

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Tuesday 19 May 2020 at 7.00 pm

MINUTES

PRESENT: Councillor Tim Briggs, Councillor Liz Atkins (Chair), Councillor Mary Atkins (Vice-Chair), Councillor Jonathan Bartley, Councillor Stephen Donnelly, Councillor Joshua Lindsey, Councillor Marianna Masters (Vice-Chair), Councillor Lucy Caldicott and Councillor Joanna Reynolds

APOLOGIES:

ALSO PRESENT: Lynette Murphy-O'Dwyer, Frank Roberts, Baboucarr Jallow, Councillor Jennifer Brathwaite, Councillor Edward Davie, Councillor Jack Hopkins, Councillor Malcolm Clark, Councillor Nicole Griffiths, Councillor Mohamed Jaser, Councillor Nanda Manley-Browne and Councillor Jane Pickard

Action
required by

1. DECLARATION OF PECUNIARY INTERESTS

Cllr Liz Atkins, Chair, opened the meeting and welcomed all attendees.

There were no declarations of pecuniary interest.

2. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting of 30 January 2020 be approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

3. COUNCIL RESPONSE TO COVID-19

The Chair explained that the main item on the agenda was a question and answer session with the organisational leadership on the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. While this was formally an Overview & Scrutiny Committee (OSC) meeting, members of the Children's Services Scrutiny Sub-Committee (CSSC) had also been invited to attend and contribute in order that issues pertaining to Children's Services could be considered at the same meeting.

In order to make the meeting as productive as possible, committee members had been invited to submit questions in advance which were then circulated to the leadership representatives a week before the meeting. The questions had been split into themed sections and each theme would have its own dedicated portion of the meeting consisting of an introduction by the relevant Cabinet Member(s)/officer(s), followed by supplementary or additional questions on that theme from committee members.

The deadline for public representations was 12pm on Friday 15th May. The Chair noted that the committee had received one such request by the deadline, from Nicola Kingston, Co-Chair, Lambeth Patient Participation Group (PPG) Network. This representation was made via pre-recorded audio message, while supporting documents submitted by Ms Kingston had also been circulated to members earlier in the day.

The representation made the following key points:

- She wished to thank the NHS, social care, council and community in Lambeth for their incredible work since the pandemic hit
- Further information was requested regarding the statistics on Covid-19 in Lambeth, especially with regards to deaths, and any explanation and lessons learned regarding the differences between the local hospital trusts
- Public Health staff should be central to the response in Lambeth, particularly with regards to personal protective equipment (PPE) and the test, track and trace strategy
- Further detail was requested regarding the differential outcomes particularly for BAME citizens
- The PPG Network believed the only way forward was to work with local communities

Due to time constraints and the number and nature of the questions already submitted to the leadership by members, the Chair explained that there would unfortunately not be time in the meeting for a detailed exploration of these issues, though members agreed that they be followed up by the relevant officers and responses reported back to the committee and Ms Kingston in due course.

The Chair then moved on to Children's Services issues. Councillor Ed Davie, Cabinet Member for Children & Young People, and Merlin Joseph, Strategic Director, Children's Services, provided an introduction during which the following points were made:

- They were impressed by how Children's Services staff had adapted to the changing circumstances, with most meetings now happening digitally but physical meetings taking place where necessary
- Social workers had maintained contact with their clients according to need and risk assessments, and they were confident that appropriate support was being provided
- A new critical safeguarding team had been established to make sure face to face support needs were met
- Most schools in Lambeth had remained open for children of key workers and vulnerable pupils, with around 900 children attending daily. Levels of attendance from vulnerable children were at around 10%; though this appeared low it was in fact around double the national average. Work was being done to understand the reasons

behind the figures and to encourage attendance. The Council was working with trade unions, head teachers, the Lambeth Schools Partnership and families to ensure schools could welcome more children back to school as soon as it was safe

- Fostering capacity had been an issue early on but this was now being addressed by working with existing foster carers to expand provision and reassessing financial support in light of children having to stay at home. Five in-house foster carers had been added and more beds and lodgings had been block purchased via an independent agency
- Additional data was being sought over and above government requirements and Office for National Statistics figures to understand and assess the risks to BAME parents, staff and children
- Looked After Children were supported by Lambeth's Virtual School as many were educated out of borough. They were also offered therapeutic support, mostly by virtual means
- Around 10,000 children were eligible for £15 per week in free school meal vouchers though the scheme run by Edenred had experienced problems. The Council was working to supplement provision of the vouchers and two Children's Centres had remained open to provide support
- A grant had been received from the GLA for a joint summer holiday food project involving Lambeth and Southwark
- As of 1 April, only 11 applications for settled status were outstanding and the deadline was not until June 2021
- Adventure playgrounds remained closed and there was currently no timetable for their reopening
- Most youth services were operating electronically
- 1200 laptops had been ordered from a national government scheme to support digitally excluded children; however these were not expected for a number of weeks and so the Council was attempting to source additional laptops locally. This remained a major challenge for many councils

The Chair opened up the meeting to CSSC and OSC members for follow-up questions, in response to which Cllr Davie and Merlin stated that:

- The government guidance was that schools could allow more pupils to return from 1 June, not necessarily on 1 June. This was also contingent on the government announcing on 28 May whether its five tests had been met. Where the council had agency locally it was working with stakeholders to support schools to be ready to increase numbers as quickly as possible and ensure a safe environment. It was noted that it was practically impossible for schoolchildren to strictly observe social distancing but that an arrangement was being considered whereby social 'bubbles' of approximately six children and one adult would be established to help limit physical contacts. There would also be more emphasis on outside learning and options were being explored for schools to use local green spaces where they lacked such facilities. Children's Services were working with schools to ensure they had PPE where advised by Public Health
- All cases in Children's Social Care were RAG rated to determine the level of risk. This information was used to decide which cases would be prioritised for face to face visits from the critical care team. This team worked on a duty basis and was staffed via a voluntary system. Staff were able to access PPE if needed. At present, 224 children were subject to a child protection plan with 123 of those visits being

face to face. Looked After Children tended to receive more virtual visits as they were typically in a more settled situation. The department was constantly reviewing working practices to ensure children were safeguarded

- All care leavers and looked after children already had laptops but a workstream had been established to ensure other vulnerable children who needed IT equipment for virtual learning were supplied with it
- Further advice regarding playgrounds was anticipated in June and this may provide a timeline for reopening of facilities
- Regarding a potential loss of learning, the Raising the Game initiative had yielded success in terms of reducing exclusions of Portuguese and Black Caribbean boys and further work was being done to re-engage those pupils as lockdown was lifted
- The current medical view suggested that young children may be less likely to pass on the virus
- A written response would be provided with regards to whether exercise books would be marked
- The GLA grant referred to totalled £300k and this would be distributed mainly to voluntary and community organisations to support food distribution and other initiatives over the summer holidays

The Chair thanked Cllr Davie and Merlin, as well as CSSC members, for their contributions, before moving on to more general questions on the Covid-19 response, to which Cllr Jack Hopkins, Leader of the Council; Andrew Travers, Chief Executive; and Paul Bates, Director of Strategy and Communications, responded as follows:

- They considered that the Council was quick and decisive in its response to the pandemic. Good data and partnership working – with businesses, community groups, faith communities, mutual aid groups and others – were key to this. This demonstrated the resilience and responsiveness of local government
- In terms of the future, the same risks would be present as previously, such as low wages, overcrowded living conditions and food bank usage. Coming out of Covid-19, the priority remained supporting those who were experiencing such hardships
- Shielded residents were supported by the hub service. This included vulnerable people already known to the Council via health and social care as well as self-identified newly vulnerable residents. Around 1000 visits had taken place and approximately 10,000 food parcels distributed. It was necessary to continue the wider effort with the voluntary sector as well as considering how the hub service may evolve
- Support to care homes, including PPE, was being provided by Integrated Health and Care
- A pandemic was included on the Council's risk register as one of a number of emergency planning scenarios. While the response was considered good, there would always be lessons that could be learned. These would be identified via a review in due course
- Covid-19 constituted an unprecedented scenario in terms of communications. A focus had been placed on the use of posters and street furniture to communicate widely with residents. While stickers on bins had been considered, it was decided that removal of these when the messaging changed would be problematic. An edition of Lambeth Talk had been issued very early on which was followed up by two more in an attempt to reach digitally excluded citizens. It was

vital that online messaging was supported by printed communications and the Communications Team was always open to suggestions

- Staff had demonstrated they were open to change and had embraced new ways of working. Front line staff had also been key to capturing residents' needs, such as social workers identifying where people did not have broadband. Many changes in working practices would be likely to be retained
- The financial viability of voluntary sector organisations was a risk and a variety of challenges existed. It was vital that the civic infrastructure that brought the people of the borough together be supported. Cllr Mahamed Hashi, Deputy Cabinet Member for Youth, was working to enhance training for youth workers, while Cllr Donatus Anyanwu, Cabinet Member for the Voluntary Sector and Leisure, was reaching out to many different communities
- While there were certain crime and antisocial behaviour (ASB) hot spots in the borough, it was not accurate to say there had been an explosion of such incidents
- There would be very serious issues with the Council's finances if the commitment of the Secretary of State to meet additional costs incurred as a result of Covid-19 was not kept. Lambeth's latest return to central government outlined a loss of income of £59m excluding business rates, yet so far only £20m had been received. It was clear that local authorities would require additional support

The next section of the meeting was dedicated to questions around staffing. Andrew Travers, Chief Executive, introducing the section, stated that:

- Staff had responded magnificently to the crisis with their flexibility, will and drive, working across teams and with partners. This was key to the quality of the emergency response
- The organisational leadership were very mindful of the welfare of staff, who were dealing with a variety of difficult circumstances including trauma. This particularly applied to BAME staff given the disproportionate effects of the virus on this group, who made up 60% of the Lambeth workforce; this additional risk had to be borne in mind when planning the response
- For those who were required to have some level of contact with residents, risk assessments were carried out and PPE was provided where it was judged necessary by the Director of Public Health
- It was clear that the nation would have to live with the pandemic for some time to come, though it was hoped the next 12-18 months would constitute a period of recovery
- The leadership would be looking at how office accommodation was used in future. It was expected that capacity would reduce to 30-40% following adjustments for health and safety. Managers would talk to staff on an individual basis regarding their wishes and needs when it came to returning to the office
- Large elements of the test, track and trace strategy would fall to be managed by the Director of Public Health and the wider team. Planning for this was at an advanced stage

In response to questions on staffing the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council stated that:

- It was reiterated that staff welfare and wellbeing were paramount and understanding each staff member's individual circumstances was key

to this. Managers were therefore expected to check in with their staff on a one to one basis. A comprehensive programme of support was available, particularly this week with Mental Health Awareness Week events taking place. Appropriate support would continue and staff would not be expected to travel or come in to work if they were shielding

- The leadership was stable and the organisation fully staffed following the restructure which took place in 2019. Staff had been moved around according to need as part of the emergency response and this had had an impact on service levels but it was still expected that the Council would service residents appropriately. Members were encouraged to feed back any examples of service levels dropping below acceptable standards
- Space requirements had been turned on their heads for almost every organisation and it was necessary to consider how best to use the space available

The Chair then moved the meeting on to consider communications around Covid-19. Paul Bates, Director of Strategy and Communications, introduced this section, making the following key points:

- The Council had tried to mobilise across various different channels in order to reach as many people as possible with vital advice
- The original “Stay at Home” advice was clear and well understood. However, the government’s shift to a “Stay Alert” message had presented difficulties in terms of being able to convey the nuances of this in a simple communication
- It was acknowledged there had been challenges surrounding the distribution of Lambeth Talk and it was estimated that around 2.5% of residents had not received it, though he was confident this would improve
- Engagement had taken place with faith groups to offer advice in different languages and offer translations
- The Council had used social media extensively, including in relation to the temporary closure of Brockwell Park
- It was impossible to get everything right and dialogue was important

In response to comments and questions from members, the Director of Strategy and Communications stated that:

- He was grateful for the positive feedback from the committee regarding Covid-19 communications and would pass this on to the team
- He was unaware of a discrepancy in the information being provided to residents with regards to the savings threshold for receiving help from the council and would look to rectify this urgently
- As the situation with the pandemic developed, the advice and guidance from central government in relation to businesses, residents and others was changing
- Communications were working closely with the housing department and registered social landlords regarding the delivery of Lambeth Talk on housing estates. Previous problems were believed to relate to concierges in new builds or issues with doors to blocks. It was noted that the next edition would be distributed via Royal Mail; though this was more expensive, it was deemed worth the cost to ensure full coverage

- Evaluating the impact of communications was a notoriously difficult activity but a demographically-balanced pulse survey was being carried out of 2000 residents which should provide some feedback

The Chair thanked the Director of Strategy and Communications and moved on to housing issues.

Councillor Jennifer Brathwaite, Deputy Leader of the Council (Housing and Homelessness), and Neil Euesden, Director of Housing, introduced this section of the meeting by making the following points:

- The housing department had worked valiantly in dealing with rough sleepers and essential repairs
- The pandemic had left many renters in trying and challenging circumstances
- The ban on eviction proceedings would be lifted on 29 June and this was considered far too soon
- Out of a total housing stock of 33,000 properties, around 444 were empty, for a variety of reasons. The council was working to turn these around extremely quickly so that they could be rented to those in need
- A multi-faceted approach was being taken to protect residents, including moving some from shared facilities to self-contained units
- Void properties on estates earmarked for regeneration were being let to those needing temporary accommodation. The council was providing beds and white goods in order that people could be self-contained
- A spike in demand for homelessness services was anticipated and there would be extra pressure on the team
- It was necessary to review whether all rough sleepers placed in hostels – a number of whom were from other boroughs – had a right to be housed in the longer term. A block booking of 88 beds on top of the usual provision had been made and this had resulted in a significant spend
- There were already 20 households in unsuitable conditions but there were no resources to help them at present

Guillotine

At this point in the meeting the guillotine fell at 9.00pm.

MOVED by the Chair and

RESOLVED: That the meeting continue for a further period of up to 30 minutes.

In response to further questions, the Deputy Leader (Housing and Homelessness) and the Director of Housing stated that:

- Figures were not available regarding how many frontline workers lived on estates earmarked for regeneration, partly due to the fact that key workers were only defined in March of this year; however, a great deal of support was being offered to those on such estates including on health and wellbeing and English
- The housing allocations process had not stopped entirely. The bidding process ceased due to social distancing but the Council was continuing to let properties, focusing on emergency accommodation

for the homeless and vulnerable

- The Secretary of State had written to social tenants regarding restrictions being eased on repairs, bidding and allocations
- It was hoped that the ban on evictions would continue to September and beyond but processes would be reviewed accordingly
- The Council did not wish to stymie those who wanted to move to find suitable accommodation but had to comply with government restrictions
- Enforcement with regards to ASB was still in operation. Visits to properties were being carried out subject to risk assessments, observation of social distancing guidelines and protection as necessary

The Chair thanked the Deputy Leader (Housing and Homelessness) and the Director of Housing for their responses and moved to the final section of the meeting, on decision making.

The Chief Executive stated that:

- The Council had implemented emergency decision making arrangement in the early stages of the Covid-19 crisis whereby urgent decisions related to the pandemic could be taken by himself as Head of Paid Service. These emergency procedures still applied
- There was a procedural flaw in two of the decisions taken in the early stages of these arrangements relating to approval from the Chair of Overview & Scrutiny. These flaws had subsequently been rectified, meaning they were lawful and still stood
- The decision was taken to temporarily close Brockwell Park as it had become impossible to maintain social distancing
- Regarding the Transport Strategy, measures had been put in place quickly to bring forward projects in the existing strategy, which had already been extensively consulted on. Processes were in place which enabled residents to flag to the Council where they thought social distancing was difficult and the widening of walkways might be considered

A comment was made regarding the Council's wider decision making processes and it was suggested training be provided to provide clarity regarding urgency, key decisions and mechanisms available for members to challenge a decision.

The Chair thanked the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive for their contributions and summarised the discussions which had taken place throughout the meeting, resulting in the following recommendations:

RESOLVED:

1. That the committee seeks reassurance regarding safety in schools when they reopen more widely to pupils and that communications to residents on this seek to address parental anxiety
2. That good practice guidance be developed with schools to help to assess and rectify issues with children lacking appropriate internet access for effective remote learning
3. That schools gather data on pupils' loss of learning over the period of school closures and that catch up packages be developed to address this

4. That the experiences of the borough's most vulnerable children, including children looked after, be captured, reported back to the committee, and used to inform planning for potential further peaks in virus transmission
5. That a lessons learned report on the Council's response to the Covid-19 emergency, addressing areas of strength and weakness, be compiled and shared with the committee
6. That the Council seeks to ensure that everything possible is done to maintain a strong community support infrastructure, including promoting joint working between residents' associations, mutual aid groups and voluntary sector organisations
7. That a focus be placed on mechanisms to support residents experiencing food poverty in the borough
8. That support be maintained to residents who are required to shield as the initial crisis period eases
9. That communications regarding Covid-19 and how residents can access help continue to be reiterated, especially for older and digitally excluded residents
10. That pastoral support be maintained for staff, including signposting to mental health services
11. That flexibility with regards to home working be continued as restrictions begin to lift, and that members of staff whose circumstances make them particularly vulnerable to the pandemic be given an offer to work from home permanently
12. That further work be done to establish how vacant space and additional space requirements be identified and connected to support changes in working practices in Lambeth
13. That Trade Unions be formally involved in any suggested changes to working practices
14. That the committee expresses its gratitude to the Communications Team for their excellent work during the Covid-19 emergency, particularly in relation to keeping councillors informed
15. That work be done with residents' associations to ensure printed communications reach all residents, particularly in properties with communal door fob access
16. That the importance of consistent messaging across all media be highlighted and that an evaluation of the effectiveness of Covid-19 communications be conducted and reported back to the committee
17. That further clarification and training be provided to members of the committee regarding decision making processes and responsibilities in Lambeth, including emergency arrangements
18. That tackling anti-social behaviour, particularly on housing estates, be prioritised, and that liaison be strengthened between the police and enforcement officers
19. That a review of the policy on evictions be conducted and reported back to the committee, including a summary of the views of key housing association partners and clarity on the commitment that no evictions would take place "during the pandemic"

4. 2020-21 OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair introduced the report and stated that preliminary discussions had already taken place between the Chair, Vice Chairs and relevant officers with regards to the agenda for the July meeting, which it was proposed would focus on the council's finances (by way of the July Finance Review report expected at Cabinet later that month) and the current state of play with regards to the council's climate change work, in light of Covid-19. This was

unanimously agreed.

A brief discussion then took place regarding possible topics for future scrutiny to be considered when planning the committee's work programme for the 2020-21 municipal year.

RESOLVED:

1. That the work programme as drafted and the status of actions be noted (Appendix 1).
2. That the following agenda be agreed for the OSC meeting scheduled for 9 July 2020:
 - July Financial Planning Report
 - Update on the Council's response to the climate emergency in light of Covid-19
3. That the following topics be considered by the committee when planning its future work programme:
 - The impact of the emergency transport programme and how this would be taken forward
 - Poverty in the borough
 - Changing work patterns in town centres and commercial spaces and the potential impact with regards to housing
4. That the Senior Democratic Services Officer contact committee members by email outside the meeting to invite further suggestions

The meeting ended at 9.30 pm

CHAIR
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Thursday 16 July 2020

Date of Despatch: Tuesday 2 June 2020

Contact for Enquiries: Gary O'Key

Tel: 020 7926 2183

Fax: (020) 7926 2361

E-mail: gokey@lambeth.gov.uk

Web: www.lambeth.gov.uk

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