

## Emergency Committee

**Wednesday 27 May 2020 at 13:00 at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

**Present:** Councillor Y Davies (Chair);  
Councillors Ali, Crompton, Hadley, Millard and Shaeen.

**Officers:** David Stevens (Chief Executive), Neil Cox (Director - Prevention and Protection), Lesley Hagger (Executive Director – Children’s Services), Sue Knowles (Head of ICT and Revenues and Benefits), Stuart Lackenby (Director - Adult Social Care), Lisa McNally (Director – Public Health), Elaine Newsome (Service Manager – Democracy), Nicola Plant (Service Manager - Regulated Services and Transformation), Sue Stanhope (Interim Director – Human Resources), Suky Suthi-Nagra (Democratic Services Manager), Surjit Tour (Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer) and Chris Ward (Director – Education, Skills and Employment).

**30/20 Apology for absence**

Members noted the apology of Councillor Moore, Chair of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board. The Chair, on behalf of the Committee, wished Councillor Moore all the very best for a speedy recovery.

**31/20 Minutes of Meetings**

The minutes of the meeting held on 6 May 2020 were confirmed as a correct record.

**32/20 Declarations of Interest**

No interests were declared at the meeting.



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**Additional Item of Business – Membership of the Emergency Committee**

The Leader reported that in view of Councillor Moore's continued absence from the Committee due to personal circumstances, it was necessary to consider his continued or an alternative appointment in order that there was Scrutiny representation on the Emergency Committee to provide effective challenge during this critical time.

Whilst Committee appointments were normally a matter for Full Council, in situations where the Council enacted constitutional provisions, the Emergency Committee was able to undertake such activities as were normally reserved for Council.

It was moved, seconded and **Agreed** that Councillor Singh, Chair of the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board, replace Councillor Moore as scrutiny member on the Emergency Committee with immediate effect.

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**COVID-19 Reset and Recovery Planning – Roadmap of Activity**

Consideration was given to proposals on how the Council would reset services following the COVID-19 pandemic and plan for future recovery of the organisation and Sandwell. The proposals were aligned to the strategic priorities set out in the Corporate Plan. The implementation of these plans was responsive to the local context and national policy changes and built in the necessary flexibility and resilience.

The Reset and Recovery Plan would focus on the future, not return to 'business as usual', whilst maximising opportunities to reform, re-imagine and re-invent the organisation by using a set of working principles that would drive innovation as one council, one team.

The Council would continue to work with communities and partners to:-

- embed community wealth building principles;
- exploit opportunities for a green recovery;
- continue to provide services digitally wherever possible to free up resources to support those who could not engage digitally with the council;
- empower the workforce to continue to be flexible and resilient.

Planning activity would be in the context of a fundamentally different economic and social landscape than before the pandemic, not only for the Council but for communities. The financial impact upon councils as a result of COVID-19 was significant and the financial pressure that local government faced over the short, medium and longer term would be a key factor of the reset and recovery plans.

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Consideration was now given to a number of presentations as follows:-

### Trajectory of COVID-19 within Sandwell

The Director – Public Health provided details of work currently being carried out by Public Health within Sandwell, including areas where work had to continue despite the pandemic, and work with various care homes, schools and work places to advise on how to manage outbreaks and risk.

Details were provided of Sandwell's position in relation to reported Coronavirus cases and the number of deaths in comparison to national and regional cases. Due to the number of older people, Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority population residing in Sandwell and high levels of socio economic deprivation, Sandwell seemed to be disproportionately affected by the virus. It was noted that Wolverhampton and Walsall had an equally high number of cases within the Black Country. Work was being carried out to address this.

The Chair requested that future analysis also include the curve for the Black Country.

The Chair placed on record her appreciation for all of the hard work being undertaken by Public Health to help manage the outbreak, working 7 days a week and requested that staff try, wherever possible, to take respite and look after their own wellbeing too.

### Financial Impact of Covid-19

The Vice Chair provided an update on the financial impact of the pandemic in the form of both additional expenditure and a loss of income from various sources.

The funding that the Council had received from the Government in response to Covid-19 was set out in the table below: -

Income Stream	£m
Council Tax – Hardship Relief	4.547
Small Business Grants	73.036
Care Homes – Infection Control	2.876
Emergency Funding – Tranche 1	12.495
Emergency Funding – Tranche 2	9.083
<b>Total</b>	<b>102.037</b>

Only the emergency funding of £21.578m was un-ringfenced and could be used to fund the range of financial pressures being incurred.

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The latest version of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) return was submitted on 15 May 2020. This reported estimated financial pressures of £24.385m, which was made up of £10.566m additional expenditure and £13.819m loss of income, based on the assumption, specified by the MHCLG, which was that the current circumstances continued for a period of 4 months i.e. until the end of July. This left a shortfall of £2.807m which would need to be funded from the Council's reserves unless compensating savings were identified during the financial year.

The Committee expressed concerns at the current financial situation and insufficient income and increased expenditure was impacting upon the delivery of key services. It was felt that the Government should allocate resources to local authorities proportionally based on the levels of COVID-19 cases to prevent the council utilising depleting reserves. The Vice Chair reported that Sandwell and Wolverhampton Councils would be lobbying the Government on this matter.

### **Business Support Grant and Discretionary Business Grant Fund Policy**

The Head of ICT and Revenues and Benefits provided an update on the level of small grants paid to small businesses within Sandwell in order to help them during the pandemic. Approval was also sought to the new Discretionary Grant Scheme Policy.

The Small Business (SB) and Retail Health and Leisure (RHL) grants were one-off payments. The discretionary grants were one-off payments and funding of £3.362m had been provided by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) for these grants. Total grant payments must not exceed this amount.

One of the issues faced by Sandwell was the high volume of small businesses in the borough. These businesses were not liable to pay business rates and there was no legal obligation for them to report their occupancy to the Council. This meant that a large proportion of the information held by the Council was out of date/inaccurate.

75% of all applications received to date had been dealt with. To process grants as quickly as possible, the resource working on grants was increased. The applications currently outstanding were those that were either in query or those where further information from businesses was yet to be supplied.

The Committee placed on record their appreciation to the work of the Revenues and Benefits Team and made reference to the unfair way in which the Team had recently been criticised.

## **Support for Elderly and Vulnerable Residents**

The Executive Director – Neighbourhoods provided an update on Council support to vulnerable and elderly residents in the community people who were unable to leave their property due to the increased risk of contracting COVID-19.

The role of the Council to support people within the shielding group had been significantly expanded through subsequent Government guidance that had resulted daily in the Council receiving the following data, requiring response:

- people registering for a food package
- new people added to the shielding list who had registered for support on the Government's website. This could be either urgent food requirements or the need for care and support
- people on the shielding list who the Government had been unable to contact.

The Council was currently receiving the details of around 40 new residents daily.

The Chair thanked the Team for the way in which the vulnerable in Sandwell were supported and made reference to the positive feedback received from residents receiving various support from the Council. However, it was acknowledged that it was not sustainable for the Council to continue to provide these services. Consideration would need to be given on options how the community could support vulnerable residents to enable the Council to commence the delivery mainstream services. A further report with options on support mechanisms would be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee.

## **Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)**

The Service Manager – Regulated Services and Transformation provided an overview of PPE supply management by the Council.

The largest items of PPE demanded were face masks and gloves with an average daily distribution of over 500 masks and over 3000 gloves. The majority of these supplies had been distributed to the Adult Social Care sector, internal and external including residential, nursing and domiciliary care providers. Some provision had also been made to Funeral Directors, Children's social care and school services to meet urgent need.

Systems were in place to monitor and manage the fluctuating demand on PPE stock levels which could be affected by a number of issues such as levels of transmission and changes to guidance on the usage of PPE.

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Over recent weeks, the Council had established a strong supply chain and would continue to utilise the relationships that had been established to respond to demand in this area.

### **Adult Social Care Infection Fund Ring Fenced Grant 2020**

The Director – Adult Social Care provided details of the Adult Social Care Infection Fund Ring Fenced Grant 2020 and sought approval to authorise the Director - Adult Social Care, in conjunction with the Director - Public Health, to administer the Adult Social Care Infection Fund Ring Fenced Grant 2020 in line with Government guidance.

On 22 May 2020, the Department of Health and Social Care published the Local Authority Circular 'Adult Social Care Infection Fund Ring Fenced Grant 2020'. The circular provided details on the Government's Adult Social Care Infection Control Fund worth £600 million nationally. Sandwell's allocation of this fund was £2.8 million.

The primary purpose of this fund was to support adult social care providers, including those with whom the local authority did not have a contract, to reduce the rate of coronavirus transmission in and between care homes and support wider workforce resilience. A small percentage of it may be used to support domiciliary care providers and support wider workforce resilience to deal with coronavirus infections. This funding would be paid as a Section 31 grant, ring fenced exclusively for actions which supported care homes and domiciliary care providers mainly to tackle the risk of coronavirus infections and was in addition to funding already received.

#### **Agreed:-**

- (1) that the framework for Covid-19 reset and recovery planning be endorsed;
- (2) that the Council's approach to restarting services as soon as is safe to do so and following appropriate health and safety measures being put into place be noted;
- (3) that the Discretionary Business Grants policy as now submitted be approved;
- (4) that the Director - Adult Social Care, in conjunction with the Director - Public Health, administer the Adults Social Care Infection Fund ring fenced grant in line with Government guidance;
- (5) that a further report be submitted to the Committee on measures to take to ensure that the community can help provide support to the most vulnerable to enable the Council to commence mainstream services.

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## Phased Reopening of Sandwell Schools

The Executive Director of Children's Services reported that whilst schools had been 'closed' since 20<sup>th</sup> March 2020, although they had remained open to the children of key workers and vulnerable children, on Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> May 2020, the Prime Minister announced that there would be a phased return of pupils to schools from 1<sup>st</sup> June 2020 beginning with Reception, Year 1 and Year 6. Sandwell's schools and Council officers had worked productively to develop a plan to safely manage the introduction of more children back to school from 1<sup>st</sup> June.

It was anticipated that secondary schools would be opening on 15<sup>th</sup> June 2020 and the Council, alongside schools, were working hard to reach a consensus on how to safely open schools for a wider group of children.

The proposed arrangements were shared with local Trades Unions who accepted that, although national Trade Unions were in ongoing dialogue with the DfE and the outcomes of this were not yet known, the Council and schools did need to prepare for a potential phased reopening. Trades Unions had also shared risk assessment and planning documents with schools to assist with this process.

The results of consultation with primary parents showed that 20-25% of families would like to take up the offer of returning pupils to school. If this was uniformly the case, all year groups would have an offer. However, if more vulnerable children came back to school and more key workers requested places for their children, the wider offer would have to be reduced according to the space available in the schools.

The Chair, on behalf of the Committee, reiterated to all parents that the decision to return pupils to school had to be made by them in the best interests of their child. Whilst the Director - -Public Health was in regular contact with schools to help ensure risks were minimised, the local authority would not be issuing fines to parents if they chose not to send their children into school.

### **Agreed:-**

- (1) that the actions taken to date regarding the phased return of pupils to Sandwell schools be noted;
- (2) that further reports in relation to pupils returning to Sandwell schools be submitted to future meetings of the Committee.

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**Programme of Committee Meetings 2020**

Approval was sought to the updated calendar of committee meetings to September 2020, pending a further more detailed committee programme being considered at a future meeting of the Emergency Committee.

This would enable more testing to be undertaken on the most effective platform to use to enable effective remote committee meetings to take place in line with The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 ("the Remote Committee Regulations") which came into force on 4<sup>th</sup> April 2020.

**Agreed** that the programme of committee meetings for 2020, as now submitted, be approved and a further report be submitted to a future meeting to approve a further programme of meetings for the remaining 2020/21 year.

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**Decisions taken by the Leader and Chief Officers in accordance with Delegated Powers**

There were no delegated decisions taken since the last meeting of the Committee.

This meeting was webcast live and is available to view on the Council's website [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o\\_zOeUaJPLg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_zOeUaJPLg)

Meeting ended at 14:34