

Covid-19 Working Group



As presented to the Scrutiny Overview Committee – 25 August 2020



Walsall Council

Foreword from the Lead Member Councillor I. Shires.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact on all our lives. Even now, as some restrictions are being eased, the new 'normal' bears very little resemblance to how things were pre lockdown.

From the Council's perspective, many plans have been put on hold in order that efforts could be concentrated on providing the support needed to ensure the resilience of our communities, and the help and support needed by businesses in these difficult times.

Lockdown, furlough and social distancing have forced massive change on Local Government. Not least of all in 'IT', which has seen the development in remote working and virtual meetings. Changes, which in normal times would have taken years, have been achieved in a matter of weeks and months and continue to develop at a pace not seen before. It would seem appropriate at this point to say a big 'thank you' to the Council's entire workforce for adapting in the way that they have to new ways of working.

With so much happening in such a short space of time, the Scrutiny Overview Committee recognised the need to add value to what was being done. By talking with our communities, businesses and partner agencies it was felt we could identify what has worked well and what hasn't worked so well or what might have been missed altogether. It was agreed to set up a cross-party working group, which I have had the pleasure of chairing, to carry out this important task.

Since its establishment the cross-party working group has operated at a fast pace and met on a weekly basis in order to make contact with a wide range of local residents groups, businesses and organisations. I would like to thank members of the work group, our support officers and witnesses for their time and commitment enabling us to complete this investigation with the speed needed for it to be relevant, informative and effective.

The Group recognises the significant effort of the Council, NHS, Partners, and the voluntary and community sector in supporting communities and businesses across Walsall. The speed of this response has meant that the most vulnerable were protected and many services continued to operate seamlessly. Staff and volunteers went above and beyond to ensure that services continued.

Whilst acknowledging the successes, the group considered it important to determine if there were any lessons that could be learnt, opportunities missed and to identify future action needed to allow Walsall's economy to recover. The pandemic is far from over and it is vital to reflect on the good work done and to ensure that the future response is enhanced by lessons learned in the event of another outbreak.

SECTION	PAGE NUMBER
Introduction	3
Terms of Reference	3
Membership	4
Methodology	4
Findings	6-14
Conclusions	15
Recommendations	16
Appendices	
1. Initiation Document	17-19

Introduction and Context

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused major disruption to communities and the economy. It is likely that this impact will continue into the future and Members were keen to consider how this impact could manifest itself in Walsall.

The government has focused on the economic and health impacts of the pandemic. The UK economy is predicted to contract by 11.5% in 2020 – one of worst affected countries. There was also concern that the ‘Brexit’ negotiations could be affected as UK / EU focused on the pandemic – which potentially increases the risk of a ‘no deal exit’ in January 2021. A Brexit ‘no deal’ risks 12.2% decline in West Midlands regional economic output (the West Midlands is more exposed than UK average). Historically, the West Midlands has not been as strong economically as the national average.

Further to this Government guidance is being continually updated due to the evolving picture of the pandemic. The situation is constantly evolving, and in response, guidance has changed rapidly in response to continuing challenges presented by the pandemic. The speed at which guidance changes, and the need to understand it can present difficulties for local business and communities.

Walsall is a culturally diverse town where people of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi background form the largest minority ethnic groups. The number of non-UK born residents in Walsall increased by 3.7% (9,900 people) between the 2001 and 2011 censuses and Walsall now has a small Eastern European population who make up about 1% of residents (2,700 people in total). There is a large BAME unemployment gap in West Midlands: 11% of ethnic minority groups to 5% of white groups. Covid-19 has had a disproportionate impact on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Groups (BAME) communities.

Terms of Reference

Draft terms of reference were discussed and agreed by a meeting of the working group that took place on 18th June 2020. The terms of reference were subsequently considered at a meeting of the Committee on 30th June 2020.

The full version of the Working Groups terms of reference can be found at Appendix 1 to this report. The Working Group was supported predominantly by:

Paul Gordon – Director (Resilient Communities)
Mark Lavender – Head of Programme Management
Nikki Gough – Democratic Services Officer

Methodology

The Working Group has held five meetings during its investigations taking into account the views of several witnesses.

The Working Group wished to understand the economic impact of Covid-19 on businesses and communities, to determine the mechanisms needed to allow recovery. Questioning what the effect on Walsall businesses and Walsall People was, in order to achieve this, adopted the following approach:

- Who do you want to see?
- When do you want to see them?
- What will you ask them?
- What other information will you want to see?

Membership

The Working Group membership consisted of the following Councillors:

Councillor I. Shires
Councillor A. Nawaz
Councillor L. Jeavons
Councillor J. Murray

Witnesses

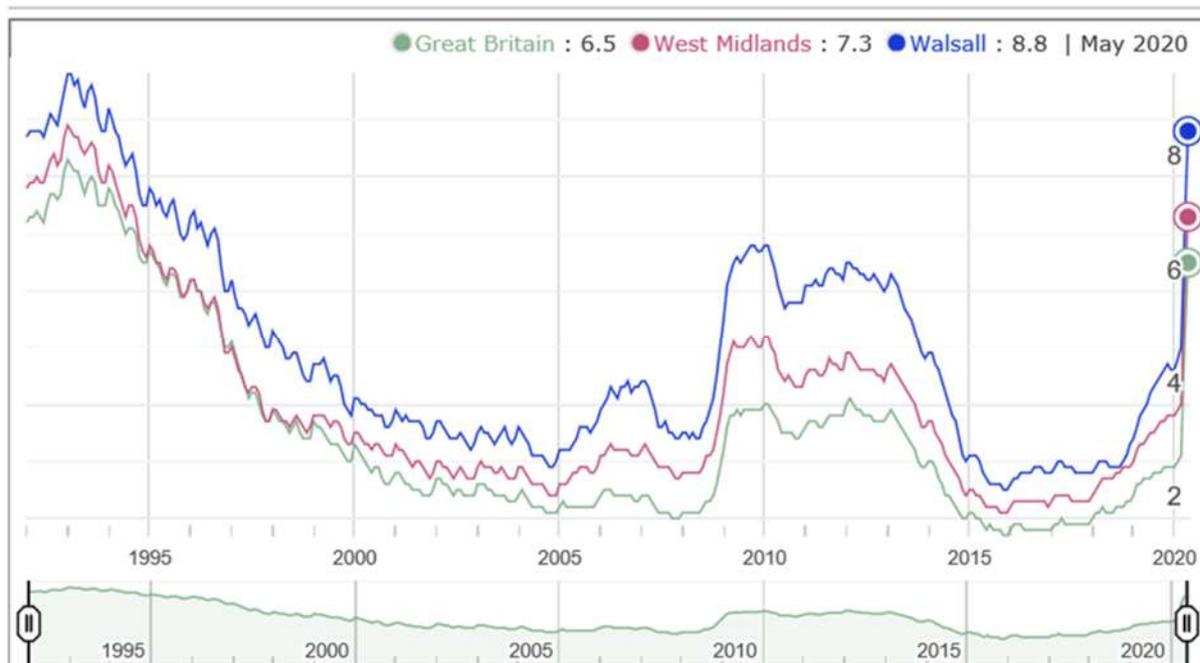
The Working Group met and interviewed the following witnesses:

<p>Walsall Council Daniel Turner Elizabeth Connolly Sarah Oakley Elise Hopkins Jeanette Hitchcock Michelle Dudson Andrea Potts Uma Viswanathan Councillor S. Craddock (Portfolio Holder, Health and wellbeing)</p>
<p>Business Reps Corin Crane, Chief Executive (The Black Country Chamber of Commerce) Karen Woolley, (Development Manager; Staffordshire and West Midlands - The Federation of Small Business) Neil Brandrick (JC Payne) Kevin Brandrick (JC Payne) Russell Eynon, (Managing Director - Breakwells Paints) Ewan Jones, (Director – Protective Sportswear Ltd)</p>
<p>Community Groups Jan Davies (Brownhills Community Association) Sue Evans, (Manor Farm Community Association) Eleanor: Bloxwich Community Partnership Sarah Oakley (Voluntary and Community Sector Lead) Allan Boot (Black Country Foodbank) Dave Pickard (Midland Mencap) Andrea Stanton (WM Pensioners Convention) Ryecroft Community Hub (written response) Collingwood Centre (written response) Old Hall People’s partnership (written response)</p>
<p>Partners WHG Gary Fulford, (Group Chief Executive) Theresa Huburn, (Corporate Director of People and Learning) Julie Haywood, (Director of Community Investment) Connie Jennings, (Head of Health and Wellbeing) Job Centre Gerry Lyng (Partnership Manager Walsall) Theresa Goodwin (Walsall Bridle Court) Walsall College James Norris (Walsall College)</p>

Findings

Walsall Economic Context

In Walsall, the Covid-19 pandemic created an immediate impact on those residents claiming Job Seekers Allowance and Universal Credit. The claimant rate in May 2020 was at 15,170 (8.8% of all working age): more than double the number in May 2019 (6,850, 4.0%)

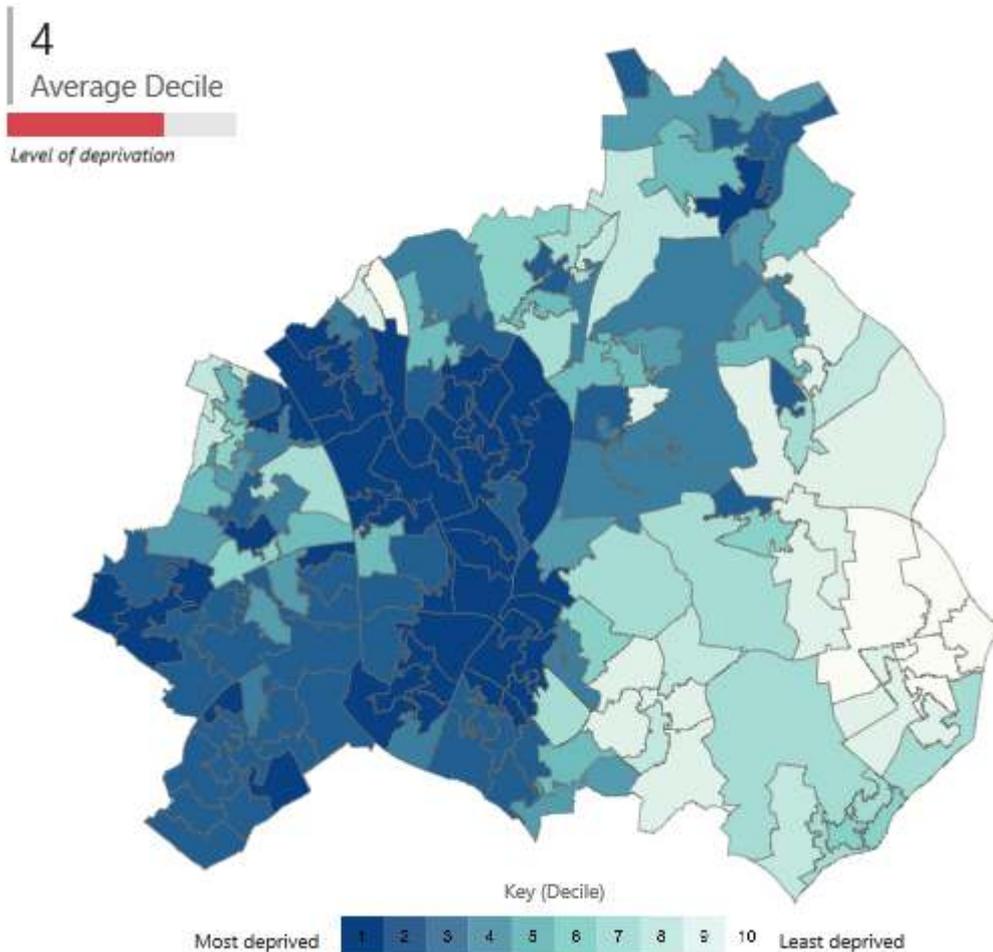


Figures indicated that 33,600 people were furloughed in Walsall: 28% of all jobs. The Council tax hardship fund issued £3.1m, out of budget of £3.9m. It was likely that there would be long-term impacts on young people's education, upskilling, and apprenticeships. Retail footfall was down 74% in West Midlands. Consumer spending in Walsall dropped by 46% as illustrated in the table overleaf. Walsall Council expected to issue 4,133 small business grants to Walsall companies worth £45.4m.



Consumer spend data has been made available by Social Impact Business and has been analysed in a Tortoise media report looking at the change in consumer spend in towns and cities. Figures for Walsall are combined with Wolverhampton.

The pattern of economic vulnerability generally follows the trend of multiple deprivation. ONS analysis also suggests deprived areas have been more negatively affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The 2019 Index of Multiple Deprivation ranks Walsall as the 25th most deprived English local authority (out of 317), placing Walsall within the most deprived 10% of districts in the country



Source: Indices of deprivation, MCHLG, 2019

Deprivation levels contribute to Walsall's increased economic exposure risk with over a quarter of businesses and employees in sectors impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Group heard that in response to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic recent economic trends may be reversed or exacerbated leading to;

- A further decline of retail in town centres.
- An increased reliance on local shopping centres.
- Potential change in housing demand, with increased home working and desire for outside space.
- Changing commuter patterns – with home working, increased use of walking/cycling, nervousness about public transport.
- Access to green spaces increasingly important.

Financial Support to Businesses

The Group were provided with the details of a range of financial support schemes to businesses such as grants, bounce back loans and business rate relief. Details of all support available was detailed at; <https://go.walsall.gov.uk/walsallcom/Covid-19>

Members considered this an excellent source of information and reflected that it would be useful for Elected Members to receive this in a format, which could be circulated across various communication methods.

Walsall Crisis Support Scheme

The Crisis Support scheme has been operational since 2015, and the budget was made up from a one off grant. It was intended to assist families, in Walsall, in a crisis situation, where their needs cannot be met from another source and there was a risk to health and well-being (subject to eligibility criteria). The existing budget will last, potentially, until the end of the current financial year. However, it was possible that financial pressures caused by the Covid-19 pandemic may create additional demand for this funding. The grant funded six members of staff and physical spend (to assist families). Without this scheme, residents may need to access such crisis support from charities and foodbanks.

Business Representatives

In order to gather information about the impact of the pandemic on local businesses the Group met with a range of business representatives from small, medium and large businesses, the Black Country Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Small Business. Members were impressed by the way, in which local businesses had adapted during the pandemic and supported employees. Further to this, the Group were pleased with the support that has been provided to local businesses by the Council. Elected Members and staff have worked hard to raise awareness, distribute and allocate government grants quickly to support businesses during this extremely challenging time. The main themes emerging from discussion were:

- Walsall Council had supported businesses well in accessing information and financial assistance, and joint working between businesses and the Local Authority had been positive, it was reflected that this should continue.
- Eligibility for business grants was linked to business rates, meaning that not all businesses were able to access assistance, for example if business rates were incorporated into premises rent. However, Members heard that the Governments 'discretionary grant' scheme (administered by the Council) made it possible for these businesses to access support where hardship could be demonstrated.
- In order to recover from the lockdown period and the effect of the pandemic, businesses were taking advantages of 'bounce back loans'. In the future businesses may need support to ensure that this does not affect their financial viability.
- Members expressed concern that in the future, Council funding could be linked to business rates, if local businesses were affected by the pandemic, this would potentially have a knock on effect to the Council.
- The Government 'Kick Start Scheme' aimed at 16-24 year olds would fund the employment of a young person for 6 months. There may be a gap in the skills held by potential employees in Walsall and the needs of businesses. In Walsall, the Authority needed to be proactive, to close this gap, and ensure young people held the skills needed to benefit from this scheme.
- Some business had high fixed property costs, and if the business was closed there was no incoming revenue but ongoing costs remained.
- A second wave/outbreak of Covid-19 may pose significant challenges for local businesses.
- Businesses tied up in a supply chain may face financial difficulties if payment from debtors was not forthcoming.

Community Representatives

In order to gain a picture of the challenges of the pandemic on the community, the Group met with a range of community groups and received written responses to questions posed to ensure a representative view. The Group were overwhelmed with how well the local volunteers had rose to the challenge of supporting the local community. The amount of energy, enthusiasm and effort in this task cannot be overestimated. It is without doubt that without the efforts of the local community the response to supporting local residents would have been weakened. Further to this the role that the Cabinet have played in allocating additional funds to local voluntary organisations, including those for core costs, should be recognised. Consideration should be given to continue this valuable funding to support voluntary sector organisations in the longer term. The main themes emerging from discussion were:

- Very effective support was received from the Council to those community associations. Assistance included community development money, and rate relief, which enabled community associations to be supported whilst closed or whilst income was reduced. The Group noted that the community associations they spoke with noted the positive support provided by the Council.
- Community associations and groups face pressures going forward. It will not be possible for some activities to restart due to increased costs as a result of social distancing requirements, however, some groups have been able to adapt and offer digital alternatives (which had been well received).
- Community associations have adapted their services to ensure people were supported throughout lockdown, providing vital services such as shopping services, prescription collection, delivery of library books, and befriending services. The Group noted the flexibility shown in adapting facilities, changing job roles, and working in partnership with others.
- Mental health needs of residents were a concern and reduced confidence of residents to leave home had been affected and valuable work needed to be done to overcome this. This was important to allow residents to support the local economy. The Group recognised the value of the plan approved by Cabinet to support the mental health of those affected by COVID at their July meeting.
- Foodbanks faced challenges at the start of lockdown due to a reduced number of volunteers (due to shielding) although food supplies are stable. Foodbanks were not included in the Councils' initial emergency response to the pandemic and some information provided, by Council staff, to residents in relation to receiving food parcels was inaccurate and caused unnecessary confusion. This was acknowledged by Officers and steps had been taken to avoid it happening again and to support foodbanks if needed.
- An emergency plan, for community hubs, would be beneficial to include;
 - A pool of volunteers ready to assist (police checked).
 - Access to drivers, possibly WHG or the fire service to deliver food parcels.
 - A strategy for work with the most vulnerable who were no able to access digital/online services.
 - A source of coherent information in relation to the pandemic.

- The Council needs to be prepared for a second wave/outbreak of the virus. It is important to learn lessons and be fully prepared by working in partnership community associations.
- Community associations will face significant challenges going forward, the organisations will need to restructure, may face financial difficulties, staffing challenges, which will be compounded with increased demand for support. Given how instrumental community hubs were to the response to the Covid-19 pandemic the Group considered it important that future funding arrangements were considered to provide the sector with more stability in the future.

Partners

The Group acknowledged that the community response to the pandemic had been provided in conjunction with the Council's Partners. In order to understand the needs of the community the Group met with a range of Partners including WHG, Job Centre, and Walsall College. It has to said that the Group thought that the response and support of partners during the pandemic had been excellent. The main themes emerging from discussion were:

- Partnerships had been effective to assist the Council in the response to the pandemic.
- In response to challenges faced, WHG had adapted their staff's roles and tasked drivers to deliver food parcels to the vulnerable. It was noted by the Group that WHG had been a key partner and supported the Council well.
- Partners had operated well-being schemes used to support residents and safeguard the vulnerable. This had provided the opportunity to connect with customers and had identified vulnerable residents.
- The College had offered and continue to offer training to assist residents to access digital platforms.
- Partners were actively supplying affordable broadband and tablets to residents to prevent them from becoming excluded, and to support children and young people with their online learning.
- Recovery would create opportunities to develop organisations and allow them to be stronger in the future.
- There had been a huge increase in benefit claims, which the Group noted was indicative of the economic challenge that would be faced by Walsall.
- Opportunities for 16 - 24 year olds to take part in Government 'Kick Start' scheme. Partners were integral to ensure that young people head the skills needed to access jobs created by the scheme.
- Partners acknowledged that there may have been duplication in the roles carried out by each public sector organisation in response to the pandemic. Walsall Council, Walsall College, and WHG representatives informed the Group that each organisation had provided laptops to residents in need. It was suggested that where possible a mechanism for co-ordinating the provision of digital devices should be developed to avoid duplication and ensure that resources were put to the best possible use. This could be part of a wider partner digital strategy.
- It was noted that the needs of 25 years+ group were different to younger people. They should also be supported to retrain and access alternative employment if made redundant.
- Impact of redundancies and the end of furlough could be significant, and affect partners in different ways.
- The Crisis support scheme has a limited budget, which may be depleted if demand continued. This may cause a future problem if officers were not able to support residents in this way.

Walsall Council Plans

The Group met with the Portfolio Holder for Health and wellbeing, Director (Commissioning and Early Help) and Deputy Medical referee (Public Health) to understand the Councils approach to reset plans and the Local Outbreak Management Plan.

Walsall Council Reset Plans

The Group heard that the Covid-19 pandemic had provided opportunities and accelerated existing plans for the Authority to learn and build better arrangements to carry out functions. The internal reset plans and the 'Proud programme' are aligned to ensure that the strategic direction of travel is maintained. The Council is connected to regional reset planning. The Authority had continued to operate a large number of services throughout the pandemic lockdown and, along with the voluntary and community sector, had supported vulnerable residents through the 'Making Connections' model.

A workforce experience and well-being survey of all staff focusing on the Covid-19 pandemic and was in the process of being analysed. Large numbers of staff had worked from home for a significant amount of time and it was important to understand how staff were feeling to help shape reset planning. Trade Union colleagues had been engaged in discussions about the resetting of services and would continue to be consulted. A Space Occupancy Group had been established to ensure Council buildings were Covid secure. It was acknowledged that all staff and services could not be accommodated in buildings all of the time. The Group had worked with HR to refresh the agile working policy.

Members praised staff for the seamless operation of services and for making new working arrangements effective. The fact that the vast majority of service continued to operate is an excellent achievement which the Council should be proud of. Further to this the Group recognise and thank those Council staff who willingly undertook other roles in the NHS whilst their substantive posts could not be completed.

Local Outbreak Management Plan

The Walsall Covid-19 Outbreak Management Plan (the Plan) is the operational response and management for Coronavirus disease and any outbreaks that may occur in Walsall. The Plan outlines a locally led system for Walsall that seeks to protect and promote health and wellbeing during the pandemic. The plan aims to:

- Reduce the number of new community cases of Covid-19;
- Minimise outbreaks and manage them effectively when they occur and;
- Reduce the impact of the pandemic on the most vulnerable groups in our community.

The Plan will remain a live document, reflecting the evolving nature of guidance, expectations and local experience. Local test, track and trace teams were working on local outbreaks and there were a range of options for testing. Government priorities have been grouped together within the plan to form five work streams for Walsall's Outbreak Management Action Plan. Incorporated in this was a Local Outbreak Engagement Board, Members were keen to engage with this forum and asked that they were proactively notified about upcoming information and meetings.

Conclusion

During this investigation the Group have been significantly impressed in the manner in which the whole Walsall community – public sector, business, voluntary sector and individuals have come together to respond to such a significant crisis at such speed. This includes the manner in which the political leadership at the Council has rose to the challenges thrown its way.

The economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic will be significant for the country as a whole. Walsall is more vulnerable to negative economic consequences due to its levels of multiple deprivation and vulnerable employment sectors. The economic impact of the pandemic is likely to continue to effect the residents of Walsall; there is also a concern that subsequent waves of the pandemic may exacerbate the impact for businesses and communities in Walsall. Further redundancies are likely as financial assistance from the Government ends and business fail; this will likely increase the number of benefit claimants and the financial/physical well-being of residents. Residents and businesses will need support to retrain and access employment opportunities.

Evidence gathered by the Working Group suggests that Walsall Council and its partners responded incredibly well to the challenges presented by the pandemic. Partnership working with businesses, community associations and other public bodies was extremely effective to safeguard vulnerable residents and assist businesses to access financial support available. Some areas for improvement were identified but these are not criticisms, rather areas that should be considered, as lessons learned, in preparation for a second wave. For instance, improvements could include involvement of local foodbanks in the initial emergency response to ensure that their skills and networks were utilised to benefit local residents. The Group felt that communities would benefit from the involvement of key partners at GOLD command to ensure that high-level expertise was utilised and benefit the emergency response. It was noted that cross party engagement with Elected Members had been good and had improved during the pandemic, however, there were benefits to enhancing this further to enable Members to disseminate information to residents and businesses. Support to businesses should continue into the future as their needs change because of the pandemic, their role as employers and business ratepayers is important to the economic stability of Walsall. As part of this support, the Council should work with partners to ensure that residents are offered appropriate skills and training to access the local job market and fill gaps in the local labour market. It was clear to the Group that Community Associations and groups had been integral to the emergency response and with support from the Council had worked flexibly to support and protect local residents. The Group feel that the Council should ensure that their basic infrastructure is funded to allow such a response in the future and recognise their importance in the Borough. The creation of an emergency plan would also assist them to support residents when needed and prevent duplication of efforts.

The Local Authority should build on this positive work through its policies to limit the potential for further economic impacts and protect the community as a whole from the negative consequences of the pandemic in order to allow communities and businesses to recover.

Recommendations

1. The Authority including Elected Members and Officers, its Partners, local businesses and most importantly, the local community, are thanked for its excellent response and for maintaining services in unprecedented circumstances.
2. The Council needs to be prepared for a second wave of the virus. It is important that 'lessons were learnt' from the initial phase of the pandemic, A coherent 'Walsall Communities Emergency Plan' should be developed and include;
 - A pool of volunteers ready to assist (police checked).
 - Access to drivers, possibly WHG or the Fire Service to deliver food parcels.
 - A strategy to help the most vulnerable who were not able to access digital/online services.
 - Provision of coordinated information on accessing support and e.g. food bank, financial support and persons of contact.
 - Proactive work with local communities to further understand their needs ahead of a potential second outbreak.
3. Enhanced partnership working should be developed with foodbanks in the future to ensure that their expertise and resources are included in the Authorities emergency response.
4. Enhanced engagement with Elected Members on the local Covid-19 situation should be developed to provide more speedy and detailed dissemination of information as and when available.
5. The Council should continue to ensure provision to businesses with/signposting to debt management and financial advice, and continue to work in partnership with local business to support their needs.
6. The Local Authority should proactively work with its Partners to ensure that skills and training courses are developed to support career changes and to enable 16-24 year olds to access the Government 'Kick Start Scheme'.
7. The Working Group welcome the Cabinet approved plan to address the mental wellbeing of residents caused by COVID-19 and encourage further valuable work by the Local Authority, it's Partners and the third sector to support residents to overcome their challenges created by the pandemic.
8. Key Partners should be involved in the strategic and operational planning of the pandemic response, including at Gold Command, to ensure that skills and expertise was fully utilised.
9. Consideration should be given to the funding arrangements for Community Associations and partnership work should be continued to allow the sector to develop.
10. A mechanism for logging and analysing the provision of digital devices, across partners, should be developed, to avoid duplication and ensure that resources are maximised to assist as many residents as possible.

Work Group Name:	Covid-19 Working Group
Committee:	Scrutiny Overview Committee
Municipal Year:	2020/21
Lead Member:	Councillor I. Shires
Lead Officer:	Mark Lavender and Paul Gordon.
Support Officer:	Nikki Gough
Membership:	Councillor A. Nawaz, Councillor I. Shires, Councillor L. Jeavons, Councillor J. Murray
Co-opted Members:	

1. Context	The Covid-19 pandemic has caused major disruption to communities and the economy. This impact will continue into the near future and Members are keen to consider how this impact will manifest itself in Walsall.
2. Objectives	The working group wishes to understand the economic impact of Covid-19 on businesses and communities, to determine the mechanisms needed to allow them to recover. What is the effect on Walsall businesses and Walsall People?
3. Scope	The working group will seek to understand the impact on the local economy in particular the impact on local businesses and employment of local people. After understanding this the working group will seek to understand the impact of the pandemic on local communities. The working group recognise that the recovery plans will be organised on local, regional and national scale so will maintain awareness of WMCA and Black Country Plans as required but these will not be the main focus. The working group will seek to identify any gaps and opportunities for further work in order to add value. Consideration will be given to the marmot objectives to ensure that those communities in most need receive required assistance to recover and that long-term inequalities do not persist as a result of the pandemic.
4. Equalities Implications	The working group will consider data to identify adverse impacts on any particular groups.
4. Who else will you want to take part?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business representative (economic partnership) • Self-employed / taxi liaison group • Federation of small businesses • College • Community organisations • Jobcentre (locality level)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foodbanks Trussell trust • Money, Home, Job • Employment Growth Team • WHG • Walsall pensioners convention • Disability Groups 															
5.	Timescales & Reporting Schedule															
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Timetable: To conclude by August 2020.