

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT COMMISSION

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY, 12 OCTOBER 2021

Councillors Present: James Cole, Lee Dillon (Vice-Chair, in the Chair), Owen Jeffery (Substitute) (In place of Tony Vickers), Thomas Marino, Steve Masters and Claire Rowles

Councillors Attending Remotely: Councillor Lynne Doherty (Leader of the Council and District Strategy and Communications), Councillor Alan Law (Council Member)

Also Present: Susan Halliwell (Executive Director - Place), Joseph Holmes (Executive Director - Resources), Matthew Pearce (Service Director-Communities & Wellbeing, Public Health and Wellbeing), Lizzie Reeves (Business Analyst (Digital Services)) and Carolyn Richardson (Civil Contingencies Manager), and Gordon Oliver (Principal Policy Officer)

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Councillor Jeff Brooks and Councillor Tony Vickers

Councillor(s) Absent: Councillor Gareth Hurley

PART I

30. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

31. Review of the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic

The Commission considered a report (Agenda Item 3) concerning the Review of the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Councillor Lee Dillon advised that Officers had been asked to provide a review of the Council's response to the pandemic, to look at what had been exposed by the pandemic, the lessons learned, and changes that had been put in place, or were planned. The review would not take account of the response by health commissioners or providers since health scrutiny fell under the remit of the Health Scrutiny Committee.

Joseph Holmes provided a summary of the report, which highlighted the key areas of the response, based around the timeline of the pandemic and the various schemes, projects and actions that took place across the Council. The report was structured to look at those actions delivered for: residents; service users and businesses. He noted that Covid was still prevalent and so the response was ongoing.

The report highlighted some of the impact of the pandemic by numbers from March 2020 to September 2021, including:

1. Over 11,000 confirmed Covid-19 cases (as of 7 September 2021)
2. 256 residents had died due to Covid-19 (i.e. within 28 days of a positive Covid-19 test), including two members of the Council's staff
3. 17,900 residents' wages were funded through the furlough scheme at the peak of the take-up (Jun 2020)
4. 4,190 people contacted the Community Hub for support between 23 March 2020 and the beginning of July 2021

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5. Approximately 90 community groups, representing 2,000 local volunteers, assisted in the response – this included pre-existing community groups, as well as Town and Parish Councils, which also responded to provide practical support for members of their community.
6. A number of asymptomatic, mobile testing and vaccination sites were established, providing ‘community collect’ and assisted testing.
7. In excess of £100m of business rate relief and grants had been distributed

A video had been produced, which set out how the Council supported residents, service users and businesses in their response to the pandemic. Unfortunately, this could not be played at the meeting due to technical issues. [The video has since been put on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/SUlf9pfCbA>.] Joseph Holmes indicated that the video included commentary from the Leader and colleagues and focused on the human story. Councillor Lynne Doherty said the video showed how the Council’s role was to try to mitigate against the most serious aspects of the pandemic within the community. She was proud of the response, but was keen to hear feedback and acknowledged that there were always lessons to be learned. She noted that the Council was still responding and continued to work jointly with partners.

Councillor Dillon invited comments from Members of the Commission. He noted that there was lots of data in the report, but little about the quality of the response, the experience of customers, or what had been done with funds allocated. He proposed that a task group be set up to examine in detail the quality of the response to residents, service users and businesses, and engage with Officers and relevant partners.

Councillor Alan Law said the report set out, by way of a data-filled summary, the Council’s response to unprecedented circumstances and formed the basis of further investigation as the Council moved out of its reactive mode into a recovery position. He felt that an important aspect missing from the report was a review of lessons learned, which was only partially covered by a section outlining a range of activities that would be retained beyond the pandemic. He felt that it would have been preferable if the report had also set out what the Council would do in the future – or do differently – that it had not done in its response, and the reasons why. He noted that there had been a poor flow of information and strategic direction from Central Government, Public Health England and the NHS and wondered what effect this had had on the Council’s response. He questioned the local experience with regard to the stock and distribution of PPE, as well as the current number of GP appointments carried out compared to those undertaken pre-pandemic. On the latter point, Councillor Dillon was able to advise that Healthwatch West Berkshire were undertaking a piece of work on GP access in order to provide clarity on the current situation. Councillor Law suggested that this may be something for the Health Scrutiny Committee to consider.

Councillor Doherty said the Council did not lack supplies of PPE and that stock had been maintained throughout the pandemic and this had been shared with partners. With regard to lack of information flow from central Government, Councillor Doherty recognised this had been an issue and whilst it was referred to in the report, she acknowledged that the Commission would benefit from a more qualitative narrative around the impact this had caused. For example there had been delays in the distribution of business grants caused by central Government not issuing guidance in a timely manner. Joseph Holmes said delays had been experienced in issuing grants, because following Government announcements on funds, there was a 2-3 week delay until guidance was issued to local authorities as to how and to whom these grants could be administered. In addition, the guidance had been subject to change, though the Government had been helpful in providing local authorities with greater discretion as to who could benefit from the grants.

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Joseph Holmes referred to the dashboard in the appendix of the report which showed some of the more qualitative aspects in terms of outcomes of the Council's response. For example, the quick distribution of business grants, business rates relief, and business rates payment holidays had supported the low number of empty businesses and the reasonably positive economic position shown in the report.

Councillor Steve Masters thanked Officers and Councillor Doherty for the depth, breadth and quantitative aspect of the report and echoed the call for more of a qualitative narrative about the actions taken and their outcomes. Councillor Masters said he had been contacted in the early stages of the pandemic with regarding shortages of PPE, necessitating procurement for a number of establishments. He felt there should be a wider discussion about this topic. In addition, Councillor Masters felt that Officers, members of the voluntary sector and representatives of commercial business should be given an opportunity to speak openly and frankly about the impact of Covid-19 and how they dealt with the support, or lack of support, that was available from central Government and the Council.

Councillor Claire Rowles also thanked officers for putting together a comprehensive report, but felt it would be helpful to have more concrete recommendations. She noted in the residents survey that there was some dissatisfaction with the Council's service delivery during the pandemic and indicated that she would have appreciated a more detailed response as to the reasons for this dissatisfaction. Councillor Rowles said she would like to see more benchmarking against other Councils in specific areas, e.g. in relation to the distribution of financial recovery packages. She also asked how much of the Council's response was Government led, for example, was the Council required to set up a Community Hub or had that been a local initiative. Joseph Holmes indicated that there was not always comparative analysis available, as some measures were unique to West Berkshire and some were a crossover between Government-led and the Council's own initiatives. For example, the Community Hub had been established before the Government had advised there must be one in place, and in regard to Council Tax and Business Rates collection, the Council had made a proactive decision to support residents and businesses by reducing enforcement activity. One area where comparison was available was around business grants; in the first few weeks of business grant distribution, the Council was in the lower quartile for speed of distribution – due to the time taken to collect the electronic contact details of the eligible businesses – but by May 2020 the Council had progressed to the upper quartile. West Berkshire was the 6th Council in the country to get a discretionary scheme up and running and had remained in the top quartile performance for speed of distribution. It was noted that the collection of more data at the start reduced had reduced the burden for businesses making repeat applications.

Councillor Dillon felt the benchmarking against other Councils was inconsistent and it might be more helpful to be judged against another comparable Council. He considered that the report showed the impacts of Covid-19 had not been quite so severe in West Berkshire, but the Council had a built-in advantage due to the economics of the area, which needed to be taken into consideration. Councillor Doherty commented that the issue with accurate or relevant comparison was that many other local authorities had not yet begun to look at their response and as a consequence had not produced any data against which to benchmark.

Councillor Owen Jeffery recognised that a great number of staff had put in a massive effort to support Council services in general and the range of new activities necessary to respond to the pandemic. He highlighted that there was no reference or recognition in the report to the efforts made by the Town and Parish Councils in support of the

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response to the pandemic. He stated that a lot of calls were made to Thatcham Town Council, which related to issues dealt with by the District Council.

Councillor Jeffery described the situation with the Council's care homes as a "tragic disaster" because so many of the residents had died from Covid-19, which had led to the number of care homes being reduced from four to three. The driver for this had been the way in which NHS patients were discharged from hospital, untested, back into care homes allowing Covid-19 to infiltrate the homes. Whilst the report made reference to appropriately supporting the most vulnerable members of the District, he felt it should be acknowledged that there were some areas in which there had been very sad outcomes even if those had not been as a direct result of the Council's actions.

[Following the meeting Cllr Jeffery asked that his statement be clarified as follows: *I would not dispute for one moment that responsibility for the heartrendingly appalling decision to discharge elderly patients without testing for Covid was a Government directive to the NHS. It was this dreadful decision that led directly to the mass ingress of Covid into the Nation's care homes including Council and private homes in West Berkshire. For reasons entirely beyond this Council's control, the most vulnerable ones were NOT supported appropriately. They were supported to the best of the ability of WBC and care home providers in monumentally difficult circumstances but were most definitely NOT supported appropriately (which would of course have been re-admission to Hospitals for suitable treatment. Hospitals that as we all know were already breaking under the strain.)*]

Councillor Jeffery was pleased that Healthwatch West Berkshire were reviewing GP access, but noted that there was a press campaign to discredit GP services, which he considered irresponsible and disappointing, as he believed GPs were doing more face-to-face appointments and had added telephone triage. Councillor Jeffery also agreed with Councillor Law's view that there should be an analysis of what the Council could and should have done better in their response to the pandemic.

Councillor Dillon indicated that the lack of detail about the Parish and Town Councils' response was partly intentional since the report was meant to focus on West Berkshire Council's response. However, going forward there would be an opportunity to talk to external partners to obtain their view as to whether the Council could have done things differently. With regard to care home deaths, Councillor Dillon said the lessons learned there would become a rolling factor with regard to the ongoing review of the Council's response to the pandemic.

Councillor Tom Marino echoed previous comments about the work undertaken by Officers. He paid particular tribute to everyone involved in the Support Hub as feedback he had received from people he had referred to the Hub had been extremely positive, and his own communications with the Hub had been excellent.

Councillor James Cole disagreed with Councillor Jeffery in that he viewed the report as looking at what the Council did and not how the Government or NHS had responded, and he felt that the Council had reacted superbly. He acknowledged the Council's efforts were ongoing and what mattered was to set up task groups and to learn more from them. Councillor Dillon agreed with Councillor Cole and felt that the organisation had faced an unparalleled crisis. Every member of staff and every Councillor had done their best to respond in order to protect West Berkshire, including the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Council, who had gone over and above what was expected of a Councillor in terms of the time spent coordinating the Council's response.

Councillor Masters agreed that the Council had responded well to the pandemic, much of which was due to the leadership of Councillor Doherty. In relation to business grants, he

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asked whether there was any intelligence or data on fraud committed within West Berkshire. Joseph Holmes did not know the national position because the Government was still reconciling all the different grants, and he expected it would take many months or even years for the Government to go through and cross-match where different people had tried to claim grants they weren't entitled to. However, nationally, some people had been able to commit fraud, and locally the Council had intercepted a number of fraudulent attempts to try and obtain business grants, some of which were up to £25,000+. He estimated that up to £0.5 million of fraud had been prevented locally.

Councillor Masters asked about the impact in areas such as turnover of business creation and bankruptcy, and whether these had been markedly different during the pandemic. Joseph Holmes stated that the number of empty businesses and the overall amount of business rates collectable had held steady. In terms of business insolvency nationally over the last four years, 2021 had shown an increase over the previous couple of years, but the overall picture would take time to understand because it was tied into the furlough scheme and the support that Central Government had given out. He indicated that West Berkshire Council was still providing business rates relief of up to 67% to a number of businesses. He suggested that this would not continue next year, though he conceded that situation could change.

Councillor Rowles indicated that it was good to see scrutiny undertaken at all levels, such as the audit of grants by the Governance and Ethics Committee and indicated that Health Scrutiny Committee would be looking at GP appointments.

Councillor Rowles commended the Leader, Deputy Leader and Nick Carter for the internal communications that came through to Members, which ensured they were well connected with decisions taken at the various Gold and Silver meetings and were able to disseminate that information to residents. She indicated that the daily and weekly briefings in the early days and the regular Q&As with the Leader and Nick were incredibly helpful and were the kind of behind the scenes work that residents would not have been aware of.

Councillor Rowles asked about the purpose of the video referred to at the beginning of the meeting and if it was intended to be for the benefit of residents. Councillor Doherty indicated that the video gave a qualitative flavour of the work undertaken and levels of support given to the community which was difficult to portray in the report. It had been recognised from the beginning of the pandemic that transparency and communication would be key, both within and outside the organisation, so that staff and members of the public were kept informed as to what was going on. Messaging via video was a communication method that had been very popular with the public and was used regularly throughout the pandemic. Joseph Holmes added that the purpose of the video was also to remember the members of the public and the staff that had been lost due to the pandemic and the impact it had had on so many people's lives, as well as an attempt to retain for the future some of the measures that had been undertaken during the pandemic. He noted that the Peer Review had stressed the importance of communications and he highlighted that the residents' survey had attracted around 3,000 responses, which had shaped the Council's activities. He also noted how teams had been formed from different parts of the Council to respond to the demands of the pandemic.

Councillor Law had been surprised by the volume of new planning applications received during the pandemic. History had shown that in an economic downturn levels of planning applications had decreased so he had been encouraged to see planning applications had remained steady during the pandemic.

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Councillor Dillon noted that the report did not go into much detail around Adult Social Care and felt it would be beneficial to understand the detail and challenges experienced locally by the department. For example, the report stated that 2,700 vulnerable residents had been contacted - he asked if that meant 100% of vulnerable adults had been contacted or did it mean only 10% of vulnerable residents had been contacted? Councillor Dillon proposed that he and Councillor Law should look at the Scrutiny programme to schedule some task groups, to look at the response from the perspective of residents, service users and then businesses,. He suggested that it was necessary to consider: whether outcomes delivered by Council could have been delivered better; what the communication was like; and what the expectations were versus the reality. Councillor Law agreed with the proposal to schedule task group activity and felt this could dovetail into the Recovery session scheduled in 2022.

Action: Councillor Dillon and Councillor Law to look at the Scrutiny programme to schedule some task groups, to look at the response from the perspective of residents, service users and then businesses.

Councillor Dillon thanked Members for their attendance and engagement and thanked Officers for their report.

(The meeting commenced at 6.30 pm and closed at 7.30 pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature