

COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RECOVERY SCRUTINY PANEL

Virtual Meeting held on Tuesday, 6th October, 2020 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor David Hennigan in the Chair;

Councillors Jim Blagden, Dale Grounds,
Kevin Rostance, John Smallridge and
Caroline Wilkinson.

Apology for Absence: Councillor Dave Shaw.

Officers Present: Lynn Cain, Ruth Dennis, Theresa Hodgkinson,
Mike Joy, Trevor Middleton, Christine Sarris,
Paul Stoppard and Shane Wright.

In Attendance: Martin Rigley (Chairman of Discover Ashfield
Board).
Councillor Jason Zadrozny.

CP.6 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary or Personal Interests and Non Disclosable Pecuniary/Other Interests

No declarations of interest were made.

CP.7 Minutes

RESOLVED

that the minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 3 September 2020, be received and approved as a correct record.

CP.8 Guidance Update and Small Business/High Street Recovery

The Chairman introduced the item and welcomed Martin Rigley, the Chairman of the Discover Ashfield Board, to the meeting who was kindly in attendance to offer a business perspective regarding small business and high street recovery following the recent Covid-19 lockdown.

Theresa Hodgkinson (Director of Place and Communities), Trevor Middleton (Town Centres and Markets Manager) and Paul Stoppard (Senior Economic Development Officer), were also in attendance at the meeting to offer their insight and expertise to various aspects of business sector recovery as required.

Councillor Jim Blagden, Vice Chairman of the Panel, updated Members as to progress with the potential development of the Key Workers' Memorial. Having spoken to officers, it had been agreed to place an article in the next 'Ashfield Matters' publication to encourage residents to offer their views

regarding the potential style and location for the memorial thus enabling the Council to gauge public opinion and progress the project accordingly.

Residents would be asked to respond via a dedicated email address and complete a short questionnaire and in addition, letters would also be sent out to local schools, voluntary groups and churches asking for their involvement in the process. The publication was due to be circulated (to around 120,000 residents) with the annual bin calendars week commencing 23 November 2020.

The wording for the Key Workers' Memorial article, to be placed in the 'Ashfield Matters' winter publication, was read out to the Panel for information.

The Service Manager, Scrutiny and Democratic Services outlined the current government guidelines for maintaining Covid secure environments within the business and retail sector including the 'Hands/Face/Space' slogan, the continued 'Working from Home' preference and enforcement rules for licenced premises.

It had been agreed at the previous meeting to focus the Panel's work on the local business sector and this has been agreed to be carried out over the following two meetings. Tonight's meeting would concentrate on small businesses and high street recovery with the second meeting offering an opportunity for Panel Members to speak to local businesses and gain insight into their personal experiences during the pandemic.

The Panel were also being asked to consider the Economic Recovery Plan, as outlined in the report and decide on any interim recommendations for submission to Cabinet on 13 October 2020.

Theresa Hodgkinson, Director of Place and Communities

To date, the Council's Environmental Health Team had worked with over 2,000 local businesses to offer support and guidance to keep them trading safely and efficiently during and after the recent lockdown. The advice and support given had been exemplary and the Council had recently seen over 60 new registrations for food outlets which had been surprising given the difficulties being faced by so many as a result of the pandemic.

The Planning Team had also continued to work at full strength considering over 90 planning applications during the lockdown period. Over £18.4 million in business grants had been administered which had assisted 1,614 local businesses. The Discretionary Business Grant which had now superseded the original funding grant from Government, had already been awarded to approximately 90 businesses to the tune of around £840,000.

The Council had recently recruited a new Economic Development Team who were now up and running and assisting local and potential new businesses across the District. The Town Centres and Market Manager was also continuing to work hard within the Council's towns and high streets to support local businesses and stimulate the economy following lockdown.

The Economic Recovery Plan, as outlined in the report, detailed the latest real time data to help the Council understand the significant impact that the Covid-19 pandemic and associated economic disruption has been having upon Ashfield's economy.

Over 30% (17,700) of Ashfield's working residents had been furloughed through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, and visits to retail, recreation and workplace venues was still significantly lower than 'normal', posing economic challenges for Kirkby, Sutton and Hucknall Town Centres.

The impact on individual sectors during the pandemic had varied significantly reflecting the extent to which lockdown measures had forced some industries to temporarily 'shut down'. Just over 20% of Ashfield's local employment, output and business bases fell within the highest risk sectors but manufacturing continued to remain strong including the substantial numbers of public sector workers which helped insulate Ashfield to an extent in the short-to-medium term.

The recent logistics development at Summit Park also demonstrated that if high quality development opportunities were provided, Ashfield's future remained bright.

It had been envisaged that it would take at least two to three years for local economies to recover to pre-Covid-19 levels of activity and the Council could only build on data as it emerged.

It had been agreed that to assist with any local economy recovery, the Council needed to adopt its Economic Recovery Plan and focus on the following:

- Town Centre Recovery
- Regeneration Capacity Building
- Skills and Training
- Industrial Sectoral Support
- Green Business Growth
- Development and Infrastructure Projects
- Supporting Ashfield's Residents.

Martin Rigley, Chairman of Discover Ashfield Board

The Discover Ashfield Board had been up and running for the last three years and had focussed on four main themes:

- Ensuring Ashfield Succeeds;
- Promoting the 'Love Where You Live' campaign;
- Health and Wellbeing for all in Ashfield;
- Visiting Ashfield and its attractions.

From a personal perspective as the owner of a local engineering company, the fact that the business was able to trade throughout the lockdown with only 3 employees needing to be furloughed for varying reasons, had been a relief. Since lockdown, new business was sporadic with work arriving in spurts rather than as a steady flow as in previous years.

Due to the fear of a second lockdown and further uncertainty, it was obvious that this has embedded a loss of confidence in customers who were unsure of their finances and longer term earning ability and financial stability. The tapering off of the current furlough scheme was also a worry for many local businesses and current discussions through the East Midlands Chamber of Commerce, had revealed that many businesses (not particularly in the Ashfield area) were on the verge of closing down and ceasing trading.

The pandemic had also seen many companies having to adapt the services or products they offered (including moving their operations online) or having to 'phoenix' into something else entirely to ensure that they remained afloat and viable as a business. It would be important going forward to ensure that local authorities assisted local businesses with these types of changes.

The harsh reality was that there was a long way to go towards recovery but Ashfield District Council had done a superb job of supporting its local businesses and the arrival of Amazon at Summit Park had been a wonderful addition during these difficult times.

With regard to the Discover Ashfield Board, they were currently in the process of recruiting a graduate officer to support the Board on a full time basis. The Council had done a sterling job of supporting the Board Members on a part time basis but it was felt that dedicated support was now required in the current climate. It was also imperative for the Board to continue to recruit key ambassadors to Discover Ashfield to promote the organisation and provide timely and efficient responses to local business opportunities, or crises, as they arose.

Questions to Martin Rigley from Panel Members:

Question/Comment:	Response:
What good advice can I offer local businesses if they ask what to do in the event of a further lockdown?	To be brave and do what is best for your particular business. Plans are changing constantly so keep abreast of new legislation and guidelines and make the best decisions for your business...
Congratulations for keeping all your staff employed in your engineering business during lockdown	Thank you and yes, we kept all staff employed and one member is 76 years old! Good communication is key
Do you think more apprenticeships are a good idea once the pandemic is over and can all local businesses play their part?	My company is looking to recruit two new apprentices utilising the Kickstart Scheme. The scheme is good and looks promising

<p>Do you know if there has been much interest in the Kickstart scheme from local businesses?</p>	<p>Yes I believe there has and from a wider perspective, over 500 businesses have recently enquired about the scheme through the East Midlands Chamber of Commerce so the interest is definitely there</p> <p>(The Director of Place and Communities added that the Council's Economic Development Team were busy promoting the Kickstart scheme and 20 placements had already been agreed for Ashfield District Council)</p>
<p>Have you received any feedback from Hucknall businesses?</p>	<p>Yes, the themes are the same across Ashfield, pubs and restaurants are having a tough time and the 'Eat Out to Help Out' scheme had a negative impact on food takeaway outlets</p>
<p>Should new businesses risk starting out at this point in time?</p>	<p>I think it would be a brave move but with lots of support it can be achieved</p>
<p>Are there Covid-19 Inspectors visiting business premises to carry out checks?</p>	<p>No this is not really happening at the moment, it is for the business itself to undertake risk assessments and ensure their premises meet Government guidelines. Other businesses can offer much needed support and guidance to each other, alongside the Council and online facilities, with this particular issue</p>
<p>Is there a silver lining in these difficult times with Brexit looming on the horizon for local manufacturing businesses?</p>	<p>Yes. Many overseas firms are now looking to the future after Brexit and may require manufacturing bases in the UK longer term.</p>

Trevor Middleton, Town Centres and Markets Manager

It was acknowledged that Ashfield District Council has a strong base of local businesses and supporting them continued to be extremely rewarding. Only essential businesses continued trading during lockdown but Council visits commenced again with businesses (and customers) in July 2020 as the lockdown restrictions eased.

With the focus shifting to recovery and restarting the local economy it was noticeable that businesses who had moved their trading online had fared considerably better than those reliant on customers visiting their premises. Support was now being offered to organisations to consider expanding their services and productivity online.

The Council's Covid-19 Information Officer has been busy visiting all local retail businesses distributing information leaflets and offering support and guidance to enable them to be Covid secure as required. The next stage of the support package has been facilitating the provision and display of the necessary QR codes to ensure customers can input information into the track and trace app as required.

670 retail premises have been visited to date and officers are currently building a central contact database of local businesses to ensure information can be disseminated to them in a timely manner as legislation and guidelines change over the coming months. The importance of building up strong working relationships with the local business and retail sector was acknowledged to try and enable them to work together and resolve difficulties as they arise.

Questions to Trevor Middleton and Theresa Hodgkinson from Panel Members:

Question/Comment:	Response:
Why is trade failing to increase at Hucknall Market?	Hucknall market is actually doing well against national ratings and moving the market temporarily onto the market place to help non-essential retailers kick start their trading has been a success. The layout of Sutton market has also been changed to a rectangle which has worked well and kept customers safe
How is the Council dealing with the public repeatedly touching the pay machines in car parks and potentially spreading the virus?	Although it remains the responsibility of individuals to maintain their personal hygiene standards, guidance is being sent out this week to offer advice on how to use the pay equipment as safely as possible. The pay by phone app is also now available to enable customers to pay for their parking places without using the pay machines
Suggestion that an award scheme could be established to recognise local businesses who have excelled (often at their own cost) at providing a safe and Covid secure environment for their customers;	Good idea that these committed businesses should be recognised for their high standards and promoted to customers accordingly. This award scheme could possibly be facilitated through the 2020 CHAD business recognition initiative

<p>How is the Council going to support local retailers through the imminent second wave of the pandemic?</p>	<p>The Economic Recovery Plan sets out how the Council intends to support local businesses through any further lockdowns and Government restrictions over both the short and medium term</p>
<p>Having recently witnessed an incidence of anti-social behaviour (ASB) in Sutton town centre, would the Council consider providing an increased Community Protection Officer (CPO) presence?</p>	<p>Most incidences are unfortunate but sporadic and cannot successfully be mitigated against by increasing CPO presence indefinitely but interestingly, shopkeepers in Sutton have commented that incidences of ASB have noticeably reduced since lockdown</p>
<p>How does the Council feel about the recent announcement to provide funding for Covid Marshall for town centres?</p>	<p>Town Centres in Ashfield are working well with the support and guidance from the Council's Environmental Health Team and this supportive approach is far more effective than any potential enforcement regimes</p>

Paul Stoppard, Senior Economic Development Officer

The new Business Support Hub that has been established by the Economic Development Team had been created to offer local and new businesses timely advice regarding the extensive and complex array of grants (134 in total) and support opportunities available to them. In the current climate, relationships with partners needed to be built quickly to ensure necessary support was readily available to offer a helping hand as required.

A new website page was currently being developed to outline the services on offer and these facilities would be fully promoted across all the Council's social media platforms.

On conclusion of the updates and ensuing discussions, the Chairman took the opportunity to extend his appreciation to Martin Rigley for taking time out of his busy schedule to attend the meeting and offer a valuable perspective to the Panel in relation to the local business sector and its experiences throughout the pandemic. Thanks were also extended to Theresa Hodgkinson, Trevor Middleton and Paul Stoppard for offering their time and expertise to the ongoing Covid-19 recovery process.

RESOLVED that

- a) the Council's ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its developing recovery programme, as outlined in the report, be received and noted;

- b) the Senior Economic Development Officer be requested to provide a briefing note to the next meeting of the Panel outlining the work of the new Business Support Hub and the signposting and support service being offered to local and enquiring businesses in relation to potential access to grant funding (including temporary Covid-19 funding);
- c) an invite be extended to Jonathan Gribbin, the County Council's Director of Public Health for Nottinghamshire, to attend the next meeting of the Panel to advise Members in relation to the development of the county-wide response to the pandemic and subsequent recovery plans;
- d) the Chairman of the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Panel be required to submit the following interim recommendations to the Cabinet on 13 October 2020:
 - 1. the draft Economic Recovery Plan be approved with the proviso that the Plan is updated accordingly as circumstances change;
 - 2. work be undertaken to consider establishing a scheme to recognise local businesses that have excelled at adapting to guidelines and providing a COVID-secure environment for customers, in conjunction with key partners such as Discover Ashfield;
 - 3. the Council continues working toward the establishment of a Key Workers Memorial, including consultation with Ashfield residents and key partners;
 - 4. the Council's established Business Support Hub offers support for those looking to set up new businesses or reinvent existing businesses as a result of the pandemic;
 - 5. Cabinet be commended for the decision to implement 2 hour free parking in all town centre car parks to aid the longer-term recovery of Ashfield's local economy;
 - 6. congratulations be extended to the Planning and Economic Development Team, the Environmental Health Team, and the Discover Ashfield Board for their continued efforts to ensure that local businesses sufficiently adapt to COVID-19 measures and survive the ongoing economic difficulties brought about by the pandemic;
 - 7. that the Council looks at all options to use all of the ring-fenced 'Reopening High Streets' Fund innovatively.

CP.9 Local Government Reorganisation - Verbal Update

The Director of Legal and Governance (and Monitoring Officer) gave a brief update to the Panel in relation to Local Government Reorganisation.

Members were advised that the white paper on local government devolution and reorganisation had now been delayed until early 2021 with no clear time frame set out for completion.

Nottinghamshire County Council had recently written to Robert Jenrick, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, asking him to invite the County Council to submit proposals for a unitary structure. To date, it was not clear as to whether a response had been received or not.

Alongside this correspondence, the Leaders of Nottinghamshire's District and Borough authorities has also written to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, stating their collective position of opposition to any unitary structure within Nottinghamshire.

The Leader of the Council, in attendance at the meeting, spoke about working with neighbouring Leaders to formulate a collective view of opposition towards the consideration of local government reorganisation at this present time. All authorities should be focussing squarely upon the current COVID-19 outbreak in the immediate future and endeavouring to find effective solutions to keeping services going during the outbreak and any further lockdowns.

No response to the letters sent to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (three were sent in total) have yet been received and an update would be given as to any replies in due course.

The meeting closed at 8.53 pm

Chairman.