

COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RECOVERY SCRUTINY PANEL

Virtual Meeting held on Thursday, 5th November, 2020 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor David Hennigan in the Chair;

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

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

In Attendance: Councillor David Walters, Councillor
John Wilmott and Councillor Jason Zadrozny.

CP.10 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary or Personal Interests and Non Disclosable Pecuniary/Other Interests

No declarations of interest were made.

CP.11 Minutes

RESOLVED

that the minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 6 October 2020, be received and approved as a correct record.

CP.12 Panel Update and Clarification

The Chairman introduced the item and asked Councillor Jim Blagden, as Vice Chairman of the Scrutiny Panel, to present his update regarding work activity and progress since the last meeting.

The seven Panel recommendations from the last meeting had been successfully submitted and approved at Cabinet on 13 October 2020.

In relation to the specific recommendation regarding options for utilising the ring-fenced 'Reopening High Streets' fund, exploratory work had been undertaken to consider the provision of hand sanitiser stations adjacent to the Council's car park ticketing machines. The station would be foot pedal controlled to enable customers to sanitise their hands both before and after obtaining a parking ticket. It had also been agreed to purchase a number of non-slip floor signs reminding residents to keep a safe distance.

To conclude, Panel Members were reminded that the consultation article for the Covid-19 Peoples' Memorial, as published in the latest 'Ashfield Matters' booklet, would start arriving on doorsteps from 3 December 2020 accompanied by letters to schools, community groups and other organisation across the District. It was hoped that the responses would be properly considered at the meeting of the Panel in January 2021.

(Following the update from the Vice Chairman and in accordance with Council Procedure Rule 4 (Order of Business), the Chairman advised the Panel that he was intending to move agenda item 5 (Guidance and Restrictions Update) to agenda item 4 and take it as the next item of business. Members concurred with this course of action.)

The Scrutiny Research Officer, to give some context to the ever-changing national picture, informed Members that the guidance update contained in the agenda that had been published the previous week, was now out of date and referred only to Tier 3 restriction requirements.

At the point of publication, the District was moving into Tier 3 restrictions but following the announcement on Saturday, 31 October, the country had now entered a further four week national lockdown. As a result of this an addendum to the agenda had been circulated which outlined the latest Government released guidelines regarding the new restrictions. Further guidance was also anticipated over the coming weeks.

In relation to the 'Business Recovery and Support' item on the agenda, Members were advised that following their request at the last meeting, the Senior Economic Development Officer had included a briefing note in relation to the work and support service being offered as part of the newly formed Business Support Unit.

As previously mentioned by the Vice Chairman, the seven recommendations submitted to Cabinet had been approved and the Panel would be updated regarding their implementation of the next few weeks.

To conclude, a warm welcome was extended to the business representatives in attendance at the meeting and an acknowledgement that engaging with local communities and businesses was an essential part of the Panel's role and all views expressed at the meeting would be valuable to the ongoing work of the Panel in achieving its longer term objectives.

CP.13 Guidance and Restrictions Update

The Council's Director of Legal and Governance (and Monitoring Officer) gave a brief synopsis of her role as Strategic Lead, in response to the Covid-19 outbreak, and advised that she attended many multi agency meetings with Nottinghamshire County Council, neighbouring authorities and key partners to ensure a coordinated approach to responding and recovering from the pandemic was achieved.

In relation to the latest national lockdown, some regulations were made available on Tuesday with their consideration through Parliament on Wednesday.

The latest guidance on restrictions included the following:

- staying at home and only leaving for specific purposes (i.e. work, essential shopping);
- only meeting one member of another household in open spaces for walk or conversation);
- designations for non-essential shops to either close or remain open for 'click & collect' only;
- rules for gatherings to take place in certain circumstances (i.e. Remembrance Sunday events).

The Police and local authorities were now equipped with enforcement powers to deal with any individual contravention of the rules by serving fixed penalty notices with a fine of £200 up to a £6,400 maximum. Fixed penalty notices could also be served upon businesses for any contraventions with fines ranging from £1,000 to £10,000.

Work was ongoing to consider and interpret the new guidelines and any updates would be circulated for clarity once finalised.

Business Grant Support

The Council's Corporate Finance Manager (and Section 151 Officer) had provided an update regarding the administration of the latest round of business support grant on offer which was read out to the Panel.

A meeting was held nationally the day before to consider the criteria for the latest business support grant funding and details of the finalised scheme would be cascaded to local authorities next week. A draft scheme for Nottinghamshire had already been drafted so once finalised, Council officers would be working hard to ensure the application process was as easy and as accessible as possible. Work was also underway to enable applicants to complete the process online and this would be appearing on the Council's website at the end of next week. Instructions for using the service would be advertised on all the Council's social media platforms imminently.

The funding scheme would again have a discretionary element although the criteria for eligibility still needed to be finalised. It was hoped that this discretionary element could be accessed by sole traders or businesses suffering excessive hardship. All payments to businesses would be made through the BACS system within three working days.

A brief Member question and answer session took place:

Question/Comment:	Response:
What support is being offered to shops outside of the town centres as many are feeling ignored?	Through the 'Reopening Town Centres Fund', 2 Environmental Health Officers, 1 Senior Covid Information Officer and 6 Covid Information Officers have been recruited. These new officers will be offering ongoing support to all shops and businesses across Ashfield (Theresa Hodgkinson)
The Labour and Conservative parties had just announced they would cease campaigning during the lockdown; would the Ashfield Independent Group be doing the same?	The Ashfield Independent Group would be continuing to assist residents through the latest lockdown (Leader)
Will the Council be refunded by Central Government for the Business Support Grant distributed and is the discretionary element of the scheme open to fraud?	Yes the Council was allocated a pot of funding by the Government to distribute and many checks and balances were already in place (including a watching brief from Internal Audit) to ensure the risks of fraud through the business support grant application process were minimal (Ruth Dennis)
Proposed layby closures in Kirkby and Sutton, as proposed by the County Council for social distancing purposes, was still going ahead despite fierce opposition from the Leader of the Council. This could be the death knell for local shops already struggling with the pandemic restrictions	Panel Members agreed
Were businesses covered for this type of pandemic emergency through their insurances?	Recent conversation with insurers had revealed this type of emergency was not covered although there were some pending court cases awaiting judgements (Richard Fuller – County Battery)

CP.14 Business Recovery and Support

The Chairman introduced the item and welcomed the local business representatives to the meeting. At the last Panel meeting, Members had

expressed their desire to hear from local businesses and understand how the pandemic has impacted upon them and how they had adapted their operations to continue to deliver services under tighter restrictions.

To enable any questions to be answered with due insight and to provide an overview of current service provision, the following officers were in attendance at the meeting to contribute to the discussion as required:

Theresa Hodgkinson – Director of Place and Communities
Christine Sarris – Assistant Director, Planning and Regulatory Services
Paul Stoppard – Senior Economic Development Officer

Director of Place and Communities

The last two weeks had proved challenging but the Economic Recovery Plan was being developed at pace and responding as circumstances were changing. The Council was fortunate to have an expert team of officers expediting the Business Support Grant scheme and the Business Support Unit was now up and running and assisting local and new businesses as required (business.support@ashfield.gov.uk).

The Council had implemented initiatives to endeavour to assist the economic recovery of its town centres and business communities with ongoing funding support, two hour free car parking, promotion of the Kickstart apprenticeship scheme and ongoing support and signposting through the Business Support Unit. With regard to the Kickstart opportunity, the Council has recently confirmed that it would be creating twenty work placement places for 16 to 24 year olds on Universal Credit, as part of the Government scheme.

Assistant Director, Planning and Regulatory Services

Officers were busy digesting and interpreting the many recent changes in legislation and were dealing with business support requests as quickly as they were able. The Business Support Unit were in the process of producing an information pack which would be finalised and available by the end of the following week.

The Environmental Health team were extremely busy offering support and guidance in relation the Covid-19 health and safety requirements and the priority was to provide educational support as a first approach, only utilising enforcement powers if absolutely necessary.

Senior Economic Development Officer

The Business Support Unit had been running since September 2020 and had assisted over 224 businesses and had made 41 client introductions. It had taken the form of a 'triage' business support service allowing the Council to help people to access the full range of available business support opportunities, including grant funding and facilitating business to business (B2B) introductions, breaking down barriers and securing the assistance they required.

The web pages to support the Unit were currently being developed but the demand for the Council's Web Team had been extraordinarily high since the outbreak and so a slight delay had inevitably occurred.

Officers were currently looking at a business support CRM system called Evolutive, which would increase the team’s capacity to support local businesses; reaching approximately 30% more clients and a decision would be made for purchasing the system within the next few weeks.

At this point in the proceedings, the Chairman asked each business representative to introduce the business they represented and to talk about the challenges they had faced as a result of the pandemic and latest restrictions:

Gary Jordan – Chair of Mansfield & Ashfield 2020

Mr. Jordan advised that he was currently the Chairman of Mansfield/Ashfield 2020, a business group that looked after mostly sole traders in the Mansfield area. He had been impressed with the information disseminated at the meeting and would be feeding it back to his members.

A recent survey had been undertaken by the Group to ascertain the challenges being faced by small businesses during lockdown including:

- Implementation of the furlough scheme;
- Cash flow issues;
- Faltering supply chain and customer confidence;
- Lack of ability to reinvent themselves as a business;
- Incorporating the digital arena.

In relation to Mr. Jordan’s own business, which involved business coaching in the workplace, the work had been very sporadic as many organisations had furloughed staff since the start of lockdown. To conclude it was reiterated that the Group would very much like to continue working with the Council and would support local businesses within Ashfield as much as possible.

Questions Raised:	
Question/Comment:	Response:
The Group offers free of charge help and support to small businesses via Q/A sessions, peer group sessions, signposting, webinar experts, networking with speakers and online training. Businesses needed to ascertain what skills and growth they need for the future and endeavour to build in some resilience. Businesses should be working together to help each other	This is very much welcomed and thank you (Theresa Hodgkinson)

Richard Fuller – County Battery

Mr. Fuller advised that his business had only closed for one day at the start of the March 2020 lockdown. Many of their products supplied hospitals and the NHS and were therefore required to remain open and operational. The garage side of the business had faltered as the requirement for MOT's had temporarily ceased but the digital side of the business had inevitably increased.

Getting stock at times had proved difficult and some orders had been cancelled which left stock shortages in some areas. The Business Grant scheme administered by the Council had been efficient and easy to access and some staff had been furloughed under the Government scheme. The health and safety of staff had been paramount but it had been a worry, as it was difficult for staff to work from home in this line of work.

Mr Fuller took the opportunity to comment that much of the continual news streams regarding the pandemic had seemed very negative and he felt it was important that people continued to see the positives in this very challenging situation.

Questions Responded To:	
Question/Comment:	Response:
Are you satisfied with the support being given to businesses by the Council? (Cllr. Caroline Wilkinson)	Most traders are adhering to the rules very well and do not need patrolling or any type of enforcement approach
When we are through this pandemic, what do you think the Council can do to regenerate our town centres? (Cllr. Dave Shaw)	I believe the free car parking initiative is excellent and should continue to encourage people into the town centres
The Panel is keen to revitalise its town centres. What type of events would traders like to see? (Cllr. Dale Grounds)	Opening Lowmoor Road back up to traffic would be a good idea and help connect the areas back together

Ewa Tinklin – Twisted Tinks Modern Barbers

Mrs. Tinklin informed that Council that her business as a barber involved close contact with customers and the first lockdown had therefore forced her to close. As a small business she had been greatly affected financially but had accessed the business grant swiftly from the Council with no difficulty. In addition, most of the businesses surrounding her premises had also received the grant without any undue delay.

Once the business reopened, Mrs. Tinklin had put in place many extra Covid safety measures to ensure her customers were as protected as possible, all at her own expense. However, since the announcement of a second national lockdown, the business was yet again closed for at least the next four weeks into early December.

Questions Raised:	
Question/Comment:	Response:
Why is track and trace difficult to obtain for small businesses and sole traders?	Not aware that this was a problem but the Council will try and ascertain why (Theresa Hodgkinson)
Small businesses are feeling a little let down and feel that no one is fighting for them to survive and stay open?	Sole traders and small businesses should be able to access the grant funding and assist in some way to keeping them viable and trading (Theresa Hodgkinson) The Mansfield and Ashfield 2020 Group is fighting for small businesses and is offering a wealth of online support and training if needed (Gary Jordan)
Questions Responded To:	
Question/Comment:	Response:
Your business was recognised in the Nottingham Post for your efforts to keep customers safe and secure. How did you achieve this? (Cllr. Dale Grounds)	We covered the chairs, workstations and door handles with a material impregnated with silver nitrate that is known for killing viruses within 10 minutes. We also provided facemasks and shields for staff and disposable gowns for customers
Are you satisfied with the support being given to businesses by the Council through both enforcement measures and educational guidance? (Cllr. Caroline Wilkinson)	Yes. The smaller shops seem to be providing effective safety measures; it is some of the larger shops that do not seem to be taking track and trace seriously and customers are nervous of products/surfaces that have been previously touched by many other customers
When we are through this pandemic, what do you think the Council can do to regenerate our town centres? (Cllr. Dave Shaw)	The Kirkby Plaza is currently underused and could be repurposed as a car parking area. Kirkby is really struggling at the moment and it was another blow when we lost the Post Office (The Interim Service Manager, Place and Wellbeing advised that the £750,000 received as part of the Accelerated Towns Funding' pot had enabled the Council to develop

	some initiatives for Kirkby which will include proposals for a small indoor market on Lowmoor Road, a new café offer with outside seating area adjacent the Plaza and redevelopment of the site opposite the Plaza with an active frontage)
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Nina Bianco – Kirkby Sales and Exchange

Mrs. Bianco advised that her business had closed in March 2020 and she had commenced making deliveries of items but this alternative service also ended in May 2020 as they had experienced difficulties getting hold of necessary stock. Business through the website had increased but administering an online business had taken up much more time and the payment of staff had been challenging notwithstanding funding acquired through the furlough scheme.

Mrs. Bianco was of the belief that she could remain open in some capacity for the second lockdown and requested some clarification on this. It was also commented upon that more regular updates from the Council would be beneficial even if the message was that Government clarification and guidelines were still awaited. This would then mitigate against local businesses speculating and worrying unnecessarily about their next move.

Questions Raised:	
Question/Comment:	Response:
Will business grants still be available to shops that open for click and collect?	This element has not been confirmed yet, it will be part of the discretionary element of the grant funding (Theresa Hodgkinson)
Questions Responded To:	
Question/Comment:	Response:
When we are through this pandemic, what do you think the Council can do to regenerate our town centres? (Cllr. Dave Shaw)	It might be a good idea for the Council to revisit its rental charging policies for shop premises as many traders have complained in the past that the rents are just too high to allow businesses to remain viable
The Panel is keen to revitalise its town centres. What type of events would traders like to see? (Cllr. Dale Grounds)	Car Boot Sales, Outdoor Markets, Pop Up Shops and Christmas Fairs always draw in the crowds but they would need to have a more modern format

Ray O'Connor – The Shop, Sutton

Mr. O'Connor informed the Panel that he had been a sole trader for nine years. He had reinvented his business three or four times over the years from food produce to electrical items to essential cleaning products and had continued to trade through lockdown as best he could.

Speaking for many traders on Outram Street in Sutton in Ashfield, he advised that many businesses were suffering as customers preferred to shop in the larger stores to save time and money. Mr. O'Connor candidly commented that he wasn't sure if his business would survive another lockdown although he did have an interest in Kickstart Gym that was fairing slightly better.

To conclude, a question was asked in relation to the availability of business support grants to traders who stayed open during lockdown as opposed to those businesses forced to close.

Questions Raised:	
Question/Comment:	Response:
Small businesses are really suffering especially those that cannot go online or offer takeaway etc.	The business grants on offer should be able to assist those businesses. The Council is desperately trying to source alternative funding pots to offer support to local businesses and is also providing advice and guidance to enable businesses to digitalise where possible (Paul Stoppard)
Questions Responded To:	
Question/Comment:	Response:
When we are through this pandemic, what do you think the Council can do to regenerate our town centres? (Cllr. Dave Shaw)	I believe it will be different approaches for each town centre. Good communication from the Town Centre Manger is key and the establishment of an effective 'Business Group Forum' would enable small and large businesses to work together to regenerate town centres as a whole

Sam Handley – Swiftool Precision Engineering Ltd

Mrs. Handley advised that she was part of a husband and wife team running a business with 134 employees. Their operations had been deemed critical at the start of lockdown as they currently provided essential infrastructure and defence components for the Ministry of Defence (MOD).

They adapted quickly to the new Covid-secure regulations and had been subsequently lauded by the Cabinet Office for their good practice. The business furloughed less than 5% of their staff for predominantly health reasons and secured independent financial support to assist the business through lockdown.

Notwithstanding that the Covid-safe working guidelines were not published until 11 May, employees had worn masks from the start and contractors were banned from the site. All staff had also undergone antibody testing to keep management informed as to the health of the workforce and it enable them to respond accordingly to any positive results. All staff had also been offered the flu vaccine as part of the ongoing efforts to keep them safe and well.

Mrs. Handley was also a board member for Make UK and this organisation had been invaluable in supporting the organisation. It was acknowledged that there were digitalisation challenges going forward and also the ongoing costs of providing PPE equipment for the workforce which currently stood at £85,000 for them personally.

The business was also committed to an apprenticeship scheme and had been recognised by Princess Anne for their efforts in relation to personalised learning for individuals within structure environments through to recognised qualification.

To conclude Mrs. Handley reiterated that key workers had given their all during lockdown and beyond and some form of acknowledgement of this commitment would be welcomed.

Questions Raised:	
Question/Comment:	Response:
Our business undertook a piece of work on homelessness and crime/poverty and sourced various foodbanks via social media outlets. All businesses can try and assist people in dire situations as a result of the pandemic and lockdowns	Agreed and thank you (Panel Members)
It would be encouraging to see some form of national tax relief or reimbursement scheme for the provision of PPE equipment by local businesses for its employees	Agreed (Panel Members)

Questions Responded To:	
Question/Comment:	Response:
Could you expand on the antibody testing that you carried out (Cllr. Dale Grounds)	78% of the workforce were keen for us to carry out the testing and when the results came back in September, 7% of the staff were showing Covid antibodies. The results had enabled management to undertake a piece of work to reinforce the effectiveness of the safety measures in place and to organise the workforce accordingly. Another round of testing was due to take place in January 2021.
The Panel is keen to revitalise its town centres. What type of events would traders like to see? (Cllr. Dale Grounds)	Looking ahead, crime is on the rise and really needs to be addressed. It would be good for businesses to have some support; as a company we are looking at employing security guards for the first time

(At this point in the proceedings and in accordance with Council Procedure Rule 23 (Conclusion of Proceedings), it was moved and seconded to extend conclusion of the meeting to 9.30pm. Having been put to the vote, Members concurred with this course of action.)

Following the Question and Answer session the Leader of the Council took the opportunity to address the Panel and extended a huge thank you to the businesses in attendance at the meeting. The Council was having to learn fast in the current climate and the contributions from local businesses were invaluable.

As the Leader, Councillor Zadrozny informed the Panel that he also sat on a Covid Recovery Panel at the County Council and as a contrast, the work undertaken by Ashfield District Council so far, via this Panel, had been exemplary and he was extremely proud of what had been achieved.

He reiterated the positive ongoing relationships the Council had with local foodbanks and also expressed his hope that the latest round of business grant funding would be able to assist as many local businesses in Ashfield as possible.

He ended with the fact that people in Ashfield care and keeping conversation alive in meetings such as these was definitely the way forward.

To conclude the discussion the Service Manager, Scrutiny and Democratic Services summed up the debate and suggested that it would be a good idea for the Panel to provide a briefing note to Cabinet to outline the issues raised at the meeting.

The Director of Place and Communities agreed that the briefing note would be extremely beneficial for Cabinet and expressed her desire to see it developed further into a working action plan

In relation to the ongoing commitment shown by Ashfield's local businesses to protect their employees and continue trading throughout the pandemic, it was suggested that this could be developed into a range of case studies that the Council could showcase via all its media platforms.

In relation to increases in crime and the difficulties being experienced by businesses and resident alike, this has been picked up via the Economic Recovery Plan and would be given due attention as work progressed.

The Interim Service Manager, Place and Wellbeing also welcomed the idea of a local business forum and opportunities for consultation through such a Group in relation to Towns Fund investment and opportunities.

RESOLVED that

- a) Cabinet be provided with a briefing note outlining the work of the Panel to date and the issues/suggestions raised at the meeting including:
 1. concerns for the ongoing viability and survival of sole traders and small businesses should lockdowns continue;
 2. to avoid undue worry and to allow local businesses to react proactively to the current climate, a request for additional communication regarding the latest Government guidelines to be sent out to business communities in a swift and timely manner;
 3. the benefits of establishing an Ashfield business forum to enable local businesses to network, interact and support each other as required;
 4. to continue work around the establishment of a shop recognition scheme for businesses that have provided exemplary Covid-secure environments for customers;
 5. options for how the Council and local businesses can continue to support local foodbanks and health and wellbeing organisations during the pandemic;
 6. appreciation to Cabinet for the imminent provision of hand sanitiser stations at car parking ticket machine location;
 7. concerns around the extensive, ongoing, cost of providing PPE to protect employees and a hope to see a tax relief of reimbursement scheme from Government in the near future.
- b) the Economic Regeneration Unit be requested to formulate some appropriate case studies, to reflect the experiences shared by the business owners in attendance at the meeting, to showcase via the Council's media platforms as appropriate;
- c) an invite be extended to Inspector Mark Dickson to attend the next meeting of the Panel to offer an insight into the perceived rise in incidences of crime as a result of the recent pandemic.

CP.15 Local Government Reorganisation

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

A response to the County Council's request to allow them to submit proposals for a unitary structure had been received from Robert Jenrick, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, declining to accede to the request.

Nottinghamshire Chief Executives, at a recent meeting, had decided to continue with dialogue around proposals for unitary status and over the coming months agreed to contact other authorities to undertake an information gathering exercise to gain an insight into their proposals and objectives for achieving unitary status. However, nothing would be moving forward in the foreseeable future without further discussions with local Leaders as appropriate.

The meeting closed at 9.10 pm

Chairman.