

Report to the Council Forum, 25th March 2021

Progress of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees

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

People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The Committee met on 8th March and looked at the key issues of the distribution of the vaccine, how the borough was meeting the challenges of the pandemic and the review of safeguarding of children. The Committee also received an update from the Youth Forum on their work especially on young people and mental health.

Vaccinations and work of the Public Health Department.

The Committee received an update from Jane Scattergood, Covid-19 Vaccination Director on the progress of the vaccination in the borough and the uptake by cohort. The Committee looked at the locations of the vaccination centres and the community based venues being used. The Committee received information on the targeting of the vaccine by occupation and a timetable for the completion of the JCVI 1-9 cohorts by both first and second doses. The local ambition exceeded the national targets for all areas. The Committee also received information on the steps being taken to overcome issues of resistance in communities and the way that reassurances were being given to achieve the maximum take up of the vaccine. This was being achieved through simple key messages including:-

- Information on the safety of the vaccine and the vaccine approval process that has been used
- That getting vaccinated means protecting yourself, family and friends.
- That the vaccine can't give you the infection and will reduce your chance of becoming seriously ill.
- The vaccine will protect you so you can protect others.

The Committee welcomed the progress on the distribution of the vaccine and the steps being taken to maximise the take up and work to breakdown resistance.

The Committee were updated on the work that was ongoing to keep the community as safe as possible and the steps being taken to try and achieve the maximum levels of vaccines available that would match the infection rates in the borough and the region. Members expressed concern about the disproportionate impact on different groups in the various communities and, whilst 'health' was the highest priority there would inevitably be socio economic inequality in the Borough and throughout the North West.

The Committee supported the work of the Chief Executive, Directors of Public Health and others in making representations to seek to achieve this.

Review of Safeguarding

The Committee were informed of the key areas of the review of safeguarding and how the review was being conducted. Mr Steve Ashley, who was leading the review and how this was to be conducted. The Committee were informed that the review had children at the heart and

would seek to ensure that the voice of young people were heard. The Youth Forum Members would be involved in the review and the outcome reported back to the Committee.

Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Committee met on 15th March and looked at two key areas of the Council's service that had been affected by the pandemic.

Cemeteries and Burials.

The Committee looked at the way that the service had addressed the challenges that had been caused by the pandemic and in particular how the service had to prepare sufficient graves in preparation for increased burial numbers, by pre-digging graves and keeping on top of these, to accommodate potential rises in death rates across the borough. The service had to work within Government legislation that saw restrictions on access to cemeteries and crematoriums with areas being closed, such as the crematoria for all but cremation services, plus cemeteries initially also, aside from services. Signage and communications had to be provided. The Government legislation periodically changed during the pandemic and cemetery access was eventually provided for those wishing to pay their respect to loved ones, but crematoriums remain closed to all but cremation services. Further Government restrictions on numbers attending both burials and cremations had changed periodically over the last 12 months, with the current restrictions allowing 22 mourners in the crematorium and 30 mourners at burials, to enable social distancing to be maintained. Face coverings are also mandatory for those who do not have any underlying conditions in the crematorium, with the Council providing them free to those who do not bring them.

The Committee were updated on how the service had sought to keep staff safe and on the introduction of webcasting of cremation services early April 2020. This had been positively welcomed. This has also been supplemented by additional music and video memorials being made available for cremation services. This had necessitated the relaxation of restrictions on filming in cemeteries to enable burial services to be provided by family members as webcasting of burials was not possible due to the lack of Wi-Fi availability at gravesides.

Occasional breaches of numbers attending funerals had occurred, with these incidents reported directly to the Police, who were responsible for enforcing the legislation relating to gatherings. Where these incidents occur, the Council also writes to the funeral organisers, including funeral directors, requiring them to ensure the applicable number attending is maintained. Lighting had been provided for burials during the darker evenings in winter, to ensure numbers being buried each day are maximised. A temporary toilet facility has been hired, with regular cleaning taking place during the pandemic, given that during high numbers of funerals, there is limited access to toilet facilities.

The Committee looked at the current capacity of the boroughs cemeteries and work that was ongoing to identify suitable areas for development. The Committee will revisit this area in the near future when suitable sites were proposed. The Committee thanked the director for the presentation and asked that these thanks be forwarded to all members of staff who had worked so hard on the front line of service provision during the pandemic and continue to do so.

The Economic Recovery of the Borough.

The Committee looked at the work undertaken in the Borough to seek to minimise the negative effects of the pandemic on the economy and businesses. The Executive Member outlined the

successes that had been made in the economic development of the Borough prior to the pandemic including 5,000 new jobs created and 1,300 new homes delivered in the last 3-years with a strong enterprise culture, diverse economic base, cash-rich business community, growing international trade links & large health economy all being supported.

He outlined progress that had continued despite the pandemic including key developments progressing at Milking Lane, Wainwright Way, Carl Fogarty Way, with increasing enquiries for new business space. New housing developments were progressing at Griffin, Alaska St, Baileys Field, Fishmoor Drive, Holden Fold. The Mall / Markets re-opened with fewer occupiers. Footfall was rising (but 50% below pre-COVID levels) with major retailers withdrawing from all high streets.

There had been no major redundancies but severe difficulties elsewhere including Rolls-Royce at Barnoldswick & Safran in Burnley. At the peak of the pandemic 20,000 residents had been furloughed through COVID and 5,000 were still off work. Latest figures were expected to show a rise and delayed unemployment when national support ended was likely. The Portfolio would continue working with HIVE, BID, Chamber, Growth Lancashire to track business needs – Q&A sessions, surveys, surgeries, etc.

The Committee were informed that £55M in mandatory grant support had been provided to over 3,500 businesses, with £4M in discretionary grant support to 600 business. COVID business support grants on-going, though limited support for self-employed. Financial support was being provided for market traders in Blackburn and Darwen Market traders and to hospitality and retail sector to adapt to COVID restrictions. Support was also being given to major employers for smart testing of their workforces

The Committee were updated on the work on Reimagining Lancashire – An Economic Recovery Framework with LCC, Blackpool and LEP which had been submitted the Government and led to a “Lancashire” Ministerial Taskforce to review recovery/long-term plans. The Growth Programme for 2020/21 had been agreed by Executive Board and was on track and progress on initiatives including the Darwen Town Investment Plan and Blackburn Growth Axis was ongoing to maximise the potential of the Boroughs economy.

The Committee welcomed the work that was being undertaken to protect the Boroughs economy and the potential developments outlined in the growth strategy.

Policy and Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The Policy and Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee meets on 22nd March and will look at a number of issues including the Councils Digital Strategy, a review of the Call-in Process and sickness and absence. An update on the Committee will be made to the Council meeting.

Councillor Sylvia Liddle Chair of the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Councillor Suleman Khonat, Chair of the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Councillor Dave Harling, Chair of the Policy and Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee.