

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE EXECUTIVE
HELD ON 25 FEBRUARY 2021 FROM 7.00 PM TO 8.00 PM**

Committee Members Present

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

Other Councillors Present

Gary Cowan
Pauline Helliard-Symons

94. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies for absence.

95. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received.

96. STATEMENT BY THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

The Leader of the Council made the following statement:

The weekly rate to 20th February in Wokingham is now 48.5 today, which is well below the peak of 606 on the 4th January but still compares very badly to the below five in August. We suspect that we will hover around this figure for some time. Happily, both hospitalisations and deaths are also stable. Our lives have changed, unrecognisably for some, and many lives have so sadly been lost. I can only restate my condolences for those that have suffered so much.

I would like again to say again to a big thank you to everybody who has stepped up to the plate and made it possible for life to continue during these appalling times.

It has never been more vital that we play our role and continue to observe the rules.

Earlier this week the PM made a statement on a roadmap for easing lockdown restrictions in England. Vaccines are at the heart of the government strategy, with 17million people having received the vaccine. The Government is taking a cautious approach to easing lockdown, guided by the data to avoid surge infections that would put unsustainable pressure on the NHS. When moving from one step to another in the roadmap the Government will examine data to assess the impact of the previous step. This will be based on four tests:

- The vaccine deployment programme continues successfully;
- Evidence showing vaccines are sufficiently effective in reducing hospitalisation;
- Infection rates do not risk a surge in hospitalisation;
- Assessment of risk is not fundamentally changed by new variants or of concern.

As we move forward on the road map, the Council will have a central role in its success. Moreover, this is part of our Recovery strategy. For example, rolling out the vaccination is critical. We are doing all that we can to enable this with our health partners. Expanding and scaling our community testing offer on lateral flow testing will be crucial – building on the Shute End and the Microsoft sites as we know that 1 in 3 people are asymptomatic. To be successful this testing needs to be part of everybody's daily routine. We need to

change the behaviour and continually check for positive cases so that these cases can then self-isolate. We need to have an enhanced tracing regime to ensure those residents who are positive, do self-isolate. We need to rapidly deploy thousands of PCR tests door to door should the data suggest we have a problem in the Borough.

Also, we need to maintain our excellent support to groups particularly at risk from Covid such as those in care home. At the same time, we need to address inequalities ensuring for example that those disenfranchised are testing and receiving vaccinations, and that we are addressing vaccination hesitancy.

Therefore, as part of recovery and outbreak management we need to have a tailored approach to our communities.

Alongside our efforts on Covid Contain as part of Recovery we are also focussing on the following areas.

- Supporting businesses and stimulating job creation and skills;
- Physical and mental wellbeing;
- Maintaining resilient and sustainable services;
- Harnessing digital and data for insight;
- Focussing on children and young people and education;
- Inequality and social inclusion.

We are already moving forward and taking action on these recovery themes and a report will be brought to the Executive on action taken so far and future action.

At the Council in February, I stated that the budget put forward was a budget for recovery. It provides almost half a billion pounds over the next three years for investment in our community and a considerable amount of this will stimulate our local economy and seek to address the housing needs in the Borough for those not currently able to afford to buy their homes. The budget also provided considerable additional ongoing investment into our care services, including the likes of the Domestic Abuse service, to ensure that we can support our residents in overcoming the fall out of this terrible virus. You may also be aware that we have done much work recently on our Poverty Strategy, our Equalities Strategy, these are also a critical part of our recovery strategy.

The main item today is the Council's approach to Covid as reviewed by Overview & Scrutiny. The administration believes that O&S provides a vital function for our decision making and democracy, and has sought to ensure that it is far reaching and unfettered in its work. For example, the budget now is reviewed by O&S prior to adoption over a period in excess of six months.

Thank you to all the officers involved and the work of overview and scrutiny in reviewing our Covid response as we can always learn more. Thank you very much.

97. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

97.1 David Dunham asked the Executive Member for Highways and Transport the following question:

Question

I would like to ask the Council/Councillors about the issues we have experienced at the Bradbury Centre and the lack of Parking at times.

On an average day at the Bradbury Centre Vaccine centre we see anything from 900+ to a high of 1400 people being vaccinated, people receiving the Pfizer jab have to be monitored for 15 minutes inside before being allowed to leave, the Astra Zeneca again 15 minutes before being allowed to drive.

There are only approximately 15 spaces available free of charge for people to use.

The vaccine centre uses the centre once a week, the Town centre is relatively quiet due to lockdown, there are five other car parks around the Town Centre, that could be used.

Whilst Wokingham are doing extremely well with the vaccination programme, could the Rose Street car park be allocated vaccine centre car park only for that one day a week? The loss of revenue would be minimal in comparison to the benefits, especially as there are many who still need to be vaccinated who are on the vulnerable list.

Waitrose have been kind enough to allow all volunteers to use their car park, so it would be used for those attending to receive their vaccine.

Answer

The way the parking in that car park works at the moment is that we have set aside some space for people getting vaccinations and that is being managed to make sure that people who are not getting vaccinations are not going to be parking in the area that is allocated. I am very happy to take away your suggestion and see if there is enough space there and make adjustments to make sure that there is enough space for the people who have been vaccinated.

Supplementary Question

Currently we have 14 spaces allocated in that car park and if we have roughly, not everybody drives, 8 people every 4 minutes and they did happen to drive, that potentially could be at the most, 32 cars. With the vaccinations they have to sit for 15 minutes as you are probably aware with the Pfizer, indoors, and not drive, sit in their cars for 15 minutes for the other one. We are also having problems; the parking wardens have recently been hovering shall we say to see those who are not parking in those allocated spaces. 5 of those 14 spaces are also disabled spaces which are the ones right next to the old M&S building, so we do not want to put anybody in those. We want those to stay for disabled people. They could do with another line of spaces that is all.

Supplementary Answer

Let me take it away and look at it, David. I am very happy to make sure that there is enough parking.

We obviously do not want to provide too much as we want to make sure that everybody is able to use the car park.

97.2 Anne Chadwick asked the Executive Member for Children's Services the following question:

Question

The report of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee of Wokingham Borough Council on its response to the Covid-19 pandemic report and recommendations of November 2020 states that the majority of child protection visits remained face-to-face (97%) in June 2020. How have child protection visits been conducted during the latest lockdown?

Answer

Throughout the pandemic children's social workers have been committed to undertaking visits to children in person and face to face. This can be seen in the high number of face to face visits that were completed during periods of national restrictions. Children's Social Care developed a set of Practice Standards that provide a structured decision-making process in relation to all visits to children, to ensure that any risks are mitigated. The standards highlight that all children subject to a Child Protection plan will receive face-to-face visits within the usual statutory timelines, or more frequently if required. There are exceptions and these are:

- When a member of a household or placement has symptoms of COVID-19
- When a member of a household or placement has a confirmed case of COVID-19.
- When a member of a household or placement is within a recommended period of self-isolation.

When any of these circumstances arise, a Covid 19 Visiting and PPE Risk Assessment is undertaken by the allocated Social Worker and their Team Manager. This will give them information on the

- risks to child
- risks to families
- risks to the workforce
- national guidance on social distancing and hygiene
- statutory responsibilities, including safeguarding

Any decision to undertake a virtual visit requires management oversight and agreement.

Since 1st January this year to the 19th February a total of 783 Child Protection visits have been completed by Wokingham social workers. Out of this number 5.4 % have been virtual and 94.6% of visits have been undertaken in person and face to face by a social worker. So, I think you will agree that we are doing our very best to ensure that we have everything covered.

97.3 Daniel Hinton asked the Executive Member for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Services the following question:

Question

Can you give us an update on the current level of Covid in care homes across the Borough?

Answer

At the start of the pandemic, Wokingham Borough Council set up a specialist Covid-19 Taskforce; made up of WBC employees they work closely with care homes across the Borough.

Since then, the team has provided vital support to our care homes and their residents, ensuring they stay as safe as possible, and particularly trying to support them when we have been in the position of having outbreaks.

From daily calls to share information and assist with any issues and concerns; to supporting with risk assessments, problem solving and testing; the team is there to assess the needs of everybody and to put support in place when it is needed.

Working in close partnership with our local providers, we are now seeing fortunately low Covid-19 case numbers in Wokingham. Across our 52 care homes, which is a lot larger than any of the nearby Boroughs, there currently are two Covid positive residents and three Covid positive members of staff, which is a vast improvement on where we were a few months ago.

Following a peak in the case rate in Wokingham at the beginning of January, the rate has now fallen steadily, and we are below the national and South East comparable rates. As the Leader said at the start of the meeting the current rate is below 50 per 100,000 and most encouragingly of all the rate in residents over the age of 60 is now hovering around 30 per 100,000, when the average for the South East is around 69.8.

As I am sure you are aware, Central Government has, announced this week that care home residents will be permitted one designated visitor from 8th March, which is obviously very good news. Our Task Force will continue to work with care homes and colleagues from across the sector to minimise the risk of community transmission and to ensure that Lateral Flow Testing is available and to fully facilitate anyone who is chosen as the chosen visitor.

Supplementary Question

Does WBC have a message for residents to ensure that this forward number continues going forwards?

Supplementary Answer

The situation is very encouraging and as I said we are generally below the Berkshire average, the South East England average etc. But you know that has been achieved for a reason because people here have generally been following the guidelines; keeping 2 metres social distancing, wearing masks where appropriate and washing hands properly. It is really, really important if we want to keep downwards pressure on the rate as hard as possible, to do those things. If you are called for a vaccine, please go because that is the way out of this.

97.4 Sam Akhtar asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question

The Council navigated a firm course through the emergency looking after the needy, protecting the residents and standing up for the Borough where necessary. I am delighted that the Executive had the strength of conviction. Well done.

How prepared is the Council for recovery and what is its strategy?

Answer

Thank you, Sam, for your question. It is pleasing and reassuring to hear the appreciation of the Council's response to the pandemic. It means a lot to know that our endeavours were felt amongst the community at such a vital time. Our response is not over yet of

course, so we must keep focused on this and doing all we can. And as you rightly point out, the Council also has a key role to play in recovery.

At Council in February, I stated that the budget put forward was a budget for recovery; it provides almost half a billion pounds over the next three years for investment in our community and a considerable amount of this will stimulate our local economy and seek to address the housing needs in the Borough for those not currently able to afford to buy their homes. The budget also provided considerable additional ongoing investment in our care services, including the likes of the Domestic Abuse service and Mental Health, to ensure we can support our residents in overcoming the fall out of this terrible virus. You may also be aware that we have done much work recently on our Poverty Strategy and our Equalities Strategy. These are also critical parts of our recovery strategy.

In March we will be refreshing our Vision and Corporate Delivery plan in the context of the impact of Covid-19 and the need for recovery and in May I hope to be able to bring a specific Recovery Strategy to the Executive that identifies our key themes for attention. Most of the recovery work is of course already progressing, for example; improving our offer to low to medium mental health support, stimulating economic recovery and helping our children achieve their development potential. However, this strategy will help us bring all these work-streams together and ensure they are not forgotten as we embark on our significant role in helping create a brighter, purposeful and happier future for our whole community.

**97.5 Shahid Younis asked the Leader of the Council the following question:
Question**

Wokingham is one of the affluent places to live, work and bring up a family. However, in certain wards 17% of children live in poverty. What strategy does the Council have in place to reduce child poverty in Wokingham?

Answer

The Executive agreed the Council's approach to tackling poverty at its meeting in January 2021 and work is underway to better understand the causes and effects for residents and families in the Borough and what we can do more of to improve outcomes for all. Child poverty will be a key consideration and actions to reduce poverty generally in the Borough will positively affect children who may be living in poverty because of their family situation.

Regardless of whichever statutory benchmark you look at regarding poverty and hardship, Wokingham still has one of the lowest rates in the country, but even if one person or one child does not have fair and equal opportunity in our Borough that is one too many and we are committed to fighting this.

We are already doing a lot to address this issue; we are not starting from scratch. For example, we have made good progress in addressing the drivers of poverty, through maximising affordable housing, providing good quality Council housing and addressing homelessness to ensure families and children have access to safe and secure accommodation. In fact, I would add that at the Executive next week, or the week after, we will be putting together a paper to increase the amount of council homes that we are building.

We also have a scheme in place to alleviate the impacts on fuel poverty. The scheme has benefited a number of our households through Energy Efficiency upgrades to homes,

which could save residents more than 30% on their annual fuel bills. These savings can help improve financial security of families which will directly benefit children.

Another example is through our out-reach work, often in partnership with the Voluntary and Community Sector, we support our residents to lead self-sustaining lifestyles, including addressing food insecurity through initiatives such as the Grub Club and Social Bites, which has positive benefits for children.

Notwithstanding this positive work that has been taking place and is being strengthened in response to the pandemic, we know we can do more to ensure those who really need our support and help get it.

98. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

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

98.1 Gary Cowan asked the Executive Member for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Services the following question:

Question

The agenda Page 8 states and I quote:

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.

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.

My question is, is the Council satisfied that it has worked just as proactively to deliver support and advice to our residents and businesses in the vicinity of the care homes where there has been reported cases of infection and sadly loss of life in the Borough.

Answer

Care homes have been particularly vulnerable to Covid 19 outbreaks but most of all at times when rates of infection are high in the community. High community rates of transmission increase the risk that staff or residents leaving the care home contract the virus, with subsequent onward transmission within the care home setting, amongst those who are elderly and vulnerable.

Outbreaks in Care Homes have been managed effectively and contained through all the necessary infection control measures and public health action to manage this risk of community transmission.

Throughout the pandemic, the Council has worked in partnership with local residents and businesses to minimise the risk of community transmission. Measures have been

introduced throughout Wokingham, including physical barriers to manage pedestrian flows, signage, targeted communication and Covid Marshalls.

The activity of the Marshalls has been directed by Public Health data and local intelligence to ensure resources are deployed where they have been needed. This obviously includes when we have had large outbreaks. Our Covid Support Team works closely with the Police, Localities and Town and Parishes to ensure community compliance and we have completed over 3,000 business and safety inspections.

Wokingham's local Case Tracing Service, which is part of the NHS Test and Trace system, has enabled the Council to ensure welfare needs are understood and that residents have been signposted to services to support their needs. At the time of writing, we have made 416 successful self-isolation calls. That has led to 101 people being referred to the One Front Door System for further support. The service aims to reach residents within the Borough to ensure that support and guidance is made available in a timely fashion to support isolation.

In addition to this we have launched our lateral flow rapid testing programme to all keyworkers in the Borough, there are currently two centres open with a third due to open shortly. The aim of this is that they can work safely, and we can better control and identify the risk of the spread of infection. So far this has done more than 4,000 tests.

Where we have seen Care Home outbreaks, the Council has targeted resources within the local community. This has included Marshal Patrols and an addition in signage, with staff working alongside local residents and businesses to highlight risks and to ensure compliance. For example, when there was an outbreak at the Shinfield View care home we arranged daily Covid Marshalls patrols and located four large temporary feather signs in Shinfield outside key shops and the garage and a number of additional standard signs to reassure the community, and to try and send the right messages out locally.

99. TO CONSIDER ANY REPORTS FROM THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

99.1 Officer Response to the Recommendations from the Overview and Scrutiny Report - WBC's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic

The Executive considered a report setting out the Officer response to the recommendations included in the report from the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee following their review of the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Councillor Pauline Helliard-Symons, Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee introduced the report. She praised the research that had been undertaken during the review, the contribution made by all of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees and the cross party working undertaken.

Councillor Helliard-Symons highlighted that the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee had been provided with results of the residents' survey regarding how the Council had responded to the pandemic, which had been very positive. Twelve areas had been reviewed and Councillor Helliard-Symons highlighted the impact on people's mental health, poverty and care leavers needing exemption from council tax to the age of 25, as areas that Members had had particular concerns about. She was pleased to note that a number of these had been or were already being addressed.

Staff welfare had been a key priority throughout the pandemic and 45 members of staff were training to become mental health first aiders.

Councillor Helliard-Symons praised the way in which the Council had worked with its partners throughout the pandemic. It was hoped that this would continue and that lessons would continue to be learned. Two recommendations around this had been added.

Councillor Jorgensen commented that there had been quick decision making in a crisis and questioned how this had been funded. Councillor Kaiser indicated that the Council had started the pandemic with a good level of reserves but also a crisis had not been allowed to turn into a disaster. Staff had been very adaptable, and a good level of support had been received from the Voluntary Sector. Government grants had also been received.

With regards to the response from the Voluntary Sector, Councillor Margetts indicated that the response initially focused on food and prescription delivery and was now focused on supporting the vaccination delivery. He praised the partnership working with the Voluntary Sector.

Councillor Clark asked how well the Council was performing in comparison to other local authorities with regards to vaccinations and tests. Councillor Margetts responded that the supply of vaccinations had been an issue, but that vaccination of Group 6 had begun. He believed that Wokingham was slightly further ahead than neighbouring boroughs. The Council was providing support in the form of buildings and volunteers amongst others. He had written to the CCG for further information on vaccinations.

Councillor Clark commented that Children's Services always ensured that children were safe, and the schools and settings were supported. She felt that greater reference could have also been made to Kooth. Councillor Helliard-Symons indicated that the report could not be amended but that Councillor Clark's comments would be taken on board.

Councillor Smith stated that the way staff had adapted to the situation and had interacted with community groups, was admirable.

Councillor Murray praised the focus of the report on mental health. He felt that all Members and more Officers should undertake the mental health first aider training in the future, given the increased focus on this area.

Councillor Kaiser questioned what was being done to involve communities, such as the BAME community, in the vaccination programme. Councillor Margetts responded that positive messages regarding the safety of the vaccination were being targeted.

RESOLVED that:

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

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