

MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BUSINESS PANEL

Tuesday, 23 June 2020 at 7.05 pm

PRESENT: Councillors Bill Brown, Sakina Sheikh, Peter Bernards, Juliet Campbell, Patrick Codd, Liam Curran, Jim Mallory, Joan Millbank, John Muldoon and Luke Sorba

ALSO PRESENT:

Under Standing Order

Councillor Amanda De Ryk – Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources

Presenting Officers:

Chief Executive, Executive Director of Community Services, Director of Public Health, Director of Public Services, Interim Director of Corporate Services, and Head of Business and Committees.

No apologies for absence were received.

1. Minutes

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the last meeting held on 26 May 2020 be confirmed and agreed as an accurate record.

2. Declarations of Interests

The meeting noted personal interests in relation to Item 3 “Scrutiny of the Council’s Covid-19 Response – Update Report” as follows:

- Cllr Joan Millbank – declared that she is a member of the Lewisham Local Collaborative;
- Councillor Sakina Sheikh – declared that she is a trustee on the board of the British Sign Language Voluntary Services in Lewisham.

3. Scrutiny of the Council's Covid-19 Response - Update Report

The Chief Executive gave an overview of the report. She recommended to the Panel to note efforts by the Council in response to the Covid-19 crisis, and consider and comment on the anchoring principles of recovery outlined in paragraph 5.6.

Members noted the report, commended officers for their hard work, and expressed an appreciation that efforts made by the Council’s Shielding Outreach Team had been effective.

Commenting on the details in the report, Members stated that the internal processes were useful but insufficient because there was not much evidence to suggest that local people who should benefit from them were aware of the available support. Thus, collaboration with partners should underline the

anchoring principles as an assurance to residents that were receiving the best possible services that the Council was able to deliver during the crisis. Members also expressed a concern about health inequalities revealed by Covid-19 reports across the country, and suggested that officers should perhaps consider implementing some national recommendations into the work of the local recovering group, such as those from the Marmot Review on health.

Action:

- Officers to publicise services that the Council was delivering with its partners to respond to the crisis, including information about continuity of provision to vulnerable people, so that local people are aware of them.

In response to questions raised, the Chief Executive advised the Panel that the co-ordination of efforts with the voluntary sector and local community groups was vital in enabling the Council to invent and reinvent its approaches to deliver and sustain critical services into the transition phase. However, to maintain up-to-date data on activities about shielding and the distribution of food was a challenge because residents' demands were constantly changing. Furthermore, most foods distributed by national government to residents were inappropriate. Notwithstanding that, staff in the Shielding Telephone Support Team were contacting residents on the shielding list within 24 hour of registration to check that their needs were being met. Members also received confirmation that employees would continue to be deployed in accordance to demand.

In light of a concern about aspects of the local place-shaping programme, the Chief Executive advised Members that the Council had implemented an online package support for its staff. It was stated that the Black and Minority Ethnic Group (BAME) network of staff had sent a survey to their members. Members were further advised that regular staff surveys would shortly be implemented across the board, with a view to collate responses for an assessment of support that might be required by individuals. On aspect about roads, the Chief Executive stated that a safe and sustainable transport system would in no doubt benefit users, but that she would consult with engineers to investigate whether a re-design of current highways plans were necessary in light of the Government's recent revised announcement relating to social distancing rules.

Action:

- Officers to share the Council's approaches of possible review to Lewisham's highway programme with partners in the voluntary sector and local community centres.

Members noted further clarification from the Chief Executive that the distribution of vouchers for school meals was continuing based on current eligibility criteria. It was stated that the new Executive Director of Children and Young People would be available at the next meeting to clarify how the Council would implement catch-up programmes to support gaps in pupils' education that might have arisen during the lockdown period.

Actions:

- Officers to provide information about support to families with school children in Lewisham who had no recourse to public funds, but were experiencing financial difficulties as a result of the crisis;
- Officers to consider involving parents and advocacy groups to help shape the wellbeing and curriculum plan in schools after the lockdown period.

Continuing with her response, the Chief Executive confirmed to Members that home search would be re-advertised starting 2 July 2020. She reiterated that answers had been circulated to the Panel about information on home search, and the effect of suspension of the housing delivering service. However, it would be impractical for officers to give a detailed assessment about the outcome of rough sleepers and others people whom the Council had placed in temporary accommodation during the coronavirus outbreak because of uncertainties in messages from the Government about reimbursement of money spent in response to the crisis by local government.

Actions:

- Officers to provide up-to-date data about the impact of the suspension of home search on the Council's housing list;
- Officers to provide data on the number of residents re-housed outside the borough during the crisis, including families with school children;
- Officers to give some indication about continued support to local residents and rough sleepers currently in temporary accommodation post Covid-19.

Members further enquired about a requirement by the Government for councils to produce a local plan on how they would manage and prevent an outbreak of the coronavirus. In response, the Chief Executive stated that the efforts were still being considered. It was stated that officials at London boroughs of Camden, Barnet, Hackney and Newham were leading on the issue. Thus, councils across London were benchmarking to learn and adapt best practice from the four leading authorities.

Action:

- Officers to confirm timescale for implementing a Local Outbreak Engagement Board.

The Director of Public Health (PH) echoed statement by the Chief Executive that work was underway to finalise governance arrangements of Lewisham's local plan for submission to the government as assurance that the Council was in a position to deal with the test and trace scheme. It was confirmed that efforts would be developed to re-assess the implementation of safe working environments for staff and others who use Council premises in light of the Government's recent revised social distancing rule. The Director of PH added that her department was working with colleagues in the Council's Communications Team and partners in the Clinical Commissioning Group to engage proactively with the local community to convey

messages about hygiene, and the need for testing symptomatic conditions related to the coronavirus disease.

Action:

To provide an update on the Council's position on test and trace scheme once the local plan is finalised.

Continuing with her response, the Director of PH advised Members that statistical profiles were being collated about the impact of Covid-19, and the effect of the lockdown on age, gender, health disparities and social and economic deprivations in Lewisham. However, although 45% of local residents had identified themselves as Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME), death certificates had no data field on ethnicity. The Director of PH stated that the Council was drawing inference about ethnicity from information compiled on country of birth from the Office of National Statistics and Public Health England to compare data on deaths, and causes of deaths.

Action:

- Officers to provide information on possible causes of high of death rates within the BAME group, and lessons to be learned as a result.

Members also received an update from the Director of Public Services (PS) about arrangements for parks and open spaces in Lewisham. It was stated that the Council would continue working with the Local Safer Neighbourhood Team to explore actions for diverting and managing anti-social behaviours in the public spaces.

The Director of PS also clarified to Members that the maximum numbers of mourners that could attend funerals had gone up to 15. It was stated that a decision was made to extend weekend opening hours at cemeteries for those visiting graves and memorials. However, in light of recent announcement about revised social distancing rule, it was likely that a review would be undertaken to consider extending opening times further. It was stated that plans to re-open a number of public toilet facilities in parks and public spaces would also be considered, but with added cleaning measures to further help in the prevention of the spread of the coronavirus disease.

Action:

- Officers to provide details of local programme relating to the re-opening of public toilets; to include information of locations of temporary toilets;
- Officers to provide an update on proposed review in regards to opening times at cemeteries and arrangements about funeral restrictions.

RESOLVED that the report and comments by the Panel on efforts by the Council in response to the Covid-19 crisis, be noted.

4. Key Decision Plan

The report was introduced to the Panel by the Head of Business and Committees. He requested that Members note and comment on upcoming key decisions.

Action:

- Officers to clarify how the Homeless Strategy scheduled for consideration in September 2020 would impact on support currently provided by the Council to rough sleepers as a result of the crisis.
- Officers to provide timetable for public consultation on the Local Plan, together with implementation date.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

5. Decisions Made by Mayor on 10 June 2020 - open session

The Chair of the Panel, Councillor Bill Brown, informed the meeting that Councillor Jim Mallory would provide a feedback following his attendance at the meeting of the Mayor and Cabinet on 10 June 2020 to address on matters relating to the “Council’s response to Covid-19 – Financial update”.

Councillor Mallory gave a summary of the recommendations he presented to the Mayor and Cabinet. The recommendations were welcomed by Members as relevant to help shape the future of the Council’s services post the initial impact of Covid-19 crisis. Councillor Mallory pointed out that equally important was a need for the local community to know and understand how the Council’s current financial situation would impact on service provision.

In response to questions raised, the Interim Director of Corporate Services (CS) advised the Panel that the Council’s capital programme was focused on delivering sustainable and affordable housing for residents. Thus, although it was sometimes necessary to review viability of approved schemes to ensure that value for money continued to be achieved, creating opportunities for jobs and skills remained part of the Council’s regeneration commitments.

The Interim Director CS clarified to Members that possible actions against the Government should it not meet its commitments to reimburse local government for the added responsibilities resulting from the coronavirus outbreak was unclear. However, from officers’ perspective, the Council would continue to access relevant networks and forums to learn and share best practice, with a view to deal with the current financial pressures, and forecast and identify risks that might occur post Covid-19 crisis. Members were also advised that steps were currently being taken by officers to submit returns to the Government in a timely fashion on costs associated with Covid-19 activities.

Continuing with her response, the Interim Director CS advised Members that the Council’s procedures and processes for budget setting would provide a consistent message to residents about its financial position. She highlighted achievements and plans in working with partners as evidence of the Council’s community

engagement efforts. Specific to current priorities, the Interim Director CS informed Members that consultation on the budget setting arrangements would commence in the autumn of 2020 for consideration by the Mayor and Cabinet prior to submitting at full Council meeting in February 2021.

Councillor Amanda De Ryk, Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources expressed a concern about uncertainties as a result of inconsistent messages from the Government regarding reimbursement of money spent on Covid-19 activities at a time when councils were emerging from austerity measures. Councillor De Ryk gave an assurance to the Panel that various London local government networks would continue to lobby the Government about the refunds, in order to help councils deal with potential financial gaps in their budgets.

The Panel also noted statement by Councillor De Ryk in support of views by the Interim Director of CS that the budget setting process would provide a meaningful engagement with residents about the Council's financial priorities. Councillor De Ryk informed the meeting that as part of the democracy review findings to explore channels to work better with residents, a video animation by Redbridge Council was being considered with officers for adaptation to further enhance engagement activities.

In his closing remarks, Councillor Mallory stated that while the development of a communication strategy was being considered as part of the budget reporting process, steps should be taken within the next few weeks to inform local residents about efforts and achievements that the Council and its partners were making in response of the current crisis. Councillor Mallory added that the pre-empt information should also include potential challenges to deliver and maintain services post-Covid-19 should the Government fail to reimburse funds to local authorities.

Actions:

- Officers should, prior to developing a comprehensive communication strategy, publicise information about the work and impact that the Council was making in response to the current crisis. The publication should include potential financial gap in service provision should the government not deliver on its commitment to reimburse local authorities for costs directly associated with supporting residents during the Covid-19 crisis.
- Officers to produce a comprehensive communications strategy, with timeline for consulting on the work of the council.

6. Exclusion of the press and public

RESOLVED that members of the public and press be excluded from the consideration of the remaining items on the agenda.

7. Decisions Made by the Mayor on 10 June 2020 - closed session

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

8. Decision by the Executive Director for Community Services on 12 June 2020

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

The meeting closed at 9.03pm