

COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RECOVERY SCRUTINY PANEL

Virtual Meeting held on Thursday, 10th December, 2020 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor David Hennigan in the Chair;

Councillors Jim Blagden, Dale Grounds, Kevin Rostance, Dave Shaw, John Smallridge and David Walters (as substitute for Caroline Wilkinson).

Apology for Absence: Councillor Caroline Wilkinson.

Officers Present: Lynn Cain, Carol Cooper-Smith, Ruth Dennis, Theresa Hodgkinson, Peter Hudson, Mike Joy, Trevor Middleton, Ian Rotherham and Shane Wright.

In Attendance: Inspector Mark Dickson (Nottinghamshire Police).

CP.16 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary or Personal Interests and Non Disclosable Pecuniary/Other Interests

No declaration of interests were made.

CP.17 Minutes

RESOLVED

that the minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 5 November 2020, be received and approved as a correct record.

CP.18 COVID-19 Response and Recovery

The Chairman introduced the item and welcomed everyone to the meeting. He spoke briefly about the Panel's work to date (specifically the 5 November meeting) and confirmed that Cabinet had acknowledged and supported all the ideas and suggestions presented to them at their 1 December meeting.

A warm welcome was extended to Inspector Mark Dickson from Nottinghamshire Police who was in attendance at the meeting to talk about the impact of coronavirus from an operational perspective and to address concerns regarding possible increases in crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB) since the start of the pandemic.

Inspector Mark Dickson – Nottinghamshire Police

Inspector Dickson advised that the pandemic had impacted the work of the Police from top to bottom and at the start of the initial lockdown in March 2020 all front line operations had been stripped back and Police officers went back out into the community to educate and enforce the new national lockdown rules.

During the first lockdown there had been increased levels of ASB and officers' time was also taken up dealing with and enforcing breaches in the Covid rules. However, once the first lockdown was over, the team reverted back to more standardised policing with the addition of ensuring the public were adhering to the new social distancing rules.

Legislation was currently changing on a weekly basis and time was being taken up learning and facilitating new enforcement rules, whilst staying on top of the ever changing position. The District of Ashfield, following the second lockdown, had now found itself in Tier 3 although, again, guidelines were forever changing as the pandemic shifted its direction.

Inspector Dickson had taken up the role of Ashfield's Neighbourhood Policing Inspector in May 2020 and had been impressed with the effectiveness of the joint working with the Council through the Integrated Hub at the Council offices. Ashfield staff had worked incredibly hard throughout the pandemic, going above and beyond their normal duties in many cases. This had resulted in areas of best practice that had been acknowledged and adopted by other local authorities.

At this point in the proceedings, a Member question and answer session took place:

Question/Comment:	Response from Inspector Dickson:
Concerns surrounding customers at the Idlewells Centre in Sutton not following the correct social distancing rules by wearing their masks either below the nose or on their chins. Would it be a good idea to increase signage in the Centre? (Cllr. Smallridge)	Police were also frustrated with masks not being worn correctly but officers only had authority to engage and explain, not enforce the rule. A conversation would be had with the Idlewells Manager to see if anything could be done to alleviate the problem
A heartfelt thank you to Police officers for the work and support given to the Carsic estate during the pandemic (Cllr, Smallridge)	The thanks and appreciation would be passed onto the team accordingly

<p>How has the pandemic and the changing roles of the Police affected their relationships with the Council's Community Protection Officers (CPOs)? (Cllr. Blagden)</p>	<p>Since arriving in May 2020, it had been witnessed that officers and CPOs worked incredibly well together and a recent training session had been facilitated to ensure there was equal understanding across both teams. It was also hoped that CPOs would soon be able to access the Police's IT systems to ensure enhanced data sharing at the point of need. A fortnightly risk management meeting was now being held with both the Police and CPOs to discuss ASB related issues as required</p> <p>Through October/ November 2020 both teams had worked jointly on Operation Safekeep to endeavour to reduce incidences of firework related ASB. This had been extremely effective with the lowest recorded firework related incidences to date</p>
<p>Has it been a problem to the Force if Police officers have been required to self-isolate? (Cllr. Blagden)</p>	<p>Yes it does affect work rotas as it would in any organisation but officers have still been working from home whilst isolating, undertaking a range of duties including talking to victims and taking phone statements etc. It didn't prove to be a particular problem</p>
<p>Are the Police prepared for the upcoming festive season which will be completely different this year? (Cllr. Rostance)</p>	<p>Yes we are always prepared and we have contingencies in place should anything change. We would like to see a reduction to Tier 2 for the Christmas holidays but it is not looking very likely at the moment. Since the start of the pandemic, Ashfield's Policing team have always endeavoured to take a pragmatic approach to enforcement of the rules and had not been over zealous at any point. It was hoped that residents would be sensible during the holidays but any big parties or gatherings would of course be broken up and enforced as required</p>

<p>Have you seen a rise in dealing with people struggling with mental health issues and do you think much of the ASB and neighbour disputes could be down to the restraints of the enforced lockdowns? (Cllr. Shaw)</p>	<p>The most recent data had not yet been viewed but from a personal perspective, I feel it is the same as before the pandemic. The Policing team were excellent at dealing with and supporting people with mental health issues and it was anticipated that the figures may rise over the Christmas period</p> <p>In relation to neighbour disputes and ASB, yes these have increased and we have recently received funding for four additional officers to cope with the rising demand for assistance. However, the rise in neighbour disputes does not seem to be escalating to direct conflict which is a relief and it should be noted that Council officers have been excellent at assisting the Police with these types of issues</p>
<p>Concerns regarding increases in ASB at Papplewick Green in Hucknall (Cllr. Shaw)</p>	<p>A conversation will be had with the Beat team to investigate the issues particularly regarding the incessant incidences of reckless off-road biking</p>
<p>Have you seen an increase in crime against homeless persons' since the start of the pandemic? (Cllr. Grounds)</p>	<p>No not really as there was a concerted effort to ensure all homeless persons were given access to accommodation (facilities predominantly in Nottingham) over this time period. Those who have returned to Ashfield since the lockdown have engaged well with the Police</p>
<p>Many residents experiencing ASB are still reluctant to contact the Police so we need to keep encouraging them to call 101 (Cllr. Hennigan)</p>	<p>Yes it is important that residents report any incidences of crime and if there is threat or risk, then 999 should be called. Other incidences of crime should be reported through 101 but many residents are frustrated as this route can often take more time. To endeavour to alleviate this, an online crime reporting facility has been introduced to offer another option to victims of crime when reporting an incident that doesn't require an urgent response</p>

<p>Concerns regarding increasing levels of ASB on Garden Lane, Sutton (Cllr. Hennigan)</p>	<p>Yes we are aware of this and a couple of online reports made by residents in this area resulted in 2 warrants being issued for arrests in relation to drug dealers</p>
<p>Can you expand on the work of Operation Reacher which seems to be achieving great things? (Cllr. Hennigan)</p>	<p>Yes it is an overarching, tactical response team covering the beat teams for Sutton, Kirkby and Hucknall. It was launched on 5 October 2020 and is performing excellently to date with 45 arrests made, enforcement of 24 traffic offences, 18 magistrate warrants issued, seizure of 15 illegal cars, 175 stop searches undertaken and 5 weapons removed from the streets. The team is here to stay to work alongside the beat teams already in place</p>
<p>Do you think there is an issue for youngsters at the moment? (Cllr. Grounds)</p>	<p>Yes, many are bored and the lockdowns have just exacerbated this situation. The Police are constantly looking at ways to engage them and are currently targeting under 18s who are vulnerable to exploitation by criminals to run drugs etc. There had already been 3 success stories of removing impressionable under 18s from moving into crime and many youngsters are already on the Police radar for engagement and support as required</p> <p>Youth projects are also being run to engage with younger members of the community including Kick It Football (which linked up with schools) and a Cadets launch which is due in early 2021. Longer term it was the aim of Nottinghamshire Police to engage with youngsters and introduce them to a career in the Force supporting their local communities</p>

On completion of the question and answer session, the Chief Executive thanked Inspector Dickson for his contribution and felt the Panel had been offered an informative insight into Police operations, particularly as a result of the pandemic. The co-location of the Council and the Police in the Integrated Hub worked exceedingly well and enabled swift and precise intelligence sharing to support and protect the residents of Ashfield.

The Director of Place and Communities also took the opportunity to echo the comments from Inspector Dickson regarding the effective working relationship between the Police and the Council. There had been a significant improvement over the last few months and thanks were extended to Inspector Dickson for driving this change and cementing the partnership for the future.

In respect of the Operation Reacher team and having recently spent an afternoon on operations with them, the Director confirmed that the team were impressive in their approach to tackling crime and the experience had been extremely enlightening. The Council were excited to see how their remit expanded over the coming months to incorporate more community work supporting Ashfield's youth and children.

In addition, the recent Community Protection review had resulted in a strengthened team with the new CPO recruits having received excellent preliminary training from the Police team at the Hub.

At this point the Chairman again thanked Inspector Dickson for his attendance at the meeting and introduced the Council's Town Centres and Markets Manager, Trevor Middleton and Senior Covid Business Support Officer, Ian Rotherham to the Panel. The officers were in attendance to advise Panel Members as to the support and assistance being offered to local businesses and retailers navigating through the latest lockdown and Tier 3 restrictions.

Senior Covid Business Support Officer

The Covid Information Support Team was established in early September 2020 and had been working tirelessly to support Ashfield's local businesses and retailers to ensure they remained viable for business and provided customers with Covid-secure environments as required. Businesses had already expressed their appreciation for the support being offered and welcomed the 'hand around the shoulder' approach to assist them through the ever changing regulations.

The three Covid Information Officers were enthusiastic about their roles and had found it rewarding contacting and conversing with local businesses to offer support and guidance as required.

Town Centres and Markets Manager

The Town Centres and Markets Manager reminded Members that the new Covid Information Team were an excellent addition to the Town Centres Team who had already established good working relationships with local businesses over previous years. This had always been important to the Council and the pandemic had just given officers the focus and opportunity to spend more time with local businesses to assist with the provision of Covid-secure environments and to continue building on relationships for the future.

The pandemic had brought about opportunities for all and many local businesses had stepped up to the plate and were not only protecting customers but were offering continuing support and assistance to fellow businesses if needed. All the Covid Information Officers were offering support and guidance for ensuring premises were Covid-secure but were additionally signposting to other officers/organisations if they wished to expand their

operations or move business online etc.

The Senior Covid Business Support Officer was also regularly capturing and compiling various data in relation to the local business economy and had circulated this to the Panel Members, via the Chairman, on a regular basis.

Question/Comment:	Response:
<p>The Council's response to Tier 3 is currently going well; are there any further plans to regenerate the economy in 2021? (Cllr. Blagden)</p>	<p>The Council's has many plans in the pipeline starting with the 'Shop Small' promotion up until Christmas. There are proposals to carry out some type of 'Thank you for shopping local' in early 2021 up until the Spring with the Communications Team supporting these initiatives with promotion across the Council's media outlets.</p> <p>Options are currently being considered to reinvigorate the Indoor Market at Sutton and the possibility of holding community markets around the District. There was also potential for a food festival in the summer to be hosted by Lincoln Green Brewery.</p> <p>Town maps are being printed and distributed to new housing estates to advise residents of what the town centres can offer and a study in relation to footfall will be undertaken to provide the Council with robust baseline data to work on targeted events and projects for the future (Trevor Middleton)</p>
<p>I have heard many great things about the Town Centres and Markets Manager and his team so keep up the good work! (Cllr. Rostance)</p>	<p>Thank you, I will pass this onto the team (Trevor Middleton)</p>
<p>Residents have complained that many of the chairs have been removed from around the main Idlewells Centre thoroughfare? (Cllr. Grounds)</p>	<p>I am of the belief this is to meet with social distancing guidelines but I will contact the Idlewells Manager to see if anything can be done (Trevor Middleton)</p>
<p>Now that the 'Pay by Phone' car parking app is up and running, is there any plans to remove the ticket machines? (Cllr. Shaw)</p>	<p>Not at all, the car parking app just offers customers more choice when visiting the centres and parking (Trevor Middleton)</p>

Have the team experienced any resistance from shop owners regarding the implementation of the new Covid-secure guidelines?	At first there were a couple of dissenting voices but that seems to be in the past and everyone seems to be engaging with the rules and have an ongoing desire to trade safely (Ian Rotherham)
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To conclude the Director of Place and Communities reiterated the Council's ongoing commitment to its local businesses and advised that work was underway to enhance the current 'Business Reward and Recognition Scheme' and to reinvigorate the local Town Centre Working Groups with a view to connecting them to the priorities contained within the Economic Recovery Plan.

Vice Chairman – Covid 19 Response and Recovery Scrutiny Panel

The Vice Chairman gave an update in relation to the latest Covid figures and advised that in Ashfield, the latest figures showed 145.5 new cases per 100,000 which was slightly better than the national average of 151 per 100,000 people. Ashfield saw its peak on 2 November with 358.8 per 100,000 so the figures were continuing to fall which was to be welcomed.

It was hoped that Nottinghamshire would come out of Tier 3 following the review next week but it seemed unlikely. At no point were Chief Executives or Leaders ever offered the opportunity to speak at the arranged Ministerial briefings and were just advised as to the latest position based on the statistics presented which were often a few days old.

Corporate Finance Manager (and Section 151 Officer)

The Corporate Finance Manager (and Section 151 Officer) presented the current position in relation to the facilitation of the Covid-19 business support grant through the Council. 975 applications has been received to date with 675 businesses receiving grants to the tune of 2.324 million. 50 applications had already been declined with 250 applications still waiting to be evaluated. Most were waiting on additional information and due diligence checks to be completed.

The Covid-19 Business Support Grant was available to businesses who pay business rates and/or have a separate rateable value on their business premises which have been forced to close for at least some time during the pandemic and lockdowns. There was also a discretionary element to the grant scheme that would hopefully assist additional businesses that are run from home, from rented premises or are for example, taxi drivers or hairdressers renting chairs.

A new element of Tier 3 business grant was to become available for the period 2-16 December 2020 and details for applying for the grant would be appearing on the Council's website from tomorrow. It was envisaged that the application process would be a lot less complex that the first round and confirmation as to the amount of grant to be distributed would be known to the Council early next week.

A question was raised regarding whether any fraudulent claims had been received through the Business Support scheme process over the preceding few months and the Panel was advised that the Council had stringent measures in place to mitigate against such events and no particular problems had been identified. However, the Director of Legal and Governance did advise that a report would be presented to the Audit Committee in early 2021 regarding the Covid-19 anti-fraud measures adopted by the Council during the pandemic.

Chief Executive

Having listened to the debate and discussion, the Chief Executive took the opportunity to sum up the Council's current position and reiterated the fact that the Town Centres Team had undertaken a vast quantity of work and had visited over 1,000 business premises. A positive approach had been key with mentoring and support guidance offered to all as needed.

Thanks were also extended to the Finance Team for their excellent work in facilitating the 975 business grants to local businesses struggling through the pandemic and it was hopeful that a further grant scheme, predominately for wet-led pubs, would soon become available.

Lastly, thanks were given to the Director of Legal and Governance for ensuring that the right messages were being delivered at the right time regarding the latest Covid-19 guidelines, Tier allocations and national position.

The Panel concurred with the sentiments of the Chief Executive and thanked all the staff involved for their continued commitment and hard work.

(During consideration of this item and in accordance with Council Procedure Rule 23 (Conclusion of Proceedings), a motion was moved and seconded to extend the conclusion of the meeting to 9.30 p.m. The motion was put to the vote and duly carried.)

To enable the Panel to begin to plan their work programme for early 2021, Members were asked to consider some potential meeting dates and discuss possible items for consideration. It was suggested that an update on the Key Workers Memorial could be an item for consideration at the February 2021 meeting.

RESOLVED that

- a) the Council's ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic, its developing recovery programme and the operational response from the Police, as outlined in the report and as considered at the meeting, be received and noted;
- b) the following meeting dates be agreed for the Scrutiny Panel in early 2021:
 - 2 February 2021
 - 23 March 2021
 - 15 April 2021.

CP.19 Local Government Reorganisation

The Director of Legal and Governance advised that there had been no progress since the last meeting and no additional information could be offered at this time.

The meeting closed at 9.02 pm

Chairman.