greater support from WBC in facilitating a more effective police response;
- As the majority of WBC staff were working from home, there were some difficulties around contacting the relevant officers for advice and support on specific issues;
- Overall, it was felt that the recognition of the local Covid-19 response efforts in the towns and parishes was welcome, and bodes well for future co-operation.

Community Safety/Localities

Members received a briefing which outlined the impact of the pandemic on a range of issues, including recorded crime, domestic abuse, anti-social behaviour, parks and open spaces, play areas, fly tipping, and bonfires.

We noted that the first national lockdown had a significant impact on certain types of crime. Burglaries and thefts from vehicle reduced significantly as residents remained at home and the restrictions on travel reduced the activities of organised groups travelling into the Borough. The briefing explained 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 the range of challenges in order to deliver key services to residents.

There had clearly been some frustrations regarding the understanding of what powers a Local Authority had to deal with some of the issues outlined within the briefing. It was felt that there needed to be a level of expectation management with regards to these issues as many of them had to be dealt with by the police.

Members noted the national research about the growth in domestic abuse cases linked to the first lockdown, with a 40% increase in calls to the National Domestic Violence Helpline. Data from other European countries indicated a spike in reported incidents once lockdown measures were relaxed. We were informed that a home refuge service was available in the Borough which supported victims who lived separately from the abusers. WBC worked closely with Berkshire Women's Aid to reach out to victims. The key was to build confidence in individuals to be able to refer themselves and access appropriate support. We welcomed the steps taken to raise awareness and provide training for front line staff such as social workers and housing officers. We felt that this was an issue requiring close monitoring over the months ahead and supported the proposal to seek additional resources within the current Budget setting process.

At the full Council meeting on 19 November 2020, Members received a presentation from John Campbell, Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police and Felicity Parker, Local Police Area Commander for Bracknell and Wokingham. The presentation gave details of recent developments including additional funding for the force of £8.4m and specific areas of investment including local policing and investigations and contact management. A restructured local policing model and increased patrol numbers had resulted in a 13% increase in arrests and a 58% increase in Stop and Search, which was felt to be effective if used appropriately.

The presentation gave details of specific operations carried out over the past year including protests and demonstrations (including Black Lives Matter), HS2 – Extinction Rebellion, Operation Venetic (serious organised crime) and the Forbury Gardens murders. In responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, the policing approach had been based on the four E's – Engage, Explain, Encourage and Enforce. In relation to Covid-19 offences in the Borough, there had been 73 crimes, 539 incidents and 8 fixed-term penalty notices. There had also been 10 Covid-19 related assaults on police officers in the Borough. Felicity Parker stated that she chaired the Wokingham Borough Community Safety Partnership and felt that there were strong, positive working relationships between the partners.

In relation to other community issues, we noted that the management of play areas was handled very well throughout the lockdown closure and reopening phases. We thanked the police and WBC officers for their hard work, support and positive engagement with the public.

We applauded the efforts made to contain increased incidents of fly tipping within the Borough, noting that this had been a particular challenge over the summer, especially as the civic waste and recycling sites had been closed. Despite these efforts, the most recent data projected a doubling of fly-tipping incidents during 2020/21 compared to 2019/20. The majority of fly-tipping related to household waste arising from domestic clear-outs and DIY projects. The inspection and clearance of fly-tips continued during the lockdown and was supplemented by awareness campaigns on social media. Since April 2020, over 70 Fixed Penalty notices have been issued. The reopening of the waste and recycling centres had been welcomed by residents. The new booking system meant that there was no longer queuing at the sites.

There had also been a large increase in the number of bonfires throughout lockdown period, which had generated a number of complaints. We were informed that, should black smoke be present at a bonfire, then an environmental notice could be served. With regard to commercial bonfires, these could often release toxic fumes into the environment. WBC were in the process of strict enforcement relating to commercial sites using bonfires to get rid of their waste. Fines of up to £5,000 could be issued on the second offence.

Communication and Engagement

The Council implemented a comprehensive communications programme throughout the first lockdown. This included social media, printed flyers and direct contact with voluntary and community organisations.

We heard about the ways in which the Council tried to gain greater insight into the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on local communities. This included an online survey for residents, workshops for external and internal partners and interviews aimed at gaining deeper insights into delivery of the Council's services.

The on-line survey generated 1,477 responses. Key findings included:

- 67% satisfaction with the Council's overall response to the pandemic and the delivery of universal services;
- Top three issues people struggled with during the first lockdown – ability to connect with family, friends and community; stress and anxiety; diet/eating habits;

- Highest future priorities for the Council: supporting local businesses/employment; mental health; reducing social isolation and loneliness in vulnerable people;
- The biggest positive impacts arising out of Covid-19: the environmental impact; time spent outdoors; sense of community and willingness to help each other; time spent with immediate family; work-life balance.

These findings would be used to shape corporate recovery priorities and to inform planning for future outbreaks and potential lockdowns.

One area explored by Members was the effectiveness of targeted communications on specific groups such as young people, more vulnerable residents and ethnic minority communities. As an example, public health research highlighted the increased exposure of ethnic minority communities to the virus. This reflected a range of factors including an over-representation in front line care settings and in jobs that could not be undertaken at home, multi-generational housing and the prevalence of pre-existing medical conditions such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and obesity. It was recognised that, initially, there was a lack of culturally appropriate messaging, both nationally and locally.

We welcomed the work being undertaken to develop greater understanding of need amongst our ethnic minority communities and to target communications more effectively. This included a specific focus on targeted mental health support and a recognition of the importance of language. So, for example, the definition of a household” was different within different communities and phrases such as “household mixing” therefore required careful consideration and messaging.

Recovery

Members received a briefing which 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.

Test and Trace

We were informed 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 (around 20% of cases), 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 October 2020, the Council was the first authority in Berkshire to volunteer to take on the delivery of local contact tracing in support of the NHS Test and Trace service.

The Outbreak Management 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 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.

Poverty – impact on the poorest, the unemployed and the homeless

As outlined above, national research indicated how the pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities relating, for example, to wages, employment, health, gender, ethnicity, and education. It also opened up and widened new issues such as access to home working, home schooling and reliance on public transport.

Although the Borough is one of the healthiest and wealthiest in the country, it does contain pockets of relative deprivation and residents in these areas will have felt the additional impacts caused by the pandemic. The pandemic had a significant impact with the shut-down of large sections of the local economy. The impacts included:

- A 223% increase in claims for out of work benefits between February and August 2020;
- A disproportionate impact on workers from the ethnic minority community, women, young workers, disabled workers and the low paid;
- 120 young people at risk of not being in education, employment or training (NEET), which was a significant increase on previous years;
- A significant increase in demand for support from Citizens Advice;
- A 220% increase in people accessing the Wokingham Foodbank during March-August 2020, compared to 2019.

We heard that the Council had worked with partners to understand the change in local needs and had delivered 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 Council’s response to the pandemic was based on strengthening key partnerships including the Town and Parish Councils and the voluntary and community sector. We heard from representatives of Citizens Advice Wokingham, First Days (a children’s charity) and the Wokingham Foodbank.

Jake Morrison (Citizens Advice) commented that joint working through the pandemic had taken partnership working to a new level. As an example, Citizens Advice were providing training for front-line WBC staff on issues such as mental health.

Emma Cantrell (First Days) was keen to work in partnership with the Council and other stakeholders. Emma commented that effective partnership working was not always about funding. Working together may drive innovation which could actually make services more targeted and efficient, thereby saving money.

Annette Medhurst (Wokingham Foodbank) stated that, although the number of people accessing the foodbank had returned to 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.

We noted the Council's positive approach to tackling the impact of the pandemic on the poorest members of the community. This included the operation of the One Front Door via Citizen's Advice and the increase in joined up working with a range of community and voluntary organisations. Other initiatives included the delivery of more affordable housing and the work to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping.

In relation to housing, we were informed that 13 additional properties had been taken over during the pandemic and a number of hotels had been used for 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. Four individuals had lost contact with WBC, but there was no indication of harm and it was assumed that these individuals had moved on. Two 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 tackling rough sleeping within the Borough.

We were heartened by the commitment given by Susan Parsonage to work in partnership and to develop 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.

Susan stated that 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 over the long term. Ongoing initiatives included:

- A full-time Debt Management Worker, in partnership with Citizens Advice Wokingham and the voluntary sector;
- Providing temporary accommodation for rough sleepers up to March 2021;
- Provision of a private rented sector access fund;
- A rough sleeper co-ordinator post at WBC;
- Delivery of Housing First units – homes designed with wraparound support to help rough sleepers;
- Enhanced mental health support in partnership with the voluntary sector;

- Supporting economic recovery through the Economic Renewal recovery workstream and Business Taskforce.

We made several recommendations relating to the impact of the pandemic on poverty in the Borough. These recommendations will help to maintain focus on this key issue and, specifically, aim to bring immediate attention and help to our young care leavers.

Maintaining Democracy

In April 2020, the Government implemented new regulations which enabled local authority meetings to be held remotely, including allowing remote access by members of the public.

The Democratic Services, People Development and IT teams enabled a remote meeting solution using Microsoft Teams to allow the normal Council meeting calendar to continue. IT focussed on technical implementation, whilst People Development focused on training Members and Officers to use the new technology. Democratic Services focussed on producing a practical meeting template whilst adhering to government legislation and the practicalities of running a Council meeting. In addition, remote streaming software was enabled to allow simultaneous broadcasting of the meeting for public viewing whilst maintaining a good level of security for each meeting to take place.

We also heard that additional briefings on Covid-19 were provided for the opposition groups on the Council. This helped to ensure that all Members were up to speed on new developments and were better equipped to provide information and support to their constituents.

Conclusions

The Scrutiny reviews have indicated that the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic has been very positive. The Council's emergency planning systems were effective, enabling decisive and speedy action on specific issues such as PPE, the risks to residents of local care homes and the establishment of the One Front Door community response.

The Council's willingness to work in partnership has been outstanding, as has the response from community and voluntary organisations across the Borough, along with hundreds of community volunteers. This strengthened partnership approach provides a strong base upon which to build relationships and respond to future challenges, during and after the pandemic. We also commend the Council's willingness to work constructively with the Borough's MPs and to stand up to the Government over issues such as the discharge of untested residents into care homes.

The Council's workforce has also been exemplary in its response to the pandemic, through its willingness to redeploy into new service areas and its commitment to maintain key universal services. Overview and Scrutiny Members have already sent a message to staff thanking them for their dedication and hard work and recognising the huge contribution from the many community volunteers across the Borough. We are pleased to note the Council's focus on the health and wellbeing of staff, especially staff at higher risk, as we move through the second wave of the pandemic.

In relation to specific service areas, we welcomed the speed with which new forms of service delivery were implemented as a result of the move to home working and the way in which vulnerable residents and service users were placed at the centre of key decisions which affected them. We noted the results of the Residents' Survey which indicated a 67% satisfaction rating with the Council's response and highlighted areas of challenge and opportunity as we move forwards.

We also noted the outcome of national research on the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on specific groups such as ethnic minorities, young people, people with disabilities and the poorest residents in the community. We made a number of recommendations asking the Council to continue to work closely with partners to identify specific needs and to target services and communications to achieve better outcomes for these individuals and families. We also welcome the focus on mental health and wellbeing as a key issue facing all sections of the community.

In relation to the new "normal", the experience of the past eight months has road-tested a number of new ways of working and living. For example, the Council had adapted quickly to the majority of staff working from home and delivering the democratic process on line. A number of services, such as libraries, quickly adapted to lockdown and delivered a more extensive on-line offer.

The significant reductions in traffic and increased levels of walking and cycling during lockdown periods have provided positive examples for the Council's work on Climate Emergency and the delivery of a "green" recovery. The strengthening of partnerships with the voluntary sector and Town and Parish Councils and increased focus on the needs of specific community groups provides a template for greater community cohesion and inclusion.

Finally, we recognise the huge challenges faced and overcome by the Council and its partners over the past eight months and hope that our recommendations will help to deliver an even stronger response as we move through the next phase of the pandemic and address the additional challenges of the winter period.

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