

HEALTH, WELLBEING & PARTNERSHIPS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday, 1st June, 2020
Time of Commencement: 7.00 pm

Present:	Councillor Ian Wilkes (Chair)		
Councillors:	Miss Julie Cooper Ms Allison Gardner Mrs Ruth Wright	Mrs Sue Moffat Kenneth Owen Mark Holland	Paul Northcott Mrs Helena Maxfield
Officers:	Andrew Bird Daniel Dickinson Geoff Durham Martin Hamilton Simon McEneny David Elkington Rob Foster Mrs Joanne Halliday Mrs Sarah Moore	Head of Recycling, Waste and Fleet Services Head of Legal & Governance /Monitoring Officer Mayor's Secretary / Member Support Officer Chief Executive Executive Director - Commercial Development & Economic Growth Head of Customer and Digital Services Head of Leisure and Cultural Services Head of Housing Partnerships Manager	

Note: In line with Government directions on staying at home during the current stage of the CV-19 pandemic, this meeting was conducted by video conferencing in accordance with the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020.

1. **APOLOGIES**

There were no apologies.

2. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest stated.

3. **MINUTES OF LAST MEETING**

Resolved: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 2 March, 2020 be agreed as a correct record subject to the inclusion of apologies from Councillors' Panter and Wright.

4. **CORONAVIRUS UPDATE AND RECOVERY PLAN**

Consideration was given to a report providing Members with a Covid-19 update in terms of issues arising and actions taken within the service areas that fell under this Committee's remit.

The Council's Chief Executive, Martin Hamilton advised Members that the Council had been busy over the last couple of months responding to the pandemic and preparing for recovery.

Mr Hamilton stated that he had been chairing an Incident Management Team every morning at the beginning of the lockdown but that had now moved to two meetings each week.

Considerable effort had gone into protecting the vulnerable, homelessness and rough sleeping. A helpline had been set up for vulnerable people which was being manned by staff from J2.

Bereavement Services had been extremely busy and the culture and leisure provision had been severely impacted upon.

Vulnerability:

The Portfolio Holder for Community Safety and Wellbeing, Councillor Maxfield stated that the team had worked incredibly hard to ensure that vulnerable residents were being looked after. Members' attention was drawn to paragraph 2 of Appendix 2 which stated that there were other vulnerable groups and Mrs Maxfield stated that the Council needed to ensure that people were not being overlooked.

The Executive Director for Commercial Development and Economic Growth, Simon McEneny stated that since lockdown there had been a concerted effort working with partners to help the vulnerable.

The temporary closure of J2 had provided manpower for the Council to set up its own call centre to provide help and advice. Over the weeks, calls had reduced but deliveries of food parcels and prescriptions were still ongoing.

The Council's Partnerships Manager, Sarah Moore advised that the Realise Foundation, partners and Support Staffordshire had been excellent and they had direct contact with approximately eight and a half thousand vulnerable people straight away.

Councillor Gardner advised that she had had interaction with the Realise Foundation and other organisations which had been very positive although she did have concerns about the heavy reliance on volunteers.

Mrs Moore assured that this had not gone amiss and the matter had been discussed with colleagues at the County Council.

Councillor Moffat congratulated the officers of the Council and its partners for their work through a difficult period stating that the Council had 'done itself proud'. In addition, the communities of Newcastle should be applauded for their great spirit.

Mrs Moore agreed that communities and town and parish councils had all stepped up.

Mr McEneny stated that there had been enormous support from volunteers and that this needed to be taken forward. The support that some residents had received had provided reassurance and comfort and this should not just stop after lockdown. A way needed to be

found to harness this. There was now a good database of where help was needed. The Council should continue to enhance and embrace the community support.

Councillor Northcott stated that the Council needed to be clear with the communication that volunteers were still needed. If this was not done, on a weekly basis, people could assume that it had been taken up by other groups.

Mrs Moore suggested that there were many groups on a County basis who could help with this.

Domestic Abuse:

Mrs Moore stated that the Council had not seen any noticeable increase in the demand for help in relation to domestic abuse which was fairly static at the present time. However, preparations were under way for any potential increase.

There could be a link with safeguarding referrals for children and the fact that they were not presently attending school. Once children return to school there could potentially be an increase in referrals.

Councillor Maxfield stated that she wanted everyone to note any noticeable increases in cases and said that it was heartening to know that the Council was keeping an eye on this and that all agencies were working together.

Councillor Gardner stated that the static number in cases could either be down to the reduced stresses, for example not having to get their children to school on time and other daily stress factors or it could be, more worryingly that people are just not able to reach out in isolation. Councillor Gardner asked how people could reach out safely and also how such people could get legal aid support.

Mrs Moore asked Councillor Gardner to email some details so that she could respond.

With regard to reaching out safely, the partners each had ways that people could use to reach out in safety.

Bereavement Services:

Mr Hamilton stated that there had been changes made in response to the pandemic.

To help with social distancing, the number of mourners allowed to attend services had been reduced to ten. At the crematorium, the length of the service had been shortened. These were both uncomfortable messages to communicate to the bereaved.

Mr Hamilton stated that he was proud of the Council's Bereavement service and how families and the bereaved had been awarded respect and dignity at such a difficult time.

Councillor Moffat stated that a number of her electorate had lost loved ones and they had praised how well the situation had been conducted with the changes and with live links for example. People were appreciative of the efforts that had been made.

Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping:

The Council's Head of Housing, Regeneration and Assets, Joanne Halliday advised Members that the Council had stopped doing proactive home inspections during the lockdown period and had turned to customer needs, looking at homelessness and housing

issues through telephone calls, emails or online help. Residents had been able to send in photographs of any disrepair and repairs had been carried out safely.

Help for the disabled had been slightly more difficult as many were shielding. However, a lot of work had been done in respect of specifications and design work.

Homelessness and rough sleeping had seen an increase and it had been challenging to find accommodation for rough sleepers.

The Open Door charity based in Newcastle had opened up a 7 bedroom unit to help rough sleepers and a Rough Sleeper Outreach Worker had now been appointed.

Councillor Maxfield thanked the staff dealing with homelessness and rough sleeping stating that the service had continued to run at full operation.

Councillor Julie Cooper asked if the number of rough sleepers had increased since the Covid-19 outbreak.

Mrs Halliday stated that over the past five years there had been a consistent handful of cases. However, since the outbreak this number had become consistently higher.

Mrs Moore added that, although there was a verified number of rough sleepers, there was also a hidden population who had not been taken into account.

Councillor Holland thanked officers for the report and stated that there had been a lot of success in getting people off the streets and the Government would like to take the opportunity to ensure that people do not return to rough sleeping.

Councillor Holland asked what this Council could do to help those who were sleeping rough prior to the lockdown to harness this.

Mrs Moore stated that the Council could look to influence its partners. There was now considerably more investment in this area compared to last year but to ensure sustainability the Council would need to ensure that the measures were still in place afterwards.

Councillor Moffat stated that now was the time for collaboration not completion, with everyone working together.

Cultural and leisure provision:

The Council's Head of Leisure and Cultural Services, Rob Foster advised Members that J2 had closed on the 20 March. Since that time, information had been sent out in respect of exercising at home and on 3rd June there would be the first live streaming of stretching and fitness exercises.

A number of staff from J2 had been redeployed to the helpline and the Crematorium and some staff had recently been furloughed.

Reopening of the Centre could commence on 4 July and guidance was being followed to put plans in place for this.

Councillor Holland asked if officers were confident that Covid-secure measures would be ready for 4 July and also, if the return of the staff to the Centre would leave a shortfall elsewhere.

Mr Foster stated that it was anticipated that the Centre would reopen on a phased basis with the pool potentially being the last to open later in the year.

Reopening the gym and the studios could achieve social distancing if people are already in their exercise kit upon arrival and do not have access to the showers afterwards.

The gym layout would have to be looked at and this was being done at present.

There was also debate as to whether the over 70's should be allowed to return during the first tranche.

The Brampton Museum closed on 19 March and staff were currently concentrating on the digitalisation of its collection. There was 34,000 items in the collection and a programme for the digitalisation had previously been set to carry this out.

There had been continued engagement with social media and the project to provide a new galley had continued.

Plans to provide a vacant shop unit for displays once the Museum closed for refurbishment had also continued.

Community Centres:

Advice had been provided to the management Committees and support had been given in respect of available grants.

Parks and Open Spaces:

Mr Hamilton advised Members that throughout the lockdown, play areas within parks had been closed off but the parks themselves had remained open to allow people to take their daily exercise.

The Council's Grounds Maintenance staff had initially been moved to help with recycling and waste collection but as lockdown continued the grounds maintenance had to be stepped back up in terms of grass cutting.

Birchenwood and Bathpool Parks had both been closed but they had now been reopened.

Fresh bedding plants would be put out shortly. The contract for these had been placed some time ago and Parks and Streetscene staff would be attending to this.

The Chair temporarily lost internet connection.

Councillor Julie Cooper in the Chair

Councillor Cooper stated that she had been made aware of people travelling and leaving litter behind and also, that there were no public toilets open.

Councillor Cooper asked if this was nationwide or just in this area.

Mr Hamilton stated that this was applicable to significant tourist destinations. There had been local issues with fly tipping but these had been dealt with.

Councillor Gardner stated that when fly tipping was on a road there was a link with County Highways but people were unable to telephone them directly and asked if there was a way to do joint working.

The Council's Head of Recycling, Waste and Fleet Services, Andrew Bird advised that, as the litter Authority it was the Council's responsibility to remove it.

Whilst the household waste sites had been closed, staff from the sites had been utilised to remove fly tipping. Now that those workable links had been made they could continue to be used.

Councillor Gardner referred to the Borough's green spaces and how important they had been during lockdown and they needed to be invested in.

Councillor Gardner asked if outdoor gyms had been closed. Mr Hamilton confirmed that this was the case and that they would remain so until further guidance was received.

Councillor Cooper enquired how the smaller shops reopening from 15 June in Castle Walk would achieve social distancing.

Mr Hamilton advised that any shops reopening would need to put a process in place to ensure that social distancing is achieved and it would be up to each premise to decide their own approach. The Council would offer advice on how it could be achieved and there would be monitoring in place..

As part of the economic development aspect for getting retail back into operation, fliers were being sent out advising upon Covid-secure requirements.

Mr McEneny added that the Market was set to re-open later this week and retail shops would follow. Signs were being arranged to assist with social distancing.

Member and Officer Wellbeing:

Mr Hamilton advised that from the beginning of the lockdown a lot of staff had been working from home. Ahead of the pandemic, the council had invested in the equipment to do this.

Regular messages had been sent to staff through the Communications Section giving tips on how to look after their wellbeing and were also being encouraged to take time out to speak to colleagues on non-work matters.

For Members, the Council had sought to carry on business as usual without the need to go into Castle House.

Mr Hamilton stated that, across the board, the Council's services had held up really well. Giving an example, Mr Hamilton advised that the Planning Service had continued to process plans and the Planning Committee was the first formal meeting to be held through Zoom.

Mr Hamilton advised that as the Council looked to opening up, there was the need to ensure that social distancing was in place and that risk assessments were carried out for those working outdoors.

Councillor Gardner asked if staff were booking leave to ensure that they were having a break from work. In addition, upon returning to Castle House, would hot-desking and conferencing still continue.

Mr Hamilton advised that all staff were being encouraged to take leave and as the country comes through lockdown, people may wish to take a more 'quality' break.

With regards to returning to Castle House, it was expected that people would be phased back in steadily. Desks had been identified which would ensure social distancing and each Service had been asked to prepare a plan for a phased return.

Staff were finding working from home better than they had expected and as a result there could be a growth in that area in the future. In addition, with the technology, there may not be a need to travel into Castle House for some meetings.

Hot-desking would be discouraged to minimise the risk of spreading the virus but, post-pandemic that would return.

The Chair stated that someone had seen three men in a refuse collection vehicle shoulder to shoulder and asked if there was any way to reduce that.

Mr Hamilton stated that more cabs had been put on to enable two-man teams. Where it was not possible to move away from three-man teams those teams had been kept together and had continued to use the same vehicle.

Mr Bird stated that the time spent together, when it was a three-man team, had been reduced and the Council had hired an extra 12 vehicles in order to achieve social distancing but it had not been possible to achieve it across the board. The staff in question had stated that they were happy to work in three's as long as they were kept together. It was pointed out that the staff were not in the cab together for the entire day, just when the vehicle was travelling to and from their destinations. The vehicles were deep cleaned daily and were not swapped between the teams.

Mr Bird added that Newcastle was the only Authority in Staffordshire who had taken measures within this service area to achieve social distancing.

Councillor Gardner stated that the whole process had been handled brilliantly.

Councillor Holland echoed Councillor Gardner's comments and stated that it would be interesting to learn more in the future about the lessons learned as a result of the changes made to rough sleeping and vulnerability during the Coronavirus pandemic and asked if Cabinet Members would commit to bringing a report to this Committee in the future.

- Resolved:**
- (i) That the report be received.
 - (ii) That Cabinet be requested to bring a report to a future meeting of this Committee on the lessons learned in respect of changes made to the vulnerability and rough sleeping services during the Coronavirus pandemic.

5. URGENT BUSINESS

There was no urgent business.

COUNCILLOR IAN WILKES / COUNCILLOR MISS JULIE COOPER
Chair

Meeting concluded at 8.50 pm