

Council Forum

Report of the Chairs of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

The three Overview and Scrutiny Committees met in December to continue work on their scrutiny of the Council's response to the COVID 19 pandemic.

People Overview and Scrutiny Committee 7th December 2020.

The Committee followed up their work on the reconfiguration of renal dialysis services in the area and the recommendations that had been made as part of the consultation in 2019. The Committee were pleased to note that the services provided in the borough were to be enhanced and expanded to better meet the needs of users.

Schools and COVID19

The Committee continued to look at the way that the Council had responded to the services provided to children through schools and children's services. The Committee looked at the way that schools had worked to open and continue to stay open safely for both children and staff. The Committee looked at the support that schools had received from the department and the guidance on interpretation of the government changing rules. The Committee reviewed how the education response team had worked with schools and to keep people safe and would continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

Ofsted Children in Our Care Focused Visit update on Practice Improvement.

The Committee looked at the findings of the focused visit from OFSTED that had taken place in February 2020 and would be followed up in the near future. The focused visit had found that-

- Senior leaders understand the strengths and areas for development within the service. While there have been improvements in some areas of service, progress remains slow in key areas of weakness that were identified at previous inspections.
- When children are at immediate or significant risk, decisions to bring them into care are made promptly and appropriately. However, decision-making when children are suffering neglect is too slow. This means that some children are left in harmful situations and plans for their future are delayed.
- Social work caseloads are too high in the assessment and support teams, which impacts on social workers' ability to build relationships with children and understand their experiences. Although leaders have acted to try and reduce demand for social work services, this has not had any impact on workloads in these social work teams. At the point of this visit, effective interim plans to address workload pressures were not addressed.

The improvements highlighted in the area of social work were outlined and the Committee were informed that the department had taken steps to meet these together with improvements made which included updating the service development plan, implementing and embedding the quality assurance and practice improvement framework and implementing a workforce strategy which had seen social work caseloads reduced by 25%. All newly qualified social workers would have caseloads under 15 children each. A number of areas of practice improvement were outlined together with the next steps that included Ofsted focused visits in January and peer challenge in February. The

Committee were supportive of the actions taken by the Portfolio and the Council and would look to receive further reports back to the Committee on the outcome of the review to improve services delivery and outcomes for children in the Borough.

Test and Trace, the Vaccine and arrangements for Vaccination.

The Committee received an update on the test and trace system and how this was working in the Borough. Blackburn with Darwen had been one of the first Councils in the country to start tracing cases locally as it had been recognised that the sooner a positive case has been identified and contacted the sooner their contacts can be identified and supported to self-isolate. The aim was to break the chain of transmission and support people in isolation. The Council will continue to work closely with the Government and Public Health England to secure additional resources and testing pilots to maximise capacity and value of test and trace at a local level.

The Committee looked at the way that the vaccine was proposed to be rolled out for inoculations and the priority order that would be used. The logistics of the actual delivery was examined and the sites that would be used as delivery centres.

Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 14th December 2020

The Committee continued its work programme of looking at the Council's response to the challenges of the Corona Virus and how service areas within its remit continued to deliver services to meet the needs of residents of the Borough.

Waste Collection, Disposal, Recycling and The Blue Bin Service.

The meeting looked at two key areas in particular this time. The first of these was the waste collection, disposal and recycling. The Committee had previously been informed that the contract for the collection of waste and recycling had been brought back in house and had looked at how this was to be achieved. The Committee were also aware that the blue bin service had commenced in the summer and was expected to increase recycling rates.

The Committee were informed that the transfer had taken place as proposed and the services had continued. The staff had been transferred and the new fleet of vehicles commenced service delivery on time with a seamless transfer. The Committee looked at-

- How the service transition had taken place
- How the household recycling centres had changed work practices and allotted times for use
- The ways that fly tipping was being tackled
- The introduction of the blue bins and how this had affected recycling of paper and card
- How operatives were kept safe and safer working practices were introduced
- The way that services were maintained throughout the period and continue to be delivered.

The Committee were informed that no collection times had been missed and that the service maintained throughout lockdown periods.

Public Protection service.

The Committee also looked at the Public Protection Service and how this had been meeting the challenges that were presented due to the pandemic. The Committee looked at how the role of the service had changed to include test and trace roles and ensuring that lockdown restrictions were being

maintained. The Committee were informed that the service had also given information and advice to businesses in the borough about safe practices and restrictions and had where necessary issued restriction notices where rules were being broken or safe practices not followed.

The Committee congratulated the department on the way they had responded to the multiple challenges that had been presented by the COVID19 pandemic and the positive way that they had done this whilst recognising the difficulties that had been faced by such an outreaching service.

Policy and Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee 21st December 2020.

The Committee looked at the key issues of resources and the effects meeting the challenges of the pandemic had had on the Councils finances. Members had previously been made aware of the concerns expressed regarding the significant increase in costs and losses of income that had been incurred in responding to the pandemic, through the first national lockdown, then coming out of the restrictions in June only to have further restrictions imposed in July.

The Committee were informed that given the lack of additional government funding at the time, it was apparent that unless further resources were forthcoming, the Council would not have been able to contain these costs and losses within the existing budget for 2020/21, also due to the low level of reserves held. In that situation it would have become more likely that the Director of Finance, as the Section 151 Officer, would have needed to consider issuing a Section 114 notice, this would effectively have meant declaring that the Council would not be able to balance its budget for the year.

The Committee noted that due to the continuous lobbying by the Leader, Members, Officers, both of our MPs, together with other local authorities and representative bodies across the country, further funding had been provided by the government to support local authorities and the risk of issuing a Section 114 notice had subsided.

The Committee received an outline of the funding received as at 11th December and were informed that:

- for some funding streams such as the Business Rate and Business Restrictions Grants schemes, the Council acts as a conduit, administering the payments on behalf of government,
- some that are listed are the maximum amount of funding earmarked for the Borough, which can only be accessed retrospectively on submission of a claim detailing the costs incurred
- some are paid in advance but are subject to a reconciliation and evidence of payments made with recovery by government for unspent funds
- some relate to general funding provided to address additional costs incurred and income lost as a result of the pandemic

The Committee looked at the total forecast additional expenditure the Council expected to incur and the income losses expected, excluding those on business rates and Council tax. The Council expects that the government funding at this point in time is sufficient to cover costs and income losses.

With regard to Business Rates and Council Tax, the government has given an undertaking to fund 75% of 'irrecoverable losses' incurred in 2020/21, with further information to be provided on the definition of irrecoverable loss, and for any resulting deficit on the Collection Fund in 2020/21, legislation has been amended to provide for recovery of this by the Council over a 3 year period rather than the normal 1 year process.

The Committee looked at the specific challenges that had to be faced by the Council and how the challenges had affected delivery of corporate priorities and also the wellbeing support that had been made available to staff.

The Committee will continue to monitor the Councils financial position and the resources being made available to meet the challenges of the pandemic.