

SCRUTINY OVERVIEW COMMITTEE

Thursday 21st May 2020 at 4.30 p.m.

Virtual meeting via Microsoft Teams

Held in accordance with the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020; and conducted according to the Councils Standing Orders for Remote Meetings and those set out in the Council's Constitution.

Present:

Councillor J. Murray
Councillor A. Nawaz
Councillor S. Ditta
Councillor K. Fergusson
Councillor K. Hussain
Councillor L. Jeavons
Councillor W. Rasab
Councillor S. Samra
Councillor I. Shires
Councillor M. Statham

Portfolio Holders present

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| Councillor M. Bird – | Leader |
| Councillor A. Andrew – | Deputy Leader and Regeneration |
| Councillor S. Craddock – | Health and wellbeing |
| Councillor R. Martin – | Adult social care |
| Councillor G. Perry – | Community, leisure and culture |
| Councillor T. Wilson – | Children's |
| Councillor C. Towe – | Education and skills |

Officers

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| Helen Paterson – | Chief Executive |
| Neil Picken - | Senior Democratic Services Officer |
| Nikki Gough - | Democratic Services Officer |

Welcome

At this point in the meeting, the Chair opened the meeting by welcoming everyone, and explaining the rules of procedure and legal context in which the meeting was being held. He also directed members of the public viewing the meeting to the papers, which could be found on the Council's Committee Management Information system (CMIS) webpage.

Members and officers confirmed that they could both see and hear the proceedings.

230/20 Apologies

An apology for absence was received on behalf of Councillor L. Harrison.

231/20 Substitutions

There were no substitutions for the duration of the meeting.

232/20 Declarations of interest and party whip

There were no declarations of interest or party whip.

233/20 Local Government (Access to information) Act 1985 (as amended)

There were no items in private session.

234/20 Minutes

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 10th March 2020 be approved as a true and accurate record.

235/20 Walsall Council and the Covid-19 pandemic

The Chair called upon the Leader and the Chief Executive to describe the initial response to the pandemic and explain how the Council was supporting local residents during this time.

The Leader described how the local authority had responded to the pandemic and emphasised that it would not have been possible without the investment in IT which enabled the council to respond quickly and move to virtual meetings. The success of the resilient communities' model was referenced, as it had allowed the Council to connect the community. In relation to schools, the Leader confirmed that they would only re-open once full risk assessments had been completed, to ensure that staff and children were safe. He stated that decisions were made on a daily basis, for the benefit of all Walsall residents and again emphasised that the investment made in IT had allowed the Council to continue to function.

The Chief Executive then addressed the Committee and thanked the Leaders of each group for their cooperation in making decisions, which ensured that vulnerable residents were supported. She acknowledged that many people had sadly suffered the loss of family members during the pandemic. With regard to the local approach to lockdown, the committee were advised that this had been carried out through two main groups. These were the West Midlands Strategic Coordinating Group, and a West Midlands Local Authority Strategic Group, which considered a broad range of matters such as PPE, testing, mortuaries, and funeral protocols. Significant communication had been required throughout the pandemic including briefing MPs, Members and

partners on a regular basis. Gold and Silver meetings were held daily, responding at a strategic level to issues as they arose.

The Chief Executive clarified that the aim of the Council, had been to 'maintain the welfare of the community'. The resilient communities approach had meant that in a short space of time, shielded and vulnerable individuals were supported. Children's services had continued to operate; however, there had been a reduction in referrals. The Authority maintained contact with schools, and work was underway to support the phased reopening of schools. Funding had been received to support business, and applications for this were being processed.

The Chief Executive confirmed that the impact of Covid-19 on the Council had been extensive noting that decisions on cessation of services had been taken. This meant that income to the Council had reduced. Whilst the financial position of the Council was stable. The long-term financial impact of the pandemic was not known at this stage.

The Chief Executive acknowledged that BAME groups, which made up 23% of the population in Walsall (2011 census) compared to 14% nationally, had been impacted upon by Covid-19. The Department for Work and Pensions and Council had seen an increase in requests for support from BAME residents.

The Chief Executive made it clear that the Council would be in recovery for some time. Noting that the resetting of services would provide the opportunity to be creative and flexible in the way that staff and members had adapted and found new ways of working to ensure that residents were supported during the Pandemic to date. She confirmed that the Councils reset would feed into the regional coordinating group ensuring that the region was prepared and well placed for recovery.

The Chair thanked the Leader and the Chief Executive for their presentations to the Committee and invited questions on the Cabinet reports as previously circulated:-

(1) Public Health

A Member asked if Covid-19 home testing was available in Walsall. The Portfolio Holder (Health and Wellbeing) stated that this testing method was not yet available.

It was questioned why Walsall had the highest Covid-19 death rate in the Black Country and higher than the national average. In addition, what steps the Local Authority were planning to take to further understand why Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities were more impacted by the Covid-19. The Portfolio Holder confirmed that the reasons for this were being carefully considered. Data was being collated nationally data to inform understanding why BAME communities were more impacted by Covid-19.

The Portfolio Holder was asked if the number of cases and deaths in Walsall care homes available. The Committee were advised that this was not available but care homes were being supported by the Local Authority to carry out swabbing of all residents and staff.

The Committee then discussed 'track and trace' and Portfolio Holders were asked if they had confidence that this would be delivered effectively in Walsall. The Leader clarified that Walsall Council had been clear with national government that test, track, and trace would be best delivered locally.

In response to a question asking what the percentage of BAME population was in Walsall, Officers confirmed that this was 23%; was based on the 2011 census. It was clarified that there had been 385 Covid-19 cases per 100,000 population, and this equated to 1,082 cases, with 192 deaths at Walsall Healthcare Trust. These figures appeared to be reducing. It was agreed that, if available, numbers of BAME deaths in Walsall would be circulated to the Committee. The reasons for a higher impact to BAME needed to be better understood.

It was questioned if it was appropriate to open schools, given that Walsall had the highest infection rate of Covid-19 in West Midlands. The Portfolio Holder (Education and Skills) stated that schools had completed careful risk assessments and it was considered that the risk to children was low.

In response, a member asked how much work had been undertaken with school staff unions. The Committee were reassured that everything had been done within the authorities power to ensure that children and staff were safe and, as more children returned to school, further risk assessments would be carried out. The Portfolio Holder (Education and Skills) stressed that the decision to send a child to school was the parents' choice and there would be no penalties for those who choose not to send their child back to school.

A Member asked for reassurance that children were not disadvantaged if their school was not able to re-open. The Portfolio Holder stated that the authority was doing its best to ensure that all children were receiving an education.

Tribute was then paid to the voluntary and community sector for their response to Covid-19. The Portfolio Holder (Health and Wellbeing) was asked if the prevalence of 385 per 100,000 in Walsall related to hospital admissions only or if it included care homes. It was agreed that this would be clarified outside of the meeting.

Members discussed the difficulties for relatives to communicate with each other whilst they were in hospital during the pandemic. The Committee were informed that the Healthcare Trust had employed a 'family liaison officer' to provide support to families, and it was hoped that this, combined with virtual communication, would help to ease the heartache.

(2) Governance and decision making

A Member thanked the Chief Executive and the Leader for their efforts in ensuring that Members had been kept informed of activity.

(3) Safeguarding response

Members acknowledged the efforts of all key workers.

The Portfolio Holder (education and skills) was asked for clarity on the number of laptops distributed to children in Walsall to enable home learning. It was clarified that Walsall Council had pre-empted the government announcement in relation to the laptop offer, which meant that although an initial number of 50 laptops had already been distributed, an additional 1300 laptops and 300 routers would be provided to the Authority to support more children in Walsall. In the interim period, children had been supplied with workbooks and materials to assist with their education.

The Portfolio Holder (Children's) was asked if vulnerable children were attending school. He confirmed that the numbers were increasing and social workers were encouraging their attendance. The Portfolio Holder stated that they were advised to attend and regular contact was kept with vulnerable families.

The cost pressures to care homes were discussed, due to PPE, deep cleaning and extra care. It was explained that care homes were private businesses but the Council has assisted them by supplying PPE when they were unable to source it themselves. A government grant would be distributed to care homes in accordance to criteria, which would assist care homes in their recovery. The Leader agreed to circulate the report detailing this when available. Pressures on Council finances beyond the immediate future were then discussed as ongoing support would be needed by vulnerable people.

The Portfolio Holder (Adult Social Care) informed the Committee that 'Holly Bank House' had been leased to Walsall Healthcare Trust to care for stroke rehabilitation patients and increase capacity within the hospital. This was made possible due to emergency powers granted to the Leader.

A Member questioned how the distribution of free school meals was being monitored and what was being done within the community. The Portfolio Holder (Education and Skills) confirmed that this was the responsibility of schools and that the situation was monitored by senior officers on a daily basis.

A member sought clarity as to whether domestic violence and mental health cases had increased and what support was in place for vulnerable residents. The Portfolio Holder (Community, Leisure and Culture) confirmed that domestic violence cases had increased. The vulnerability of families was a concern to the Authority, and staff were also being supported in case they were also affected. It was noted that other crimes had reduced.

The monitoring of the financial viability and cleanliness of care homes was discussed as it was important that they were safe. The Portfolio Holder (Adult Social Care) stated that quality teams were being sent into struggling care homes. Assurance was sought that care homes remained viable and Walsall remained in a satisfactory situation. The Leader stated that this was not possible as they were private businesses; however, the distribution of the grant provided the opportunity for bounce-back loans. The Portfolio Holder (Health and Wellbeing) confirmed that the Public Health Team were working with care homes to provide training and ensure they were well equipped to deal with the emerging situation.

(4) Supporting shielded and vulnerable residents in Walsall

The Portfolio Holder (Communities, Leisure and Culture) was asked for clarification on how many medically vulnerable residents had registered for food parcels. He confirmed that 1,910 people had registered for food parcels. He was then asked if community associations had applied for government grants. He confirmed that the council were supporting community associations to apply for network and wider bids through the national lottery. Work had commenced with community associations to ensure that the smaller organisations were not disadvantaged and that they too were able to reset and adapt to new ways of working. It was emphasised that the community response had been strong.

Reassurance was sought that a consistent approach had been adopted across the four community hubs to assess eligibility criteria for requests for support. The Portfolio Holder (Community, Leisure and Culture) stated that, in the early stages, it was important to assist people who needed it. As this progressed an eligibility criteria was developed with hubs and networks.

A Member of the Committee asked how the Authority would fund extra pressures caused by the pandemic and how this would be sustained going forward given the hardship the Pandemic would create. The Leader stated that the Authority hold reserves and that a letter from all seven Metropolitan Councils would be sent to the Government to request that all costs would be reimbursed. The Leader stated that scrutiny would be kept updated on this situation.

The Portfolio Holder responded to suggestions that food parcels did not meet dietary needs confirming that every effort was being made to ensure that the challenges in the early stages were resolved. The importance of the third sector in responding to the pandemic was recognised

A Member suggested that the Local Authority should ensure that individuals affected by trauma should be assisted. The Portfolio Holder stated that the Council's offer, in terms of employee assistance, had been extended to community volunteers.

(5) Business rate relief and grant programmes for Walsall

The Committee discussed the effect of Covid-19 on resident's income due to loss of employment, an increase in housing benefit and council tax reduction applications. A Member suggested that a working group be established to consider the economic impact of Covid-19 and understand the implications on the sustainability of Walsall's communities.

The Senior Democratic Services officer suggested that an initial meeting take place to develop a scoping document for the working group, which could be considered by the Scrutiny Overview Committee at its next meeting. This was supported by the Committee.

A Member asked what mechanisms were in place to identify fraudulent applications for business grant funding. The Portfolio Holder stated that time and consideration had been taken to ensure that fraudulent applications could be identified.

(6) Paying for community based commissioned care services during COVID-19

There were no questions in relation to this report.

(7) Walsall Proud Programme – managing delivery during COVID-19

There were no questions in relation to this report.

(8) COVID-19 and Corporate Financial Performance

A Member questioned if contracts were still being paid for those services that were not being utilised during lockdown. It was acknowledged that the Council needed to support affected businesses, however this would be reviewed.

(9) Post lockdown – resetting and recovery of business

A Member stated that in the short to medium term it would be beneficial for the Covid-19 recovery plan to be considered by scrutiny prior to submission to Cabinet. The Portfolio Holder (Finance) agreed that it was important that scrutiny were involved in the reset of the Council and the economic recovery to ensure that Walsall attracted jobs and that the economy was protected.

A Member asked if businesses that received grants had been contacted to ensure that they would be ready to operate and be able to open once it was safe to do so. The Portfolio Holder stated that work was underway.

The Committee suspended standing orders to allow the Committee to continue past 7.30pm.

Resolved (by ascent)

A briefing note, previously circulated, detailing the impact of COVID-19 on Council services is considered by the Scrutiny Overview Committee at the next meeting due to be held on 30th June 2020.

236/20 Areas of Focus

In consideration of the reduced committee schedule, the Committee discussed the need to set a work programme for the coming municipal year. It was agreed that Members would email Democratic Services with suggestions for the work programme for the remainder of the municipal year.

Resolved (unanimously)

1. The areas of focus document, for the Scrutiny Overview Committee, is considered and agreed at the next meeting. Members are asked to send suggested items to Democratic Services for inclusion in the draft document (by ascent).

2. A Scoping exercise for the establishment of a working group to ‘understand the economic impact of Covid-19 on communities’ is undertaken and reviewed by the Scrutiny Overview Committee at the next meeting (by roll call).

237/20 Forward Plans

A Member suggested that scrutiny meetings should meet before Cabinet meetings to enable pre-decision scrutiny. The Chair confirmed that this had been raised with Democratic Services Office. The Clerk confirmed that special meetings and ‘call in’s’ remained an option for the Committee.

Resolved (by assent)

That the report be noted

Termination of Meeting

The meeting terminated at 7.45 p.m.