

Confirmed



Minutes of a Meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee** held remotely via Zoom on **Thursday 26 November 2020 at 6:30pm**

**Members of the Committee present:**

**Other Members present:**

**Officers present:** Katherine Abbott (Democratic Services Officer), Stephen Baker (Chief Executive), Sarah Davis (Democratic Services Officer), Phil Harris (Communications Manager), Nick Khan (Strategic Director), Mark Sims (Food and Safety Manager)

**Others present:** Peter Langford, Joint Emergency Planning Unit (JEPU)

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Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Gee. Councillor Cooper acted as Substitute.

There were no Declarations of Interest.

The Scrutiny Committee received report **ES/0570** by the Leader of the Council and the Cabinet Member for Community Health, respectively. The report was the second of two reports requested by the Committee - the first having been received at the meeting on 15 October 2020 - provided information of communications, winter preparedness, emergency planning and Test and Trace. The report and its appendices summarised activity undertaken by the Council in response to the pandemic and noted that in many areas this had been a joint response with partners, volunteers and other agencies. The report was introduced by the Leader of the Council and the Cabinet Member for Community Health made some opening remarks in praise of the hard work of the teams within her portfolio.

Before inviting questions, the Chairman referred to paragraph 6.1 of the report which stated that the scoping report for this review had not included the financial impact of the pandemic and so those issues have not been included within the report. He explained the original and continued intention of the Scrutiny Committee had been to undertake a full review of the financial impact of the pandemic once it had subsided

and that the two reports received to date were part of an interim review of the response to date.

Councillor Beavan, with reference to communications, expressed concern that perhaps people in areas where there were a number of infections were not being made aware of this and offered advice. He also referred to the local dashboard which indicated the number of tests undertaken within the district, by location, which, he said, differed from the figures on the Government website and queried the effectiveness of the technology. The Leader of the Council agreed that communication was important but of equal importance, he said, was the delivery of consistent messages, linked to those of other involved agencies, in order to minimise confusion. He added that these messages were delivered as part of an organised local system, or cell, which echoed messages. In addition, he said, statistics and numbers were quickly out of date. He suggested that a reasoned approach was needed and that the announcement of outbreaks, as defined by Public Health England and the Outbreak Board, was not the role of the Council or its communications team. The Communications Manager said that the communications cell was an effective means of two-way communication of local intelligence on issues related to the pandemic; it enabled communications to be targeted appropriately and to keep local communities up to date with local public health advice. In response to a request by Councillor Beavan that his points be referred on to Public Health, the Leader of the Council suggested that Councillor Beavan was best placed to raise these issues directly.

Councillor Beavan asked if it was possible to have an update on the vaccination programme. In summary, the Chief Executive said that a vaccination programme was being compiled and the logistics of its delivery fully explored. This was being led by the NHS, supported by Public Health England and local Councils; he added that the dates and specific requirements of the vaccination programme were awaited but he was confident that full and sufficient preparations had been made.

Councillor Gooch referred to the announcement of the local restriction tier system earlier that day and asked about the arrangements for neighbouring counties allocated to differing tiers. The Leader of the Council said the Government's advice was not to travel to a location with a different tier, but, if this was necessary it was required to abide by the requirements of the tier where you permanently resided. The Communications Manager added that, at the heart of the communications cell messaging approach, was consideration of each potential individual occurrence based on local intelligence and evidence. It was, he said, crucial to achieve the right balance that meant messages were sensible and moderate.

Councillor Gooch referred to the management of pools, gyms, health centres during the pandemic and suggested that, in the first lockdown this had perhaps been erratic and confused and asked if detail on how the operators' requirements for the use of showers and the application of regulations was being applied. It was agreed that this would be provided outside of the meeting. The Leader of the Council said that he was confident that the district's leisure providers were fully compliant.

Councillor Coulam asked if mass testing was proposed for any area in the district. The Leader of the Council said this was proposed in those areas which had been put in tier three of the local restrictions system where, it was hoped, the greater benefit would be

achieved.

Councillor Deacon asked which bodies were responsible for the policing of those who did not comply with the regulations and who would prosecute in such instances. The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Community Health said that the Council's Food & Safety team worked in conjunction with the police; she referred to an establishment in Pakefield. The Chief Executive added that the Council's Environmental Health officers worked with Trading Standards, as did the Food & Safety team, but stressed that the Council was not responsible for checking every property.

The Food and Safety Manager referred to information within the report that explained the Council's work with the Health & Safety Executive (HSE); he continued to refer to how details of premises considered to be of higher risk of non-compliance were provided to the HSE which contacted the premises and undertook checks to assess compliance through various means including the use of open questions to test awareness of the regulations etc. If a premises was considered to be non-compliant, the Food and Safety Team would undertake further visits to give advice, undertake further assessment and, in certain circumstances, take enforcement action.

Councillor Topping asked if the Council was confident in its preparedness for the requirements of testing. The Leader of the Council said that the Council would maintain its positive messages - i.e. face, hands, distance - and hope that local residents would continue to act responsibly to keep the R rate down. He added that, beyond that and until the Government issued further guidance, the Council was as prepared as it could be and prepared to undertake any further requirements. Councillor Topping was concerned that the R rate could spike and the impact this would have on the Council's staff who might be asked to respond. The Chief Executive said some of the Council's staff would be on standby, as usual over any holiday period, as part of the Council's normal emergency preparedness response.

Councillor Lynch praised the Council's communications to date and asked if these were shared with partner organisations. The Leader of the Council said he was confident ward members would cascade messages to their town and parish councils and would encourage that to continue. He was, he said, also confident that communications within the network of partner organisations was working well. The Communications Manager added that regular communications were sent direct to town and parish councils; he referred to two-way engagement led by specific requirements that ensured consistent messaging but, equally, allowed targeted messages to certain audiences too. It was noted that social media was a valuable tool in countering inaccurate messages.

The Chairman asked if the Council was confident its messages were also reaching the districts black, Asian, and minority ethnic residents. The Communications Manager referred to continuous liaison with the Council's communities team to facilitate links with a variety of different groups and to ensure that, where appropriate, the right message for the audience was created.

Councillor Beavan referred to the written response to his written question on the Bernard Matthews factory and was pleased that testing of workers who were not symptomatic had now commenced. Councillor Beavan referred to a number of

infections within his ward and raised a question about the efficacy of the test and trace local arrangements. The Food and Safety Manager stated that, in the scenario referred to by Councillor Beavan, there had been no failure in the system. It was agreed that a comprehensive response to the specifics of this be provided outside the meeting. The Chief Executive added that test and trace had been evolving throughout the pandemic and that local public health staff were achieving a success rate in excess of the national scheme. He emphasised that there was no one definitive approach. The Leader of the Council urged caution in referring to a small number of cases as an "outbreak".

Councillor Green wished to record her praise for the Council's communications throughout the pandemic which she considered to have been exemplary. Councillor Green asked about the variety of communications channels, including traditional news sources which were being used, for example for those without social media, and asked if these could be improved. The Leader of the Council endorsed the compliments of the communications team and agreed that Council needed to continue to consider access to positive messages by those who did not use social media. He referred to broadcasts on Radio Suffolk, links to national campaigns in local newspapers and to suggested all ward members might encourage town and parish councils to utilise their noticeboards and parish publications for disseminating Covid-related messages. The Communications Manager said he was very happy to provide ward members with advice on the best means of delivering communications, including bespoke messages if needed, and advised that he and the communications team was there to support ward members in that endeavour. The Strategic Director added that the Council's communities team was proactively contacting the clinically extremely vulnerable individually by telephone and had done so repeatedly.

Councillor Wiles asked what sort of reach the communications of the Council had and if lessons learnt from the first lockdown had been applied to the second lockdown. The Communications Manager said the key lessons were ensuring that information was disseminated swiftly whilst also being mindful of the need to have effective internal communications. In terms of the reach of the communications outside the Council, the Communications Manager said that analytics did not always make this easy to measure, but there was reliance on feedback, the number of followers on social media and this increasing etc. The most important aim, he said, was to ensure that information was heard by the right people first and that this was followed swiftly on social media; the aim was to add value and not noise. The Leader of the Council added that communications needed to be both reactive and proactive. The impact of Covid-fatigue and the reaction of people to messages was a real issue but the echoing of important "stick at it" messages was intended to be reassuring and supportive.

The Chairman asked for an approximate figure for the number of residents who had been identified as clinically extremely vulnerable in the district. The Strategic Director said there were approximately 13,000. Councillor Byatt asked if there were specific issues with communicating the Council's messages to those who were blind and/or deaf. The Strategic Director said the communities team would be working hard to contact these residents and to provide them with additional information. The Leader of the Council said the various disability for a across the district were also providing assistance in this regard.

The Chairman referred to the multi-agency coordination arrangements for response

and recovery provided as an appendix to the report and suggested this was very complicated for a fast-moving situation. The Chief Executive agreed that the arrangements in a complex environment with numerous stakeholders necessitated intricate coordination which helped to ensure coherent working. He added that it was important for each part of the team to understand its role; the Suffolk system had proved to be successful and was looked to by other counties as an example of good practice.

There being no further questions the Chairman moved to debate.

The Leader of the Council thanked the Scrutiny Committee for its work and the useful and interesting discussion of aspects of the pandemic and the impact. He welcomed Scrutiny's review of what had been done and its suggestions for what could be improved upon going forward, if within the powers of the Council to influence. The Leader of the Council said the communications team could look at appropriate media to cover the return of university students.

Councillor Beavan wished to remind all present that under the Council's Constitution the Committee could consider any matter affecting the district. The Chairman agreed but did stress that matters discussed needed to be within the Committee's jurisdiction.

There being no further matters raised for debate, the Chairman thanked the Cabinet Members and Officers for attending the meeting.

It was agreed that the Scrutiny Committee would meet informally to formulate its recommendations and that these be submitted to Cabinet for consideration.

The Scrutiny Committee received and reviewed its current forward work programme.

In addition, the Scrutiny Committee drafted and agreed its final recommendations following the review of Civil Parking Enforcement and Parking Management at the meeting held on 16 November 2020. These would be incorporated into a formal report to Cabinet in due course.

The Meeting concluded at 9:18pm

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Chairman