

CANNOCK CHASE COUNCIL
MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE
CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON TUESDAY 28 JULY 2020 AT 4:30 P.M.
VIA REMOTE ACCESS

PART 1

PRESENT:
Councillors

Allen, F.W.C. (Chairman)
Sutherland, M. (Vice-Chairman)

Bennett, C <i>(via telephone)</i>	Hughes, R.J. Jones, B.
Cartwright, Mrs. S.M.	Startin, P.D.
Crabtree, S.K.	Stretton, Mrs. P.Z.
Davis, Mrs. M.A.	Wilkinson, Ms. C.L.
Fisher, P.A. <i>(joined at 4:50pm)</i>	Witton, P.T.

Also in attendance: Councillor Miss M.A. Freeman (Invitee as Chairman of the Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee)

1. Apologies

None received.

2. Declarations of Interests of Members in Contracts and Other Matters and Restrictions on Voting by Members and Party Whip Declarations

Member	Interest	Type
Davis, Mrs. M.A.	<u>Agenda Item 3: Covid-19: Response and Recovery</u> Owned a small number of shares in a company that had received Business Support grant funding.	Personal

No other declarations of interests or party whip declarations were received.

3. Covid-19: Response and Recovery

Consideration was given to the following reports received by Cabinet on 23 April and 21 May, 2020, respectively:

- Covid-19 Pandemic: Response of Cannock Chase District Council and Partners (Item 3.1 – 3.20);
- Approach to Recovery Planning from the Impact of Covid-19 (Item 3.21 – 3.28).

Overview

The Managing Director advised that the purpose of bringing the two reports before the Committee was to set out for Members what the Council had done during the response phase to the pandemic, and what its intentions were for the recovery phase. The response phase had been an extraordinary period where existing priorities had had to be set aside and new ones developed, whilst also dealing with a continual stream of Government announcements and changes to working arrangements for Officers. During the early period of the response phase a number of urgent decisions had to be taken as no Member meetings were in place at that time.

Financial Response

The Head of Finance advised that one of key things to address had been support for businesses, with the Council being given responsibility for administering a number of new support grants with a total value of circa £23m. The process of making payments had started at the end of March, with £10m being paid out by 10 April. This work had not been as straightforward as envisaged due to not having the necessary details of some businesses to make payments to. As at the end of 26 July, just over £20m out of the £23.8m allocation had been paid out. Some businesses had missed out, although close to 95% of eligible businesses had been paid, and every effort made to contact those businesses who had applied for funding. The Council was now in the process of paying out the £1m discretionary funding scheme which was in place until the end of August.

Community Response

The Head of Housing and Partnerships advised that the position on this had constantly changed. In the early stages it was unknown what the role of Staffordshire County Council (SCC) would be, but this Council had to help any rough sleepers located in the District as a matter of urgency, which was done within 48 hours. Ten rooms at accommodation in Bridgtown were secured for three months with 11 rough sleepers being helped on and off during that time, and food parcels provided by SCC. The majority of those individuals had recently been rehoused in properties suited to their needs.

It was also expected initially that the Council would be heavily involved in the distribution of food parcels to vulnerable persons as there was concern that food banks would run out of supplies and stockpiling of goods by people had become an issue. Officers had worked with Tesco locally to secure the provision of food and parcels, and as a result the Council had only had to distribute 31 of its own parcels. All remaining stocks were being sent to the Salvation Army.

The Community Vulnerability Hub (CVH) set up the Council had included the work of 50 Officers at its peak. 17 different data sources were used to identify over 7,000 people in the District classed as vulnerable, with 4,800 letters being sent out and calls to over 3,000 people being made. Of those contacted, most had issues with loneliness and social isolation, and some had to be referred to specialised services. In the wider community, a number of Mutual Aid Groups were set up, including the Chase Coronavirus Support Network (CCSN) and the Heath Hayes & Wimblebury Support Group (HHWSG) and both groups worked very well effectively together, providing a range of support services including shopping trips, prescription deliveries and telephone calls.

A Member queried what would happen to an individual if they became homeless through eviction because of non-payment of rent? The Head of Housing and Partnerships advised that no evictions could happen before 31 August, but should this occur, the Housing Options team would work to find alternative private accommodation.

Organisational Response

The HR Services Manager advised that the majority of the Council's workforce had moved to homeworking within a few days of lockdown, and the ICT service had worked hard to source as many laptops and phones as possible for critical services required. 10 staff had however still been coming into the Civic Centre regularly to do necessary work. Where employees could not work from home, those services were suspended and affected staff used to support the work of the CVH or redeployed to other areas.

In terms of Covid-19 infection rates, there had been a fairly low number of positive cases amongst staff. Thirty had reported symptoms, the majority of which were in the early stages of lockdown and there had been no confirmed cases following a test being taken. There was not any sickness absences at moment due to the virus, and this had been the case for several weeks now. Throughout the lockdown period and beyond the Council had continued to support the mental health of its staff with the offer of confidential independent support and external counselling services via phone or virtually, a dedicated health hub on the Intranet and the trialling of an employee assistance programme. An 'Employee Voice forum' had also been set up on Fridays to allow staff to discuss concerns and issues in a confidential setting.

The Managing Director advised that the Council had not worked on its own during crisis but as part of the Staffordshire Local Resilience Forum (LRF) due to the pandemic being declared a public health emergency. The LRF meetings were chaired by the Director of Public Health and involved all local public sector bodies as well as a representative from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). The meetings were held regularly during the early stages, with the key principles of working together, managing a coordinated response and providing mutual aid. A significantly sized temporary mortuary had been established at the County Showground in Stafford, however it did not need to be used owing thankfully to a lower than anticipated death rate in the County.

Early in the crisis the provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was a national issue, however thanks to the work of this Council in pre-empting this and increasing its own PPE stock levels, supplies were able to be provided to prisons, the health sector, voluntary and community groups as well as neighbouring local authorities.

The Head of Finance provided further details about the urgent decisions that had had to be taken at the start of the crisis, as referred to earlier in the meeting by the Managing Director.

A Member then queried what the costs had been to the Council of each of these decisions. The Head of Finance advised that this was confidential information but could be provided to Members separately.

The Head of Governance and Corporate Services advised that communications had played an important part of the response phase, with a lot of effort and time focussed on keeping residents informed of services closures, changes and signposting to support

available. Similar information had also been provided to staff and Members via weekly updates, along with regular updates to the Group Leaders from the Managing Director. The Council had also support national campaign messaging regarding Covid-19 related advised on hand washing, social distancing etc.

A Member referred to comments made by the Leader of the Council about how recent political changes had undermined the Council's response to the pandemic, and so asked what the view of Officers was in this regard. The Managing Director replied that he had no factual evidence that demonstrated that the Council's Covid-19 response or recovery work had been disrupted by the recent political group changes and nobody had raised concerns with him. Council Officers had continued to focus and work on recovery efforts regardless of any party political issues.

Recovery Phase

The Managing Director advised that from the Council's perspective the response phase was now over, and the LRF had formally declared the major incident status was stood down. Local response structures such as the CVH were being wound down. Due to the negative consequences and impact of pandemic there were legacy issues to deal with that would take some time to work through. The Council was now in restoration phase, which was a different environment with different challenges, but things wouldn't go back to how they were pre-pandemic.

Economic Recovery

The Head of Economic Prosperity advised that the pandemic had had a significant impact on public health, the community, residents and businesses. During the lockdown period many businesses had to close, and whilst most were now reopen, there would be a need to look at the long term impact on the economic performance of the District and any subsequent recession. The main focus would be on where to provide resource to aid recovery, how to support existing businesses and what ongoing help would be needed to weather the storm.

Unemployment had increased significantly during the lockdown period, with the June 2020 figures indicating that 3,660 people were out of work and claiming benefits. This equated to an unemployment rate of 5.8%, compared to 2.6% pre-lockdown. Of those unemployed, 20% were aged 18 to 24. Under the Government's job retention ('furlough') scheme, nearly 17,000 people had been furloughed, which was approximately 36% of the District's workforce. As the scheme was due to taper off during the autumn it was expected that unemployment would increase further, but at this stage it was unknown by how much.

The pandemic had especially impacted the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors, and whilst many venues had reopened, these sectors were susceptible to further outbreaks. The Council had helped the District's town centres to reopen safely with social distancing measures in place, and would continue to provide relevant support. Looking ahead, help would be given to get the unemployed back into work and the Economic Prosperity Strategy refreshed to reflect the change in the economic climate, linked in with recovery work being undertaken by the West Midlands Combined Authority and Local Enterprise Partnerships.

A Member queried if the Council was anticipating an increased number of business failures when a number of bills needed to be paid next year? The Head of Economic

Prosperity replied that it was too early to say at this stage and what the impact would be, but noted that some businesses had benefitted from the various support grants available and the Business Rates payment holiday.

Another Member queried what impact the pandemic had had on the Council's working capital? The Head of Finance replied that there would be a direct financial impact for the Council, and wider impact on the District and local economy. As such, it was necessary to ensure the Council's finances were stable in the medium term, but for 2020/21, there had been additional costs pressures and a significant reduction in income levels. Government funding support of £1.2 million had been received to alleviate those cost pressures, but it was anticipated that there would be a shortfall in this year's budget of circa £1.5 million. Reserves and working balances could be used to support the budget position for the current year, but this would create further problems going forward, much of which would depend on what was included in the next local government finance settlement. A short term financial strategy for the remainder of this year would be produced, alongside a review of the medium term financial strategy, but it was important to note the Council was not in a position of needing to issue a S114 notice as it remained financially viable.

A Member referred to paragraph 5.12 of the 'recovery' report, noting the estimated savings requirement of £600,000 for 2022/23, and queried if an emergency budget situation was envisaged? The Head of Finance replied that this wasn't the case as it was felt the Council had sufficient reserves in place, but this would depend on any forthcoming Government announcements on further funding support, in particular for leisure services as nothing was being provided at the present time.

Another Member queried if it would be necessary to inflict further service cuts due to the current situation? The Head of Finance replied that this would be for Members to determine, but the overall impact on the local economy and the Council would need to be known before Members could take such decisions.

Community Recovery

The Head of Housing and Partnerships advised that the CVH had now been mothballed as most of the pressing issues during the response phase had been dealt with. The dedicated email account and telephone switchboard call option had been 'closed down' for the time being, but they could be quickly re-established in future if needs be. Specific issues that needed to be addressed as part of the recovery phase was an increase in cases of ASB and domestic abuse, along with any impact felt by the ban on evictions being lifted in the autumn. A lot of the community recovery work overlapped with the economic recovery in respect of support for unemployed people who ended up in vulnerable situations.

Organisational Recovery

The Head of Governance and Corporate Services advised that work was concentrated on working arrangements for staff and restoration of services, a number of which were now fully back in place, and some partially so. A lot of work was being done in regards to employee safety and wellbeing, including reviewing the number of staff that could work in the Civic Centre and other locations at any one, whilst being clear that all affected staff could not be brought back in house as yet.

Moving from restoring services to reshaping them, work was being done to look at how

things had been done differently during the lockdown period, and how successful changes could be adapted and put in place more permanently. Four overarching work-streams had been setup, each led by a different Head of Service with wider input from Leadership Team, and oversight provided by a Recovery Overview Board, which was formed of some Cabinet members, the political groups Leaders and relevant Officers. As part of this structure it was also agreed that the Corporate Scrutiny Committee would have the remit for scrutiny of the Council's Covid-19 related work.

The Managing Director advised that there were now national, regional, county and local recovery structures in place which the Council was involved in through relevant bodies and organisations. It was expected that an economic recession would be experienced nationally, so there was a need to know what the Government's response to this would be, including what support would be available for businesses and the unemployed. Members were also alerted to the publication in the autumn of the 'Local Recovery and Devolution' white paper from the Government. At this stage it appeared that recovery support was being linked to local government reorganisation, with the Government's preferred models being either unitary authorities or mayoral combined authorities. This would obviously have an impact on the long-term future for district/borough councils such as this Council, but this would need to be considered alongside all the other issues raised throughout the meeting.

A Member thanked the Managing Director, Leadership Team, Democratic Services and all other Council staff for their hard work in keeping essential services going during the pandemic, and for providing the detailed report to the Committee. Thanks were also given to all Councillors for working hard in the community during this time no matter what political group they were from.

Other Members also gave thanks to the work of Officers and others involved during the crisis, as well as being impressed by the level of volunteering that had taken place within the local communities.

The meeting closed at 5:35 p.m.

CHAIRMAN