

Confirmed



Minutes of an Extraordinary Meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee** held remotely via Zoom on **Thursday 15 October 2020 at 6:30pm**

Members of the Committee present:

Other Members present:

Officers present:

Katherine Abbott (Democratic Services Officer), Stephen Baker (Chief Executive), Karen Cook (Democratic Services Manager), Cairistine Foster-Cannan (Head of Housing), Anita Humphrey (Communities Manager), Andrew Jarvis (Strategic Director), Fern Lincoln (Housing Needs Service Manager), Matt Makin (Democratic Services Officer), Sue Meeken (Political Group Support Officer (Labour)), Nicole Rickard (Head of Communities), Paul Wood (Head of Economic and Regeneration)

Others present:

Christine Abraham (CEO Community Action Suffolk)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Keith Robinson. Councillor Colin Hedgley acted as Substitute.

There were no Declarations of Interest.

The Committee received **ES/0531** by the Cabinet Members with responsibility for Community Health and Communities, Leisure and Tourism, respectively. Councillor Rudd advised that the report highlighted the work that the Council had undertaken with a wide range of partners, including health partners. This included the partnership with Norfolk and Waveney CCG where referrals from their Covid Protect programme for people with long term conditions who needed help with food, medication or isolation had been received by the Council. The Connect for Health social prescribing

providers in the Ipswich and East Suffolk CCG area took referrals from the Communities Team for more complex cases in need of additional support. In terms of tackling isolation and loneliness, which Councillor Rudd said was the number one priority for the East Suffolk Community Partnerships and a clear mental and physical health priority, the Council had initiated a befriending scheme in Lowestoft and piloted the innovative Grandpad programme to support those who were feeling isolated and were digitally disadvantaged. Councillor Smith advised that the first part of Appendix A of the report provided an overview of the Home But Not Alone community response in East Suffolk. Home But Not Alone (HBNA) was a Suffolk-wide initiative delivered in the District by the Council's Communities Team. The appendix outlined the level and location of demand for support during the eighteen and a half weeks that people were 'shielding' and the role that Home But Not Alone had played in supplementing the national support available to those who were 'shielding', including doorstep food deliveries. Councillor Smith added that HBNA had supported anyone in the District who was vulnerable, not just those who were 'shielding'. The appendix also considered the response by the eight Community Partnership areas, with a particular section on Lowestoft, which had 70% of the referrals. In conclusion, Councillor Smith said the report celebrated the work of community groups across East Suffolk and highlighted how this work had been enabled through the Council's Hardship Fund, which included contributions from all Councillors.

The Head of Communities advised that a request had been received from Councillor Gooch for information related to incidents and trends for domestic violence during the pandemic. In response, the Head of Communities said that although there had been an increase in reported Domestic Abuse Crimes of 24.9% on the three year average, there had not been the sustained spike that some had feared as lockdown measures were eased. She said that whilst the impact of Covid-19 could be a contributory factor in the escalation of abuse and risk, local specialist support had good capacity locally and was coping with demand. The Committee was advised that the Domestic Abuse Outreach Service delivered by Anglia Care Trust to medium risk victims had seen a 26% increase in referrals and the Independent Domestic Adviser Service for high risk victims had seen a 29% increase – demand for the services of both had peaked in July. A new 24/7 freephone Domestic Abuse Helpline had been launched in May and information about DA shared through pharmacies, HBNA call handlers, GP text messages, supermarkets, midwives and health visitors during the pandemic. There were 300 trained DA champions in Suffolk who had access to the most up to date information on services/trends and advice. The White Ribbon campaign in November would focus around libraries in Suffolk being safe spaces for victims to seek support.

The Housing Needs Manager added that a review of 2019 figures had shown that the Council's Housing Needs team 36 clients presenting as a result of Domestic Violence for the period from March 2019 – October 2019 compared to 48 cases for the same period in 2020. This was a slight increase in presentations of 13%. Currently, the Housing Needs Team had 20 active domestic violence related cases the team are working on and was actively engaged with support providers across the County to ensure the right support and safeguarding measures and interventions were put in place at the different stages.

Before inviting questions from members of the Committee, the Chairman reminded the Councillors of the topics to be reviewed at the meeting on 26 November 2020 within part two of the report - these being winter preparedness, emergency planning, track and trace and communications. The Chairman asked that when posing their questions, members of the Committee try to avoid straying into those areas of discussion.

Councillor Topping referred to the £60 million to be made available across the police and local authorities for compliance and enforcement activities and that East Suffolk Council had been allocated £121,000 from that fund. Councillor Topping noted that the funding was ringfenced for compliance and enforcement activity but that there was flexibility on how it was used so long as it was for the purpose of controlling the spread of Covid-19. The Government had encouraged local authorities to consider using the funding to deploy marshals to support compliance and Councillor Topping asked what the Council intended to spend the funding on. The Chief Executive said the £121,000 was yet to be received and that early discussions suggested the use of marshals in an extensive, largely rural district would not be the most effective use of the money. Instead, the enhancement of current services through environmental health and the overall support to effect positive behavioural change were more likely. He added that the money had not yet been fully allocated but would be used creatively and to best effect to maximise its benefits including the reinforcement of safety and containment messages.

Councillor Back advised the Committee that he had previously volunteered to be a befriender of those who were 'shielding' and, unfortunately, had not been called upon to assist; he asked if this might have happened to other volunteers. Councillor Rudd replied that the Council had been contacted by a large number of volunteers but, if a community response group was already active and fully manned in an area, there had been a wish not to duplicate efforts but rather to fill gaps. Councillor Rudd said the previous scheme was being reviewed in order to improve it in case it were necessary to implement it again. Councillor Rudd apologised for Councillor Back not having been contacted.

Councillor Coulam referred to the table within the report which indicated the groups which had been received funding from the East Suffolk Hardship Fund and highlighted the £975 allocated to the Afghanistan and Central Asian Association. The Head of Communities advised that the Association had received funding to provide advice and support in particular languages to a specific group of people. The Association had since returned unspent funds.

Councillor Beavan said his experience of the Tribe Volunteer app was that it had not worked. He stated that the Council needed to ensure such apps do work and he asked for an update on how this was being approached and also if there was the potential to have an ESC app. The Head of Communities replied at the start of the pandemic in the UK a lot of elements had been required quickly and the Tribe app had appeared to provide the solution the Collaborative Communities Board had sought in terms of volunteers. The Head of Communities agreed that in the analysis of how the app had performed it had been identified that it had had limited success and that work was in hand to see how it might be adapted and improved. The Chief Executive Officer of Community Action Suffolk added that the extent of the positive response to the call for

volunteers had been overwhelming; she said that had that not been the case the app would have been helpful. There were, she said, teething issues with its use. The Council's Chief Executive Officer said that national apps were not always under the control of local authorities or local bodies. He added that an ESC app had been considered but, currently, the work required to ensure it was finessed and sufficiently focussed to do the job meant it was not feasible.

Councillor Deacon said the early intervention of many community groups had been amazing and welcome. He said many of these groups were treated as charities and asked what arrangements were for independent groups to receive donations. The Cabinet Member for Communities, Leisure and Tourism said the communities team had encouraged such groups (who might wish to do so) constitute their membership and so formalise their status through the inclusion of DBS checks, safeguarding training, increased governance etc. The Chief Executive of Community Action Suffolk said the diversity of the community response had been immense and her organisation was aiding the informal groups to set up a more formal infrastructure, if they so wished.

Councillor Green referred to the trial of Grandpads; she asked if there were plans to roll out the pilot more widely in the district under the digital inclusion scheme. Councillor Green also asked if there was evidence the devices were being actively used. The Head of Communities said the Council had funded 25 Grandpads, the Ipswich and East Suffolk CCG in the south of the district had undertaken to fund a further 50 and a further 25 for the north of the district would be funded by the Community Partnership Board's funding. The use of the Grandpads was monitored through reports to show how much they were used and the categories accesses; a follow-up telephone survey of users was also planned. The users of the Grandpads were encouraged to use them to access GP appointments, online shopping, prescription ordering etc. Councillor Green asked if the two CCGs within the district worked together in sharing information with the Council and if they fed back to their equivalent of a scrutiny committee. The Head of Communities said that, clearly, the CCGs would work in different ways and with differing priorities, however they did work closely. Councillor Green, with reference to the information about domestic abuse provided earlier in the meeting, asked if it would be Council staff or library staff who would provide this help. The Head of Communities clarified that the library would be signposted as a safe space from within which victims could report issues or call for specialist services.

Councillor Topping stated that the Council's communities team had done brilliant work during the pandemic; she asked if there were sufficient staff and if the Council would be able to respond as well to a spike in infection rates. Councillor Topping also asked for more details on the Volunteer Passport Scheme and if the demise of Age UK Suffolk had resulted in an increase in enquiries to the Council. The Head of Communities advised that some Officers from other teams within the Council had helped the Communities Team and provided additional resource through temporary redeployment. The Committee was informed that the corporate management team had looked at resources which would be required in the event of another lockdown, particularly because of the additional responsibility for local authorities to distribute food; these discussions continued but the redeployment of some Council officers would be used again. The Head of Communities said that the demise of Age UK Suffolk had had an impact on the Council; it was working with and seeking funding for 'chin

wag' groups to support elderly residents. In addition, a bounce-back fund had been established to help other such voluntary and community organisations which were also struggling. The Chief Executive of Community Action Suffolk said that the volunteer passport scheme had been in use for several years; it enabled volunteers to be 'passed' between organisations as seamlessly as possible and to minimise duplication of effort. A pilot was being undertaken in east Suffolk to provide training in basic volunteering; this was fully accredited and included first aid, safeguarding, diversity etc. The volunteer passport also provided a pathway to employment for some people. (*Clerk's note: Information on the volunteer passport scheme was circulated to the Committee after the meeting*).

Councillor Gooch referred to Dame Louise Casey's statement, that day, on child poverty and hunger; she asked if the Council had sufficient resources in place to take responsibility for the distribution of food as this was additionally important as this was sometimes one of the contributing factors in incidences of domestic abuse. Councillor Gooch suggested that if the causes of domestic abuse were identified as food related, for example, would the Council be able to respond quickly with support. The Head of Communities said that, with Community Action Suffolk, a study of how well-equipped the Collaborative Communities Board was in terms of food provision and capacity to support people had been undertaken. Hunger was a huge issue and the Council, with partners, worked hard to try and identify those most vulnerable in order to try and support them. She added that there was a joined-up support service in place but the need that would be encountered in the coming months was not underestimated. The Head of Housing added that the Low Income Family Tracker (LIFT) software was being used to provide predictive analytics that proactively identified households likely to experience economic hardship and rent arrears in order that they could be assisted to apply for discretionary housing payments. The software did provide an opportunity to look at other indicators of deprivation and disadvantage within a corporate project to best support vulnerable residents.

The Chairman asked if the recent cessation of the eviction moratorium had resulted in an increase in clients asking the housing team for assistance, if there were indicative figures of the likely demand and if there were sufficient staff to manage the response. The Head of Housing said that a gradual rise over a longer period of time was anticipated because of the long process to be followed before eviction took place. Only certain cases were being prioritised to court and the first hearings were not scheduled until mid-November. The Housing Needs Manager said that approximately 70 clients had presented to the housing team having received a six-month notice of eviction; 17 of these had presented since the lifting of the moratorium. She added that there was sufficient resource to deal with the cases and that officers worked with people to resolve issues, where possible, and to support.

Councillor Gooch asked if there was an intention to provide school children with food parcels to take home, as had been done in Birmingham. The Head of Communities said that several alternative sources of healthy food were being explored such as community fridges, community pantries, community supermarkets etc. The Chief Executive of Community Action Suffolk said several organisations were looking at food waste generally, a good example of this in East Suffolk was the 'teapot project'. Work was in hand to engage with food banks, some of which were schools, but not all had registered with the Trussle Trust yet. In addition, in partnership with churches, food

parcels that provided ingredients rather than prepared food were being explored to help people to have healthier food and learn basic cooking and nutrition skills.

Councillor Hedgley asked if, during lockdown, accommodation had been found for all the district's rough sleepers. The Head of Housing advised that the number of rough sleepers had peaked at 38 during the lockdown; all had been housed in self-contained accommodation. Each person had been assessed by a housing needs officer and a personal housing plan devised to meet their needs, including any health matters, and solutions put in place. At the present time, 5 people remained in the accommodation provided; the remainder had moved on to more suitable accommodation as a permanent solution, including supported housing, education or training needs. In response to a question, the Head of Housing said that some of the rough sleepers had claimed benefits to sustain their permanent accommodation. There were some newly identified rough sleepers in the district and the housing needs team was working intensively to engage with them; some clients required intensive support and assistance. Councillor Hedgley asked if there were sufficient resources. The Head of Housing said that grant funding was available until the end of the financial year; it was anticipated that a new bid for further funding for one year would be possible. The team's core staff were funded until the end of the financial year.

Councillor Gee asked about the support available for arts and culture during the pandemic. The Head of Economic Development said the Council was working closely with the Marina Theatre to support them in developing ideas to generate revenue; the theatre had also applied for a £300,000 grant from the Art Council's Cultural Recovery Fund. More widely, East Suffolk Council had established an arts and culture forum which was examining the scale of the issues and how best to help venues through shared learning and, possibly, the lobbying of central government. Councillor Deacon asked about the Spa Pavilion in Felixstowe. The Head of Economic Development said that this theatre had a different governance structure which made applying for government funding more difficult. The theatre had approached East Suffolk Council around supporting different business models which would help it to remain viable and these discussions were ongoing. The Council was unable to provide direct funding support but had offered support and assistance where it could. Councillor Deacon asked about the Two Sisters Arts Centre in Trimley. The Head of Economic Development said he did not believe they had approached the Council for assistance but undertook to check and advise Councillor Deacon outside the meeting.

Councillor Gooch asked if the geography of the community volunteer groups had meant that "social engineering" had been necessary to ensure hamlets were included and any gaps in provision addressed. The Chief Executive of Community Action Suffolk said her organisation had worked closely with local authorities to map community groups and identify any gaps. She had been astounded that only 40 very tiny parishes had not been "covered" by an emergency response; these parishes had on the whole already aligned themselves with a neighbouring parish for mutual aid and so there had not been a need to socially engineer. The Committee was also advised that a survey had been undertaken to identify how community groups were managing and, more recently, if they remained in existence and able to step up again if the need arose. The initial responses had been very positive. The Head of Communities said the Council would be contacting any groups which had not yet replied.

Councillor Bird said that the report indicated a deficiency of volunteers in Lowestoft and asked what actions were being taken or were proposed to try and address. The Head of Communities said that Lowestoft did not have as many community response groups; the Council had met with Lowestoft Town Council and representatives of Lowestoft Rising and was planning to work, with Community Action Suffolk, on a volunteering campaign focussed on Lowestoft in an effort to build some volunteer resilience.

Councillor Back referred to national media reports of bogus companies claiming grant funds; he asked if there had been incidences of this in east Suffolk. The Head of Economic Development said the Council's fraud team reviewed any applications that raised concerns and payment withheld.

Councillor Gooch asked if the Council had been asked to formally respond or provide feedback to Ministers or the Secretary of State on local experiences. The Chief Executive said he was not aware of such a request, however, collectively Leaders of Councils had written to express concerns and views.

Councillor Topping urged the Chief Executive to ensure there was sufficient staff resource to deal with any local surges in infection rates and that the well-being and safety of staff was fully considered. The Chief Executive said the second report to the Committee, in November, would include emergency planning and one of the Council's core duties was to respond to any emergency when it happened; he wished to reassure the Committee that it was within the ethos of all the Council's staff that they would get involved in emergency situations in order to allow a flexible approach. He also emphasised that the well-being of his staff was foremost at all times.

There being no matters raised for debate, the Chairman suggested that the provisional recommendations from the meeting be carried over to the second meeting in the review to be held on 26 November. This was agreed. It was also agreed that the Scrutiny Committee would meet, informally, to draft these recommendations

RESOLVED

1. That, having considered the contents of the first report, the Scrutiny Committee would, at its meeting on 26 November 2020, formulate appropriate recommendations to Cabinet from the two Extraordinary meetings in order that these be considered as part of the continuing response to the Covid 19 pandemic.

8.33pm There was a short adjournment for five minutes. The Meeting reconvened at 8.38pm.

The Scrutiny Committee received and considered a draft scoping form submitted by Councillor Cloke on car parking enforcement. The scoping form was approved and an extraordinary meeting of the Scrutiny Committee would be held on 26 November 2020 to undertake the review.

The Chairman advised that the various strategic financial reports scheduled to be received in December and January would not be available to the Committee in advance. This was because of the additional complexities due to the on-going pandemic.

The Chairman reminded the Committee of the topics for review currently scheduled on its work programme.

The meeting concluded at 8:50pm

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Chairman