

BRIEFING NOTE

TO: Scrutiny Overview Committee

RE: Information requests to Scrutiny Overview Committee

On Thursday 21st May 2020, the Scrutiny Overview Committee received reports on the Covid-19 pandemic. These reports were considered by Cabinet on Tuesday 19th May 2020.

To assist members with deliberations and in response to information requests from members, this briefing has been prepared.

Q1. What has the impact of COVID-19 been on the Council?

- *Financially – what is the impact on the budget and what are the implications of this impact? Will the Council's costs be reimbursed by the government?*

Cabinet in May received a report providing an estimated analysis of the financial impact of Covid-19 during 2019/20. Please refer to the link below.

<https://cmispublic.walsall.gov.uk/cmismis/Meetings/tabid/70/ctl/ViewMeetingPublic/mid/397/Meeting/3057/Committee/406/Default.aspx>

Further work is being undertaken to update the position and understand the implications beyond the end of July and a further report will be presented to Cabinet in July.

In summary, the position is:

- The financial impact can be managed in the short term. Direct costs of Covid-19 are expected to be covered by Government funding, however a significant financial impact is accruing from lost income where Government direct closures of facilities (leisure centres etc) and also from delays in delivery of Proud savings as resources have refocused on our emergency response to the pandemic. Further information is awaited from Government as to what other cash and non-cash support they will offer to council's to manage these aspects of the impact.
 - We are still legally required to maintain a balanced budget and take action when it becomes clear this is at serious risk. Should the impact of Covid-19 continue for the full year, costs could be in the region of between £31m - £47m, meaning a shortfall in funding of between £14m to £30m, requiring the need to replenish general reserves and take other actions if further Government funding is not made available.
- *Business – how are local businesses being supported?*
 - *Recovery – what are the plans to return to 'normal' with services?*
 - *Decision making whilst meetings are suspended – who is/has been making the decisions during the response to the pandemic? Are the Leader and Cabinet involved? If so, how?*

Information on these points is already contained within the Cabinet reports and so further responses have not been requested.

Q2. Gold Command:-

- ***What is it?***
- ***What are its terms of reference?***
- ***What decisions can it take?***
- ***What decisions has it taken?***
- ***What interface does Gold have with elected members (if any)?***

A PDF has been provided with the email and this briefing.

Q3. What services are still operational, which are limited and what has ceased?

Adult Social Care

With the exception of Goscote Day Centre, all Adult Social Care operational services continue to be delivered. Those that were previously supported at Goscote are having their needs met in a different way.

Some strategic development and commissioning work has been reprioritised and will be delayed.

ASC Commissioned services with the exception of day care and social clubs are largely continuing to operate, however, these services may prioritise those with greatest need, meaning others may experience a change in the way that their care is delivered.

Economy, Environment and Communities

Clean and Green

	Status	Comments / Service update / New risks
HWRC sites (tips)		Service operating - Open with restrictions from Saturday 16 May 2020
Garden waste (Brown)		Service operating – Reduced service – 5 weekly from 11 May Normal fortnightly resumed from 15 June
Fleet MOT's		Arrangements being made for potential partial re-opening July
Markets		Arrangements being made for phased re-opening from 12 June for Walsall. Bloxwich w/c 15 June and Willenhall w/c 22 June
All other Clean & Green Services operating as normal (grounds, street cleansing, trade waste, fleet, trees)		

Household Waste Recycling Centres (Tips) - open with restrictions							
Site	Saturday	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Fryers Road	Open 8.00 to 17.30	Open 8.00 to 17.30	Closed	Closed	Closed	Closed	Closed
Merchants Way	Open 8.00 to 17.30	Open 8.00 to 17.30	Open 8.00 to 17.30	Open 8.00 to 17.30	Open 8.00 to 17.30	Open 8.00 to 17.30	Open 8.00 to 17.30

Leisure, Culture & Operations

Service area	Service Manager	Operational status
Bereavement & Registration	Christine Walker-Kelley (& Holly Holdsworth)	<p><u>Operational:-</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Burials Cremations Death registration Birth registrations - (can now restart once office space is identified) <p><u>Not operational:-</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weddings
Sport & Leisure (Active Living Centres and Outdoor Education)	Stuart Webb	Closed
New Art Gallery	Stephen Snoddy	Closed
Walsall Arena & Arts Centre	Neil Johnson	Closed
District Libraries, Mobile & Home Delivery	David Gill	Closed
Leather Museum	David Gill	Closed
Lichfield Street Hub & Archives	Manjit Kaur	Closed

In the Bereavement Service, recent changes to the day-to-day service have to increase the number of mourners who can attend. As at 15 June 2020 these are:-

- Streetly Crematorium. 10 seats in the East Chapel and 15 seats in the West Chapel. A further 15 attendees can stand outside the chapel and listen to the service.
- At Council cemeteries a maximum of 30 attendees can attend a burial.

In the Registration Service, arrangements are currently being considered as to how the service can catch up with the 800+ outstanding Birth Registrations. Notice of weddings are already being taken. A decision from Government is awaited on the re-commencement of weddings.

For all other Sport, Leisure, Arts, Recreation, Libraries, Gallery and Heritage services, the arrangements for re-opening the services is dependent on the Government issuing its guidance. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is currently leading on a Ministerial Taskforce and will advise Government on when and how re-opening may take place.

Extensive preparation and planning is taking place in the meantime and includes cleaning of the buildings, layout, signage, barriers, screens and PPE.

Children's Services

In Children's Services we are continuing to deliver our work within Statutory requirements although some of it is being delivered differently through virtual technology. With the exception of short breaks where we have had to cease some activities due to infection risks but are continuing to offer support to individual children/families in different ways such as shopping for food/medication and advice and support on home based activities.

Public Health

Public Health continue to fulfil their statutory obligation for mandated services. Following risk assessment, all services have been realigned, adapted using technology or suspended to ensure the protection and safety of staff. Our prevention programmes concentrate on the most vulnerable & disadvantaged who are most at risk of suicide, self-harm and mental health related issues within the Borough of Walsall. Support for some of our most vulnerable groups has been facilitated via our resilient communities model and officers from Public Health have helped facilitate the development and ongoing delivery of activity via locality hubs and a food distribution centre.

Q4. How is the local community being supported? How is each locality affected? Are Resources being directed in the most need as per the Marmot objectives? How is each area performing with regard to volunteers

The Council understands that the local communities are different and that any response to a pandemic needs to reflect that diversity. Therefore the use of Locality and Community groups is critical to the overall response. The Council are using the

Making Connections Walsall infrastructure to deliver its response to COVID-19. The council is also playing a key role in the procurement and preparation of food parcels however the service offered to communities through the hubs is not limited to food parcels and includes:

- Shopping requests;
- Befriending;
- Food Parcels;
- Prescription collection requests;
- Other ad-hoc activities

Some hubs also offer food hampers which are purchased directly by the hubs and is chargeable to the resident.

CUMULATIVE DATA FOR LAST 7 DAYS, week ending 16/6/2020 and total figures from the start of the project including demand types:

DATA FOR LAST 7 DAYS:

CUMULATIVE DATA FOR LAST 7 DAYS WEEK ENDING 17/6/2020:								
Below is the data for the last 7 days for COVID 19 referrals and demand types.								
7 days ending 17.6.2020	Total referrals	Number of new shopping requests	Number of new befriending requests	Number of new bespoke shopping	Number of new food parcel requests	Number of new prescription requests	Other, please provide examples	Total new activities
Thursday	56	4	5	0	42	4	10	65
Friday	61	11	1	0	56	0	3	71
Saturday	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sunday	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Monday	85	7	4	0	73	9	7	100
Tuesday	48	6	6	0	51	5	2	70
Wednesday	60	10	0	0	57	5	4	76
Total	310	72	41	0	279	23	26	382
Previous 7 days	351	35	29	0	306	24	97	491
	-41	37	12	0	-27	-1	-71	-109
% Change	-12%	106%	41%	0%	-9%	-4%	-73%	-22%
Cumulative total	8195	1792	1370	1	5060	1045	1286	10614

The Council has registered for the new prioritised supermarket slot scheme for those self-isolating but are not part of the NHS shielding scheme. This is expected to further reduce demand for food parcels. Since the last scrutiny report demand for food parcels has been reduced by 25%. Befriending requests have remained consistent. There are no significant backlogs with the work. Referrals by locality since the start of the project are as follows:

Referrals by Locality	7 days ending 17/6/2020	7 days ending 10/6/2020	Movement	% Change
East	156	196	-40	-20%
West	58	63	-5	-8%
North	78	75	3	4%
South	18	17	1	6%
Total	310	351	-41	-12%

The Council plays a key role in the delivery of appropriate support in cases of hardship and the whole MCW process is linked into the Money, Home Job team who will help residents maximise their benefits and signpost to additional support as required. Much of this support is focused around the position and need of each resident.

Locality Hubs

The Council's community response to COVID-19 fits within its resilient communities approach. The key element is the Making Connections Walsall model which gave a readymade infrastructure which is being supplemented by additional community activity. The Making Connections model has been extended until December 2020. As demand for food parcels reduces the model will revert back to its original purpose of providing social prescribing opportunities including befriending services.

Phone calls are taken by the Fire Service and are automated as much as possible. In line with a desire for channel shift e-mail and direct forms are used to reduce the pressure on the fire service. The process has been mapped and is included in appendix (1)
The four locality hubs are run by:

Accord Age Matters - South
Bloxwich Community Partnership - North
Manor Farm Community Association - East
Old Hall Peoples Partnership – West

The demand figures for each hub is shown in the table overleaf:

Hub - 23.3.20 - 17.6.20	Total requests for hub support	Number of new shopping requests	Number of new befriending requests	Number of new bespoke shopping	Number of new food parcel requests	Number of new prescription requests	Other, please provide examples	Total new activities - including weekly ongoing demands
North	2072	677	279	0	996	263	268	3925
East	3023	253	874	6	1016	439	503	6589
West	2087	285	263	1	2437	164	208	4841
South	870	250	65	165	425	139	117	1156
Cumulative	8195	1792	1370	172	5060	1045	1286	10614

N.B – these are the new referrals that the hubs and breakdown of demands

Each of the hubs is responsible for adapting its service to local community need and using whatever networks it feels is required. They also have the ability to adapt/add to the food parcels supplied by the Council for local requirements. These additions typically include more fresh produce. This level of agility would not be available through the central distribution hub.

The hubs have the freedom to design their services and how those services are delivered. This freedom gives the opportunity for a greater match with local need. The responses from residents has been overwhelmingly supportive and some of the statements received have been included here:

- Delivery to lady 85 years of age living alone with no local family to help. “I would like to thank you for the food parcel you sent me. The amount and quality was really impressive. Thank you for everything you’re doing for the community, I’m so grateful for people like you”;
- The hub received a call from a client’s sister who lives 30 miles away. ‘I just wanted to thank you, my sister has just phoned to say had parcel and so happy with it, we are both in tears. You are Angels, your wings must be touching the walls’. She had no way of supporting her sister who was however managed to organise a delivery of a parcel;
- A lady with mobility issues called to say she was struggling to get to the shops and is unable to stand for a long time. She is in her late 80’s and supporting her son who has downs syndrome and he couldn’t go out. She was in tears with the thought of going out again. She is now receiving regular parcels from us and also phoning the local shops for additional items when required.
- A young single mother who has a child with autism found it impossible to go out to shop due to restrictions on numbers into the shop and also her son didn’t cope well with shopping. She was finding it extremely hard to cope as all respite support had ceased. She was provided with a box to relieve the immediate stress and local information to enable her to source food items. We chatted and she felt a lot better after the call as shared some of her concerns.
- A 63 year old man, single and self isolating, referral sent by one of our partnership organisation, struggle with food stock has been contacted and arranged to send him a food parcel every week. He was sceptical at first time but after first delivery our partnership organisation and ourselves received a few phone calls from this person to say thank you and that he is feeling supported, he has never felt like that before. Now we are contact with him between the deliveries to see if he is fine and he is answering all the time with joy in his voice.

Clearly with the level of demand and the speed of operational set up there have been issues. Generally the hubs work positively with the referrals to ensure high levels of resident satisfaction. Performance issues are fed back to the hub for review.

In relation to volunteering generally there has been a really positive response from Walsall residents and supply has outstripped demand. The central distribution centre has a network of 18 volunteers, 13 through One Walsall, who regularly support activities. Manor Farm Community Association – 10-15 volunteers, 10 through One

Walsall. Bloxwich Community Partnership – All non-management staff are volunteers.
Old Hall Peoples Partnership – All non-management staff are volunteers. Accord Age Matters – All non-office based staff are volunteers.

All volunteers receive appropriate training to the work they undertake with particular focus on COVID-19.

The Council values the work volunteer's do both for the Council and for organisations outside the Council. There is a recognition that the work being done is unusual and some volunteers may come across situations which are outside their experience. To support those individuals the Council has arranged for access for COVID-19 volunteers to the employee support scheme operated by Care First.

Catering, Cleaning and Caretaking

In response to the below catering, cleaning and caretaking services are all still operational in a safe working capacity, all employees are working on a rota system and meeting needs as requested by headteachers. Schools still have caretakers, and cleaners everyday and also catering staff providing hot meals and take away lunches.

Catering, cleaning and caretaking services are all still operational in a safe working capacity as follows:

- School Crossing Patrol Wardens have now all returned to their crossings.
- Catering, cleaning and caretaking are operating as usual but some schools with larger numbers are on a rota basis for safe distancing.
- We are working alongside Public Health / Head teachers with meeting individual school needs on catering and cleaning.
- We are implementing duty cleaners throughout the day in schools that require them.
- Managers are training school staff where required on bleach touch point cleaning.
- All catering and van drivers are working to provide meals to schools.
- Couriers and post room are still opening post and delivering for education.
- PPE still being collected by caretakers.
- Food hub deliveries – being conducted by caretakers.
- All library cleaners are back.
- Member so the team are part of the space occupancy group working on Reset
- Safe systems of work talks are ongoing and being updated with Government Guidance and cascaded to front line
- All systems are in place in case of a ' breakout ' of Covid-19.

Q5. What is the situation regarding Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) across the Borough?

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Adult Social Care worked to set up and prepare a central PPE supplies and distribution site at Goscote in order to support the urgent and evolving needs of care and support providers across Walsall in infection prevention and control.

Initial planning included the sourcing of urgent PPE supplies, in the absence of local supplies being available to all of the care market. Since that time, the site has sourced

and supplied many different items of PPE to a wide range of providers. The items most regularly distributed and hardest to source from all suppliers have been:-

Lines	Distributed
Masks	290,525
Gloves	530,505
Aprons	250,624
Sanitizer	746 Ltrs

Although the site has also sourced and distributed a whole range of products to support the Providers and workforce during the crisis, including Body Bags: Red bags for washing soiled items: yellow bags: overshoes: inconti wipes/sheets: hand wash: cleaning,detergent/disinfectant/bleach,tablets:visors:overshoes/overgowns;goggles

The local Supply site at Goscote is currently supporting:

- 58 Residential /Nursing care Homes (7 x days' supply)
- 102 Domiciliary care: Extra care and Supported Living Providers where they require this
- Direct payment recipients
- Unpaid carers who require PPE to continue to care for people at home.
- Funeral Directors when in absolute urgent need
- Pharmacists in urgent need
- The Internal workforce across children and adults social care
- Now planning also for the re- opening of Walsall schools and in the event there are no local supply chains available for the schools who require this PPE, then the local distribution point at Goscote will also provide urgent supplies where needed.

By the end of March, the crisis in terms of the supply chains were increasing. Lack of raw materials meant increased prices for the PPE and the care market are still struggling intermittently with local prompt supplies. Work has also been taking place with regional partners in order to ensure that there is a consistent approach to managing the response to the PPE challenges. Due to the lack of consistent and regular supplies via the Local Resilience Forums (LRFS), there has been an absolute need to continue to purchase supplies via the Council in order to keep people safe and working within the national guidance.

There has been very little support to ease the pressures on PPE from the National Disruption Supply and some of the stock delivered via this route has contained out of date stock. The out of date stock was issued with assurances from the NHS, however, Walsall Council, along with other LA's have sought legal advice on the use of this. In the meantime, Walsall Council has taken the decision not to use the out of date stock unless absolutely necessary, and where no other stock is available for use.

Due to the continued urgent need for regular supplies of stock, an urgent decision was presented to the Leader of the Council on 23rd April 2020, to seek financial approval to purchase more Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to the value of £660k per month from March – May. It is likely a further request for funding will be presented to Cabinet in June 2020.

Regional procurement arrangements have been established to secure best value for the items procured against a backdrop of few or no readily available and compliant supply chains for the providers to source their own supplies and at a reasonable price.

Q6. What is being done to ensure that all pupils have equal access to on-line education?

From 20 March 2020, schools, colleges, nurseries, childminders, and other registered childcare settings in England, closed for all but the most vulnerable children and for children of critical workers.

Vulnerable children, in this context, include children who have a social worker, and those children and young people with education, health and care (EHC) plans. Those who have a social worker include children who had a child protection plan and those who are looked after by the local authority. A child may also be deemed to be vulnerable if they are assessed as being in need, or otherwise meet the definition in section 17 of the Children Act 1989.

Critical workers are defined as parents whose work is critical to the COVID-19 response, including those who work in health and social care and in other critical sectors.

A core team of Inclusion leads was established as the front line staff to devise the LA communication with and response to all school settings including academies, as directed by the Department for Education. The Inclusion Team worked with school leaders to provide daily advice, support and guidance in the new ways of working during the pandemic.

The Department for Education also provided regular guidance documents for schools and parents.

During the coronavirus outbreak schools were required to continue to provide support to all children if the school is only open for certain groups or closed. They could decide how best to do this and this could be through a mixture of online support, phones, social media and paper based.

To help young people access online learning, devices have been ordered for disadvantaged children who would otherwise not have access to one and are preparing for exams (in year 10) or receive support from a social worker, or are a care leaver. This criteria is set by DfE and the devices are being fully funded from Government. This is intended to support schools and parents to ensure children and young people's education can continue. It is to ensure that children with a social worker can continue to receive support from children's social care services, and that care leavers have the online access they need to keep in touch with the support and services they need.

Where care leavers, children with a social worker at secondary school and disadvantaged children in year 10, do not have internet connections, the DfE are also providing 4G routers to them so that they can learn at home. In addition, they are working with the country's major telecommunication providers to make it easier for families to access selected educational resources by temporarily exempting these sites from data charges.

As of 8th June, we had received 844 laptops and 177 routers for children with Social Workers. There have been distributed to schools to give out to the pupils.

Other available support includes:

- [a list of online educational resources](#) which have been identified by some of the country's leading educational experts to help pupils to learn at home
- guidance to [help primary school children continue their education during coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak](#)
- enhanced education provision from the [BBC to include daily lessons](#) starting from 20 April 2020
- an online resource from [Oak National Academy](#) with daily lessons available to both primary and secondary pupils.
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For 16 to 19 year olds, education providers were directed to provide support to young people who are not able to access an internet connection. Young people and parents were asked to contact their provider if they are not able to access remote education.

Any 16 to 19 year olds in education, without a suitable device and/or connectivity to study remotely and whose family can't afford these costs were informed to approach their college, school or other 16 to 19 providers to request support. Decisions on support will be made by providers. Colleges, schools and other 16 to 19 providers will be able to apply to top-up bursary funds, where necessary, to ensure that vulnerable learners receive appropriate support.

For parents with children under 5 years old who have not yet started school, the Department for Education's [Hungry Little Minds campaign](#) features tips and practical activities that parents can do at home with children to support their early learning. There are many simple ways to help children learn and it does not have to feel like 'learning'.

Having everyday conversations, make-believe play and reading together all make a big difference to child's development. There are more ideas and content from the BBC's [Tiny Happy People campaign](#) and the National Literacy Trust's [Family Zone](#). The Department for Education has published further guidance on how to [help children aged 2 to 4 to learn at home during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak](#).

They have published [guidance for parents of primary school children regarding supporting the continuation of education at home](#). This includes advice and guidance around:

- structuring the day
- use of digital devices
- language development
- reading and writing
- numeracy
- information tailored to each age group
- information for those with children reaching the end of primary school

This guidance is designed to complement support and advice provided by schools and teachers. Engaging with a child's learning will be helpful in their continued educational development. For example, something as simple as talking to them during the day about what they are doing for school, or about anything around the home, enhances learning.

There is support available to keep children safe online. Here you can access [further information on keeping children safe online](#).

Other useful links were produced to help parents and carers.

- [Thinkuknow](#) provides advice from the National Crime Agency (NCA) to stay safe online to help families manage during this time, the NCA has launched [Thinkuknow: home activity packs](#), a set of fun, engaging activities based on Thinkuknow cartoons, films, games, and advice articles
- a new activity sheet for each age group will be published on the [Thinkuknow](#) website every 2 weeks while schools are closed - these activities offer a great opportunity to help keep up positive, supportive conversations about online safety in the home
- [Parent Info](#) is a collaboration between Parentzone and the NCA providing support and guidance for parents from leading experts and organisations
- [Childnet](#) provides a tool kit to support parents and carers of children of any age to start discussions about their online life, to set boundaries around online behaviour and technology use, and to find out where to get more help and support
- [Internet Matters](#) provides age-specific online safety checklists, guides on how to set parental controls on a range of devices and a host of practical tips to help children get the most out of their digital world
- [LGfL](#) provides support for parents and carers to keep their children safe online, including 6 top tips to keep primary aged children safe online
- [Net Aware](#) provides support for parents and carers from the NSPCC, providing a guide to social networks, apps and games
- [Let's Talk About It](#) provides support for parents and carers to keep children safe from online radicalisation
- [UK Safer Internet Centre](#) provides tips, advice, guides and resources to help keep children safe online, including parental controls offered by home internet providers and safety tools on social networks and other online services
- [staying safe online](#) provides government guidance offering advice on parental controls, fact-checking information, communicating with family and friends while social distancing is in place and taking regular breaks
- Social connections, alongside exercise, sleep, diet and routine, are important protective factors for mental health. Materials to promote and support mental wellbeing are included in the list of [online resources](#) published to help children to learn at home.
- Public Health England's [Rise Above](#) platform supports young people. The Department of Health and Social Care is providing £5 million of additional funding to support mental health charities to increase their provision for adults and children at this time.
- Social isolation, reduced exercise and bereavement may affect children's wellbeing in this period. Resources to promote and support children and young people's mental wellbeing include:

[MindEd educational resources for adults about children and young people's mental health](#) which is relevant for parents and carers as well as volunteers, teachers, and other professionals working with children
[Every Mind Matters platform](#) which supports looking after your own and other's mental health
[guidance on looking after wellbeing and mental health](#) during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak
[guidance on supporting children's wellbeing and mental health](#)

- All NHS mental health trusts are setting up 24/7 helplines and seeking to use digital and virtual channels to continue delivering support during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

Q7. What does this look like across all four Localities?

The laptops for Walsall children have been distributed as below

Laptops		
	Number	Percentage
Walsall	661	80%
OOB(Out of Borough)	149	18%
Care leavers	21	2%
Walsall Localities		
East Locality	169	20%
North Locality	199	24%
South Locality	115	14%
West Locality	150	18%
Other (EHE, NEET)	28	3%
Total	661	

Q8. What is the picture in each locality re Universal Credit?

The Council is not responsible for administering Universal Credit (UC) so does not have direct access to this type of information.

- Walsall comprises four localities (North, South, East and West). The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) only provide a breakdown of Universal Credit (UC) claimants by Local Authority (LA) area. They have confirmed there was an increase in the number of applications for UC in Walsall of 31% by the first week of April 2020. This was the highest increase seen in the Black Country.
- Walsall Council received an average of 2724 UC actions to process in the 6 weeks prior to lockdown. In the 6 weeks from 23rd March 2020 we received an average of 4318 each week. This represents a 58.5% increase. In the last 6 weeks this has reduced to an average of 3813 batches per week.
- There has also been an acceleration in the speed our Housing Benefit caseload is reducing (as local claimants transition into UC from legacy benefits due to a change in circumstances). For the 4 weeks prior to lockdown it reduced by an average of 41 case per week. For the 4 weeks following 23rd March 2020 it reduced by an average of 48 cases per week. This has slowed slightly to 46 cases per week on average in the 4 weeks up to 14th June 2020.

- There was an average of 107 new applications received each week for CTR in the 4 weeks prior to lockdown. This increased to an average of 240 new applications per week in the 4 weeks preceding 23rd March 2020. 404 new applications were received in a single week from 27th April 2020. We have seen a decrease now with an average of 132 claims a week received over the last 4 weeks.
- Although we have no definitive data for this question, the above all demonstrate the number of claims being received and increase in customers who have applied for UC for extra support.

Q9. What is the picture in each locality for council tax 3 month payment holidays?

We cannot provide this information on a locality basis as the system does not record the data in a way that would allow us to report on it in that way. Residents have been advised about the options available to them through the Council's website and a targeted campaign via direct text, email and voice messages. The 3 options offered have been:

Option 1

If you currently pay your council tax in instalments due April to January, you can spread the year's charge over 12 months; April 2020 to March 2021.

Option 2

If you currently pay your council tax in instalments due April to January, you can have instalments due June 2020 to March 2021.

Option 3

You can have April and May instalments spread over your remaining payments from June 2020 onwards.

It is not possible to get exact numbers of customers who have taken up the offer of these options. However the number is around 2,000 (based on financial profiling).

Additional Information:

- By the end of May 2020, £24,056,917 had been collected for the collection fund. This equates to 17.0% of the total charge for the year. Having regard to the Covid-19 crisis, this compares quite favourably against a normal collection rate of 18.0% as at the end of May and against other local authorities across the country
- This lower collection level resulted in circa £1,415,000 less being collected in April and May than would have been expected (based on previous years).
- Currently no formal recovery documents have been issued for the 2020/21 council tax, however we have begun sending text, email and voice messages reminding them that payments are due and the help that is available to them if they are experiencing difficulties.
- £3,093,732 has been awarded in hardship payments to 20,858 working age claimants. This has reduced each of their 2020/21 council tax bill by up to £150. In addition to the hardship payment, the amount of council tax reduction awarded to working age claimants for 20/21 has increased by £1,405,000.

- The authority was awarded a hardship fund grant of £3.9 from Central Government, however the total of the hardship payments and increase council tax reduction awarded is £4.5m, £0.6m in excess of the grant funding.

Q10. What happens to those who are on zero hours contracts and others who fall through the net all together?

- It would be expected that most local people on zero hour contracts would have already applied for Universal Credit and/or Council Tax Reduction (CTR) (where applicable) as they typically constitute low income households. We receive automatic updates from the DWP where someone has a change to their UC award meaning claimants are always receiving the appropriate level of CTR.
- Those who cannot now obtain any hours at work are advised to claim Universal Credit and CTR.
- We have seen a 6.1% increase for those in employment claiming CTR since 23rd March 2020. This is in comparison to a 0.6% rise seen between the start of January and 23rd March 2020. There has been a further rise of 0.7% between 14th May 2020 and 17th June 2020.
- Those who are in receipt of CTR will have received a further Hardship Payment of up to £150.00 off their annual bill. This has been awarded to 20,858 households and totals £3.1 million in support.
- When customers contact the Benefits Service they are advised of local services that can assist them including support through their Housing Provider, Ablewell Advice Services, Citizens Advice Walsall and their Job Coach.
- There is an escalation procedure for particularly vulnerable customers with all four local Job Centres and Money Home Job to ensure those flagged as vulnerable are given additional support.
- Use of Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) funding has already been utilised for those in extreme hardship with an expected increase in demand over the coming months as the restrictions on evictions are lifted.
- Customer experiencing temporary hardship who are not eligible for benefits are being supported with council tax payment options or hardship support.
- Customer who are experiencing hardship can also receive help such as food parcels via local hubs. Staff are actively referring customers to this service when they identify need.

Q11. Do we know how many Walsall residents are furloughed?

No, the Council is not involved in this and therefore does not have specific data on the number of individuals furloughed in Walsall. All furlough data is held by HMRC. The figures included in the answer above give an indication of the increase in the number of those who are both employed and also claiming Council Tax Reduction (due to a low income). As at 14th May 2020 there were 5217 active CTR claims where either the claimant or the partner were employed. This is in comparison to 4918 on 23rd March 2020. As at 17th June 2020 there are 5253 cases.

There are no records held by Walsall Council in relation to those furloughed across the borough (as many are likely to reside in households with no active benefits claims). These cases are not identifiable due to automated processes to receive information via HMRC/DWP systems.

- 9 out of 10 of the worst economically effected LAs are in the Midlands or North West based on DWP data. This again gives an indication that we are likely to have a higher than average furlough rate.
- DWP have only released national data currently but we have managed to confirm the below with them to give an indication with neighbouring authorities:

There was an increase in the number of applications for Universal Credit by the first week of April as follows:

- 26.1% in Dudley
- 26.9% in Sandwell
- **31.1% in Walsall**
- 23.1% in Wolverhampton

Q12. What is the impact on Free School Meals?

The free school meal eligibility checking service has continued to operate for the 101 schools that use the service. The number of eligible children registered from the start of the Covid-19 pandemic to the current total has increased by over 600 children.

FSM application forms have been received and have been processed in a timely manner and new eligible children added to the scheme each week. Schools have continued to receive reports informing them of their new eligible children to enable them to be included in the free school meal provision that is being offered by the school.

Previous free school meal applications are being automatically checked for changes to their circumstances and added to the scheme if they have become eligible.

Prior to the FSM national e-voucher scheme being launched MHJ set up an interim voucher scheme to provide the 33 catered schools with a two week supply of vouchers. Three schools have continued to be supported with local scheme vouchers due to continual problems that they were having with the national voucher scheme. The schools will be invoiced for these vouchers but will be able to claim it from a government fund that is being made available for exceptional costs associated with COVID-19.

Frequently asked questions for parents has been made available to view on Walsall Council website advising parents of arrangements in place for FSM children and what to do for help. All schools across Walsall have been contacted to confirm the arrangements that are in place for their free school meal children.

The Government have also announced that Free School Meal vouchers will be provided during the summer holiday period. We believe the Government National Voucher Scheme will produce 6 weeks' worth of vouchers at the end of the summer term for schools to distribute to parents. We are still awaiting the official guidance. Please refer to appendix 2.

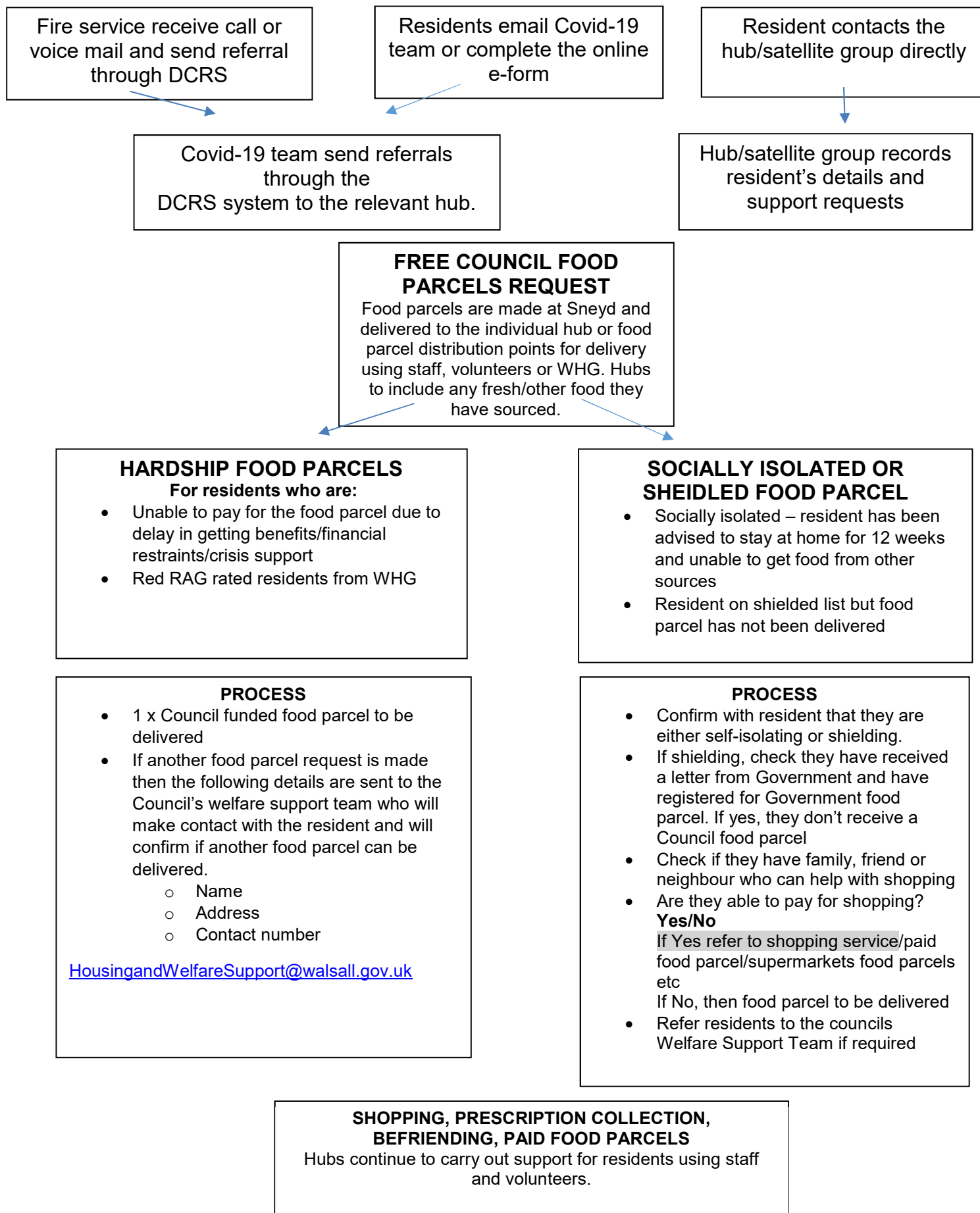
Authors

Neil Picken
Senior Democratic Services Officer
Council | Regulatory | Appeals

Nikki Gough
Democratic Services Officer

Making Connections Walsall Hub Referral Process

Appendix 1





Walsall Council

Money Home Job

Date: 3rd April 2020
Please ask for: Elise Hopkins
Direct Line:
Email: elise.hopkins@walsall.gov.uk

Dear Parents / Carers / Teachers

Update about Free School Meals - Walsall

Please find below a range of information in response to frequently asked questions.

1. What help is being offered to children who are eligible for Free School Meals (FSM)?

On the 19th March 2020 and 31st March 2020, the government issued national guidance about what schools should do to support children in receipt of Free School Meals. The guidance is available from:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance-for-schools>

2. My child is eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) but the school is closed, can I still receive support towards a meal?

Please contact your child's school via the telephone or email. They will be able to advise you about the specific support that they have put in place to support children who are eligible for FSM. Not all schools use Walsall Council catering, or FSM benefit processing team, and those that do not, will need to advise you directly on the arrangements that they have put in place. Under the government scheme, schools may provide a meal pack, packed lunch, or a voucher, which is redeemable from local supermarkets. What option they provide is down to each school to determine (in conjunction with their caterer) and is not a choice the parents themselves make. If your school is closed, and you are unable to get through to them via the telephone or email, please contact the Council's Free Schools Meal team on COVID-19communityhelp@walsall.gov.uk with your child's name, date of birth, and address, and we will do our best to liaise with the school on your behalf to find a solution.

3. What other support is available families who are struggling to afford to feed their children or who are self-isolating and cannot get out to buy food?

We are working closely with a number of partner organisations in order to provide support to families. You can contact Making Connections by emailing: COVID-19communityhelp@walsall.gov.uk or by calling 0121 380 6690. They will allocate your case to one of the four locality hubs who will arrange to contact you to discuss your needs. They will also be able to provide practical help with things such as shopping, picking up prescriptions or financial advice if you are self-isolating.

4. My circumstances have recently changed and I am now out of work or on a low income. Will I qualify for FSM?

Information regarding the eligibility criteria for FSM and our online claim form can be found using the following links to websites:

https://go.walsall.gov.uk/free_school_meals

<https://go.walsall.gov.uk/forms/Application-for-Free-School-Meals>

The Council's in house FSM benefit team are processing applications from families who apply for Free School Meals. If you apply, and qualify, we will write to you and also inform your child's school so they can put arrangements in place for your child.

5. I am unable to leave my house due to self-isolation / mobility problems and so cannot access the help available from my child's school.

We are working closely with a number of partner organisations in order to provide support to families. You can contact Making Connections by emailing: COVID-19communityhelp@walsall.gov.uk or by calling 0121 380 6690. They will allocate your case to one of the four locality hubs who will arrange to contact you to discuss your needs. They will also be able to provide practical help with things such as shopping, picking up prescriptions or financial advice.

6. Not all of my children are eligible for a FSM, but I have recently lost my job, what do I do?

Please make a claim for FSM based on your new circumstances (as per Q4 above) and we will check to see if you now qualify for FSM. You can also seek support from Making Connections by emailing: COVID-19communityhelp@walsall.gov.uk or by calling 0121 380 6690. They will allocate your case to one of the four locality hubs who will arrange to contact you to discuss your needs. They will also be able to provide practical help with things such as shopping, picking up prescriptions or financial advice if you are unable to leave your home.

7. I've been notified that I do not qualify for FSM, but I still need help, what do can I do?

We are working closely with a number of partner organisations in order to provide support to families. You can contact Making Connections by emailing: COVID-19communityhelp@walsall.gov.uk or by calling 0121 380 6690. They will allocate your case to one of the four locality hubs who will arrange to contact you to discuss your needs. They will also be able to provide practical help with things such as shopping, picking up prescriptions or financial advice.

8. Can the Council help me with Free School Meals (FSM)?

The Council is only involved in providing catering services for 33 schools in Walsall. In these schools, the catering team continue to provide hot meals to Key Worker Children who are still attending school, and meal provision is also available to vulnerable children who need meals (at the schools discretion). From Wednesday 24th March 2020, the Council began providing packed lunches to children who require a Free School Meal but are not attending for lessons. The school will distribute the lunch bags or arrange for parents to collect them from the school. The schools we cater for have also been issued with a two-week stock of e-vouchers from our local voucher scheme that they can distribute to families at their discretion.

9. What if a school in Walsall is struggling to provide a Free School Meals (FSM)?

In accordance with the government scheme (as detailed in Q1), every school has responsibility to make their own arrangements to provide food for children in receipt of FSM. In circumstances where a school in Walsall is having problems with putting provision in place, the Council will do our best to offer support and assistance.

Schools and individuals can request help by emailing: COVID-19communityhelp@walsall.gov.uk.

Please provide a name and contact number and the details of your problem and our team will contact you as soon as possible.

10. As a parent can I choose whether my children in receipt of FSM have a lunch bag, hamper or a voucher from their school?

No, the government guidance asks that schools seek help from their catering company in the first instance. Some catering companies can provide the school with packed lunches or hampers for their children in receipt of Free School Meals. In such circumstances, parents would not normally be entitled to an e-voucher as well.

11. I am a Head Teacher of a school and my catering team is still able to provide hampers or lunches to FSM children. Should I still register for the new government e-voucher scheme?

Walsall Metropolitan Council is advising all schools to register with the national government e-voucher scheme in case their circumstances change and they need help in the future. We also believe e-vouchers might prove to be more beneficial for children in some exceptional circumstances e.g. children with special dietary requirements (which cannot be met via standard food hampers) or for children whose parent(s) have a disability (which prevents them from collecting hampers from schools). The decision to issue vouchers is however entirely at the schools discretion.

12. I am a parent, why have I have received two different types of e-vouchers?

Until the new government e-voucher scheme was in place, Walsall Metropolitan Council and some local schools, put their own interim schemes in place to help children in receipt of FSM. We are sorry if this has been confusing but now the national e-voucher scheme is in place things should become more consistent.

13. I am a Head Teacher of a school. Do I have to provide meals to all FSM children over the Easter holidays?

On 4th April 2020 Micheal Gove announced that the government had done a U-turn and would now be extending the government e-voucher scheme to all children eligible for FSM over the Easter holidays.

14. My children are in reception, year 1 or year 2, and normally receive free lunches as part of universal meals support. Why are they not on the schools list of children eligible for FSM now?

Full information regarding the eligibility criteria for FSM and our online claim form can be found using the following links to websites:

https://go.walsall.gov.uk/free_school_meals
<https://go.walsall.gov.uk/forms/Application-for-Free-School-Meals>

In accordance with new government guidance, schools only need to provide meals to children currently not at school due to the Covid-19 crisis, if their parents are on a low income and would qualify for assistance as a result of being on benefits. To qualify parents will need to be on:

- Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance,
- Income Support
- income-related Employment and Support Allowance,
- Universal Credit and your monthly household earnings are below:
 - £616.67 (if you live in England and Wales);

The following benefits and assistance also apply for qualifying for free school meals.

- The guarantee part of Pension Credit.
- Child Tax Credit, as long as you are not getting Working Tax Credit and have an annual income of less than £16,190.
- Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- In England and Wales, if you are getting Working Tax Credit for a run on period of four weeks because you have stopped work or reduced your hours to less than 16 hours a week, or in some cases, less than 24 or 30 hours a week, you may still be able to get free school meals for your children.
- Children who get Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance in their own right qualify as well.

To qualify for FSM in these circumstances you need to apply for them. The Council's in house FSM benefit team are still at work and processing new applications from families who need to apply for Free School Meals now. If you qualify on the above grounds, and you have a claim for Housing Benefit, or Council Tax Support with Walsall Council, we will have automatically processed an application for FSM for you. If you live outside Walsall, and have not already applied separately for FSM, you will need to do so now at:

<https://go.walsall.gov.uk/forms/Application-for-Free-School-Meals>

If you apply now, and qualify, we will write to you, and also inform your child's school, so they can put arrangements in place for your child.

If in the mean time you are in immediate need of help with emergency food, we are working with a number of partner organisations in order to provide support to families. You can contact Making Connections by emailing: COVID-19communityhelp@walsall.gov.uk or by calling 0121 380 6690.

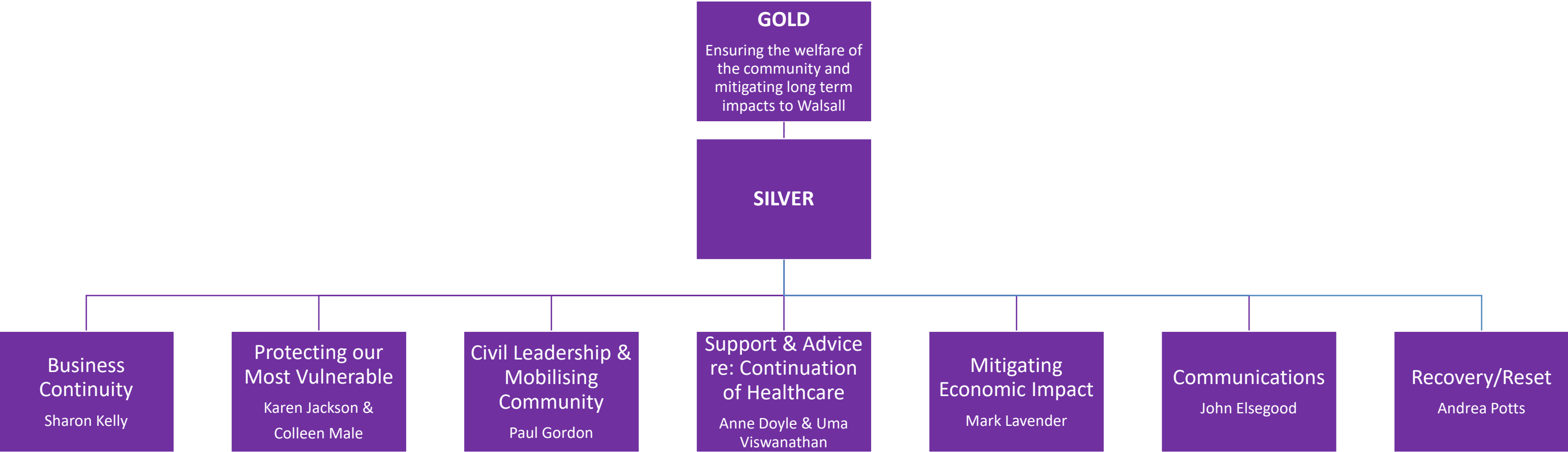
Due to the scale and speed of the Covid-19 emergency, Council officers are receiving the new guidance on Free School Meals at the same time that it is released to the public. At times, that has made it difficult for us to plan in advance, or know what advice to give schools, or parents when you first contact us. We are working very hard to respond quickly, and keep you informed, but I am aware that at times we have struggled to respond to every enquiry we have received from schools or parents.

I would like to thank you for your patience, and support, during such a difficult period. Please do continue to let us know if you need our help and we will get back to you as soon as we can.

Yours sincerely,

Elise Hopkins
System Leader
Money Home Job

GOLD & SILVER Control Meetings - Coronavirus (COVID-19)

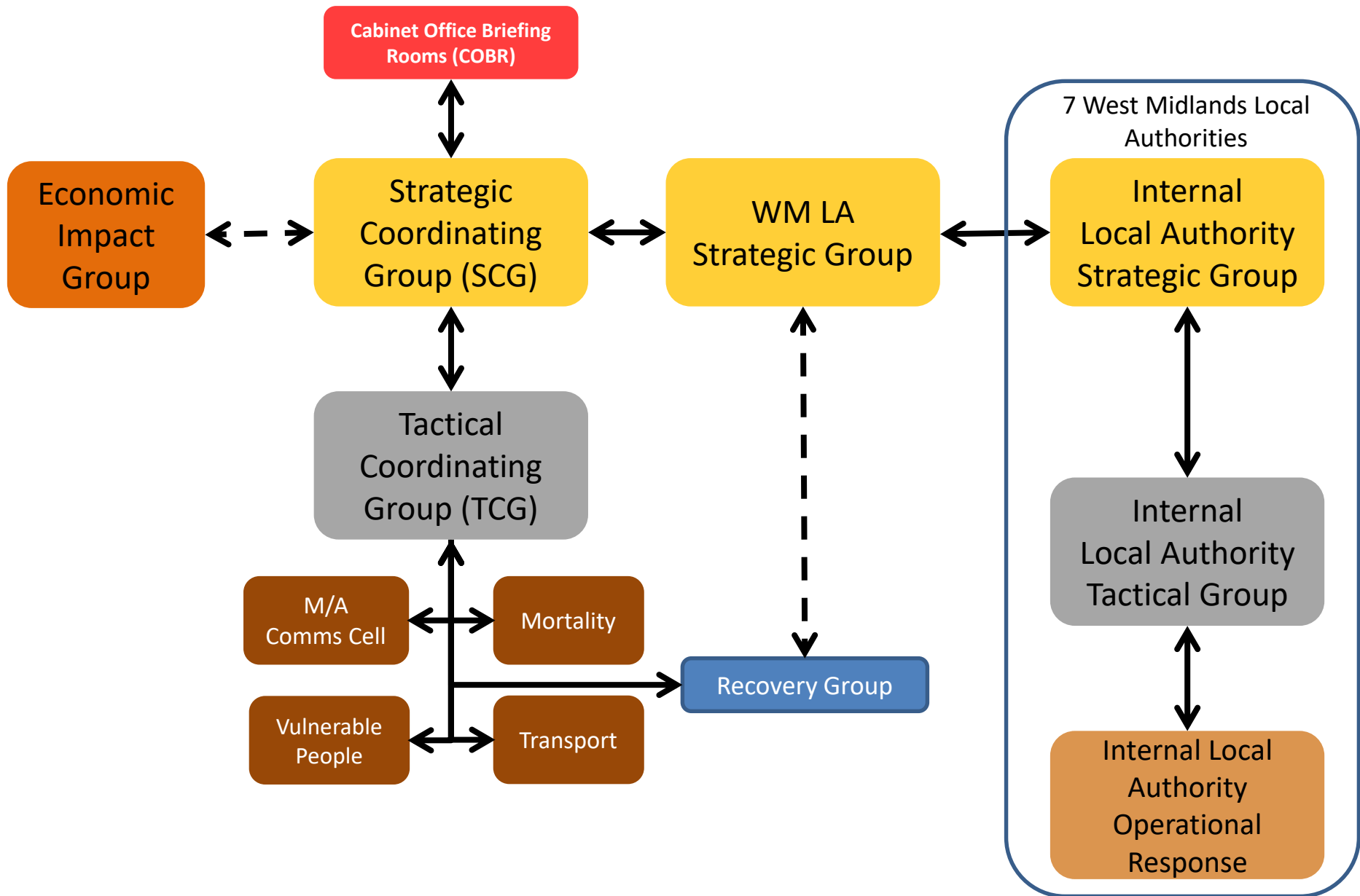


GOLD Attendees: Helen Paterson, Stephen Gunther, Paula Furnival, Sally Rowe, Simon Neilson, Anthony Cox, Vicky Buckley/Ross Hutchinson, Michael Smith, Kate Goodall, Sheridan Buckley, Lianne Deathridge

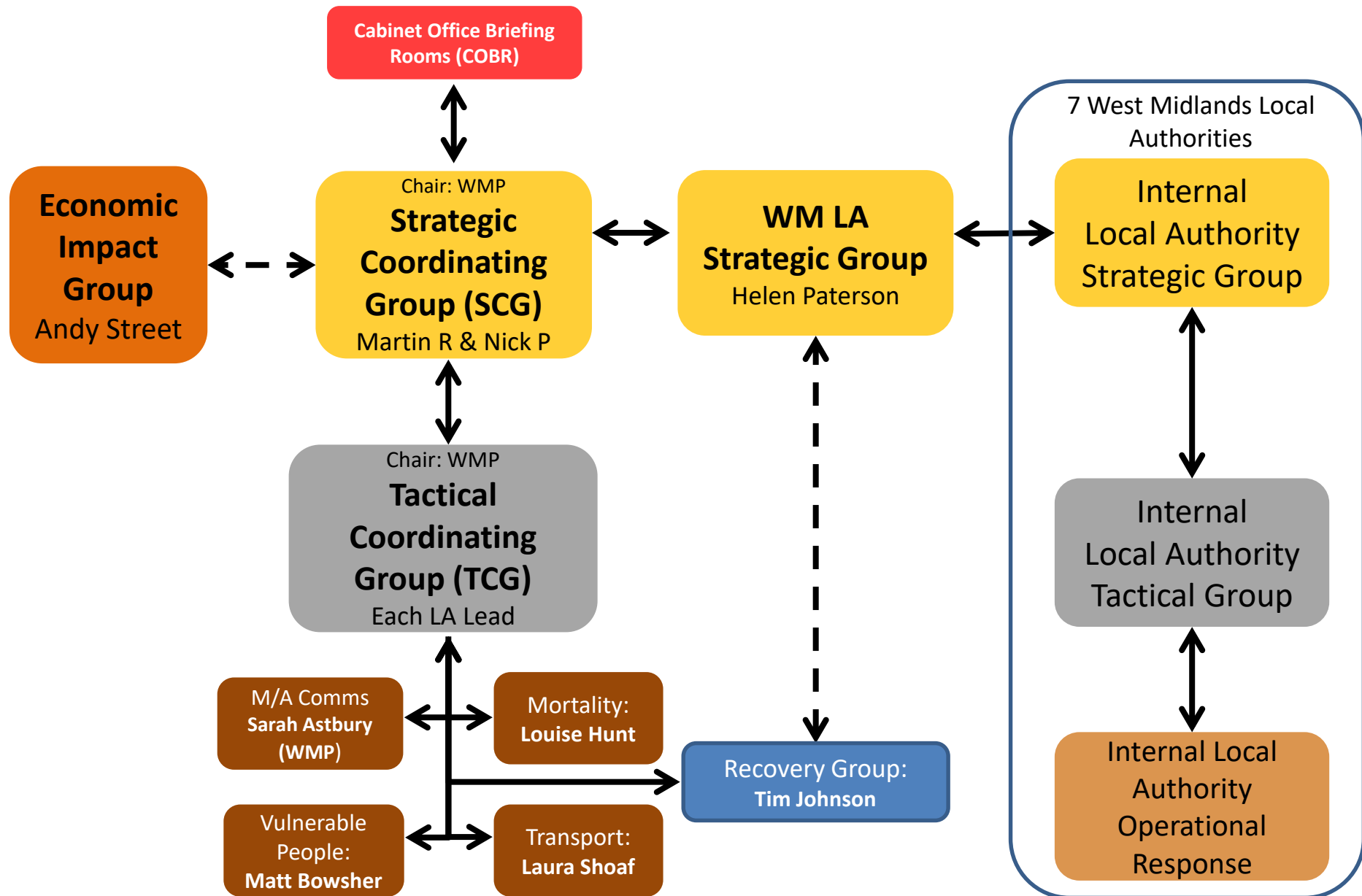
Roles and Responsibilities

- Multi-Agency S/TCG:
 - Coordinate Multi-agency Response
 - Local Authorities remain in this structure
- Local Authority command structures
 - Commands Local Response
 - Responsible for local activity
 - Accountable for all local activity
- West Mids LA Strategic Group:
 - Sharing intelligence to support SCG
 - Responding to coordination requests from SCG where they are not directed through TCG or a TCG Operational Cell
 - Provide support and mutual aid across WM Local Authorities

(1) Regional COVID-19 Response Structures



(2) Regional COVID-19 Response Structures (with named leads)



(3) Regional COVID-19 Response Structures: Health Focus

