

Emergency Committee

Wednesday 24 June 2020 at 15:30 at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury

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

Officers: David Stevens (Chief Executive), Neil Cox (Director - Prevention and Protection), Nicky Denston (Service Manager – Business Excellence), Lesley Hagger (Executive Director – Children’s Services), Alison Knight (Executive Director – Neighbourhoods), Stuart Lackenby (Director - Adult Social Care), Rebecca Maher (Head of Finance), Elaine Newsome (Service Manager – Democracy), 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).

38/20 Councillor Singh

The Chair welcomed Councillor Singh to his first meeting as a member of the Emergency Committee.

39/20 Apology for absence

Members noted the apology of Councillor Millard.

40/20 Minutes of Meetings

The minutes of the meeting held on 27 May 2020 were confirmed as a correct record.

41/20 Declarations of Interest

No interests were declared at the meeting.



42/20

Additional Item of Business – Review of Sandwell’s Emergency Food Provision in response to Covid-19

The Executive Director – Neighbourhoods reported that, to date, 11,593 food parcels had been provided to vulnerable residents in Sandwell. The decision was taken to focus on immediate and urgent need and parcels were provided to residents on a one-off basis unless a further referral was accepted by the practical support unit. The intention from the commencement of the food hub was to identify alternative pathways for support and the offer from the voluntary and community sector had proven to be a real success as the Council had seen referrals from the practical support unit reduce by 50% over the last 4 weeks. Other local authorities took the route of providing weekly food parcels to all vulnerable residents’, but this may have initiated some reliance within their communities and at a considerable expense.

One of the major outcomes of the Sandwell food hub had been the response to immediate need but also the transfer of need to more sustainable options. Working in partnership with voluntary and community sector partners to find community-based solutions that met on-going needs had included the Good Neighbours initiative and Community Offer as well as, relatively small scale, community kitchens and food pantries.

The food hub had expanded its offer over the last 11 weeks providing invaluable assistance to a wider range of vulnerable residents. The offer was now available on a weekly basis and had provided 393 meals to 20 residents living in 9 venues of temporary accommodation, weekly to 296 children currently not on the school roll, direct referrals from 14 local schools and referrals from the Children’s Trust. Over one-third of referrals, a total of 2692 parcels had been provided to support vulnerable children and families.

The food hub’s success over the last 11 weeks had created an impact and sustainable legacy that had and would improve the lives of the people of Sandwell which included redeploying 80 employees to work at the food hub, collaborative working with our stakeholders and partners and safeguarding and welfare whereby delivery drivers had identified issues where residents had required additional support and in some instances emergency assistance.

However, it was acknowledged that the Council would need to consider resuming its key services and therefore an options appraisal had been developed as follows:-

Option 1 – Retain the existing food hub service

Continue with the current arrangements of providing and delivering food parcels from the food hub at Tipton Sports Academy for vulnerable residents and those identified by Children’s Services and Education.

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Option 2 - Transfer food hub service to existing food banks

Transfer any remaining stock and relevant equipment to the Sandwell food banks. Residents would have to go to their local food bank to access supplies, although two of the food banks have been providing limited delivery.

Option 3 – Develop a community food offer

It was proposed to develop A 'community food offer' for residents in Sandwell. The aim was to initially establish a baseline of current provision around food in key areas such as volunteering, transport, food banks, community kitchens and partner organisations such as voluntary and faith groups. The intention was to develop a web of support for children, families and vulnerable people who required access to emergency food.

Option 4 – Close food hub from 31 July 2020

Close Tipton Sports Academy as a food hub completely from 31 July 2020.

Option 5 – Reduce scale of offer at Tipton Sports Academy

Continue to use the facility of Tipton Sports Academy as the infrastructure was already in place and reduce the delivery from 5 days a week (Monday to Friday) to 3 days a week (Monday, Wednesday and Friday). This service would close on or before 31 July 2020.

Option 6 – Only provide parcels to vulnerable children and families

Continue with the current arrangements at the food hub but only provide parcels and delivery to those identified by Children's Services and Education.

Option 7 – Close food hub on or before 31 July 2020 and use supplier to purchase and deliver all food parcels

Close the food hub on or before 31 July 2020 and transfer all remaining food stocks to the food banks. Those residents suffering financial hardship, who were not self-isolating or suffering from covid-19 and were able to leave their homes would not receive a food parcel from the food hub. These residents would be required to apply for a Local Welfare Provision food voucher to access food from their local food bank.

To support those residents in crisis who were vulnerable and self-isolating a contracted supplier would provide and deliver a food parcel with next day delivery. The parcels contents would be sufficient to last the resident for 6 days. In emergency cases, a food parcel would be delivered to the resident within 4 hours. Other options to support immediate response would be explored. The next day delivery principle would be utilised to provide parcels for those identified by Children's Services or Education.

Bulk purchase of food for the food banks would continue, with a review in mid-September 2020.

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Having considered the options, the Committee was of the view that providing food parcels was creating a dependency culture which could not be sustained long term and would not enable people. Where possible, vulnerable residents should be accessing welfare rights and citizens advice bureau support to help them access money that they were entitled to. It was felt that the food hub should be closed sooner rather than later with responsibility for providing aid being transferred to food banks and the voluntary sector who could work proactively to address vulnerable residents needs.

It was subsequently **Agreed** that:-

- (1) the Executive Director – Neighbourhoods close the food hub at Tipton Sports Academy before 31 July 2020 and operate at a reduced scale of 3 days a week until this point;
- (2) the Executive Director – Neighbourhoods enter into negotiations with a supplier to provide and deliver food parcels to vulnerable residents, families and children until 30 September 2020;
- (3) that a further report be submitted to the Committee on 22 July 2020 monitoring the Council's withdrawal of this support before 31 July 2020 and the support available to residents via the voluntary sector and food banks.

43/20

Re-introduction of market stall fees in post-coronavirus recovery period

Further to Minute No. 18/20 taken on 22 April 2020, whereby all market stall fees were waived on the 23 March 2020 to provide financial assistance to market traders who could not earn their living due to the markets being closed, approval was now sought to re-charging stall fees for market traders once the markets re-open in a phased manner from 22 June 2020.

Government had provided some financial assistance for retailers during the period when they have not been able to trade, but many market traders, particularly on the outdoor markets, have not been eligible to receive this support. Therefore, a decision was taken by the Emergency Committee to waive fees for market traders from 23 March 2020 on all Council markets to help support them during the non-trading period.

The Markets Service had developed a comprehensive risk management strategy, with the assistance of the Council's Public Health and Health and Safety services, to mitigate risks from infection by coronavirus when markets re-opened and this included money handling procedures.

The Markets Service intended to introduce a contactless card system for receiving market stall fees, but this would not be operational until 1 July 2020.

The Council could continue to waive market stall fees, but this would continue to have a negative impact on the Service's budget and would act as a

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disincentive for some market traders to return to trading. In addition, the Markets Service was an income generating business unit which derived most of its revenue from market stall fees.

Agreed:-

- (1) that markets stall fees be reintroduced from 1 July 2020 on all markets at full rate except for the indoor market which will receive a 50% discount for the month of July and will then return to full fees from 1 August 2020;
- (2) that indoor market traders that are prevented from trading due to Government guidance on shielding or vulnerable groups are eligible for a 100% discount in their market fees to be reviewed on a monthly basis by the Director - Public Health and the Interim Director - Regeneration and Growth;
- (3) that the Director - Public Health and the Interim Director - Regeneration and Growth, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Inclusive Economy, re-commence charging full market fees to indoor market stallholders.

44/20

Amendment to emergency changes to Financial Regulations and Procurement & Contract Procedure Rules

It was reported that in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, on 18 March 2020, the Emergency Committee approved several amendments to the Council's Financial Regulations and Procurement and Contract Procedure Rules (PCRs) in order to provide flexibility in responding to the crisis (see Minute No. 3/20).

Since these flexibilities were introduced, a Statutory Officer's Group had been set up that included the Chief Executive, Monitoring Officer and Acting Section 151 Officer to consider all significant decisions to ensure that the appropriate level of scrutiny and assurance had continued to take place and reduced the risk of fraud or irregularity occurring.

As the Council now began to move from emergency response to reset and recovery, it was important that these flexibilities were reviewed and a decision made about whether they should continue.

It was therefore deemed unnecessary to continue with some of the amended Financial Regulations and PCRs and it was proposed that these now be revoked.

The Chair thanked the Acting Section 151 Officer for all of her hard work ensuring that the risk of fraud was minimised during this period.

Agreed:-

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- (1) that the Committee approves that the following amendments to the Council's Financial Regulations and Procurement and Contract Procedure Rules with effect from 1 July 2020:-
 - **Key Decision threshold/approval limit** –£0.250m.
 - **Strategic Finance appraisals** – to be reinstated;
- (2) that the following amendments to the Council's Financial Regulations and Procurement and Contract Procedure Rules be approved with effect from 1 August 2020: -
 - **New contracts below PCR 2015 threshold (para 2.7 below)** – standard procurement processes should be reintroduced. It is important to note that the intention of this amendment was to reduce the workload for Chief Officers during the crisis response
 - **New contracts above PCR 2015 threshold (para 2.8 below)** – standard procurement processes should be reintroduced. It is important to note that the intention of this amendment was to reduce the workload of Cabinet/Emergency Committee during the crisis response
- (3) that a further report is presented to Emergency Committee or Cabinet regarding the remaining amendments made to the Council's Procurement and Contract Procedure Rules in response to Covid-19 when appropriate.

45/20

Use of donations received by the Council during Covid-19

It was reported that Sandwell had requested monetary donations from the public and businesses to provide support to vulnerable people during the covid-19 crisis. In response, a total of £2608.50 had been collected. It was now proposed to close this fund from 5 June 2020 and to consider the following options on how to use the donation fund:-

1. Use the donation fund to offset existing spend on the food hub.
2. Use the donation fund to offset spend used to support food banks across Sandwell.
3. Use the donation fund to purchase additional food stocks for the food banks to assist them in sustaining provision over the next few months.
4. Identify a community project to fund which would deliver positive outcomes by supporting communities who continue to be impacted by Covid-19.

Option 1

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Sandwell had been allocated a government grant of approximately £21m to cover the range of costs associated with Covid-19, including the costs of providing food parcels to elderly and vulnerable residents during the Covid-19 crisis. It was not yet clear whether this grant would be sufficient to fund all financial pressures incurred by the council but a £2.6k contribution would not have a material impact on this. This was therefore not recommended as a suitable option.

Option 2

The expenditure on food, used to support Sandwell's food banks and ensure they were well stocked to meet the growing needs of people on low incomes during this period had been included in the expenditure total of the food distribution hub. It was not yet clear whether this grant would be sufficient to fund all financial pressures incurred by the council but a £2.6k contribution would not have a material impact on this. This was therefore not recommended as a suitable option.

Option 3

The food hub had been supporting the food banks with supplies of food stocks over the past 10 weeks as well as sharing donated stock including juice, bread, sauces and meat. This had helped to increase the amount of food stocks available and the contacts identified through the food hub project were being shared with food banks so that those relationships could be sustained going forward.

Option 4

The Albion Foundation's meal delivery initiative was having a very positive impact on vulnerable families and children across 63 of Sandwell's schools, however, it had been curtailed severely due to the furlough of the club's chef. As a result, the numbers of families who could be supported at this critical time has been severely reduced. The Foundation had engaged the supermarket, Morrisons, to provide food parcels which would be packed at Tipton Sports Academy's food hub and delivered by Foundation employees. The Foundation would also host a food collection point at The Hawthorns and donated items would be transferred to Tipton to be included in food parcels.

There was an opportunity to pool resources and effort to extend the meal delivery initiative and the education food parcel deliveries to address the gaps left by the furloughing of the club's chef. The additional funding from the Council would enable the initiative to increase the amount of food parcels provided and improve on the specific contents of them to meet specific needs. It was therefore proposed to support the Albion Foundation's 'Meal delivery to schools' project.

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Agreed:-

- (1) that the donation fund is closed for public donations from 5 June 2020;
- (2) that the donated funds received are used to support the Albion Foundation's 'Meal delivery to schools' project.

46/20

Six Month Attendance Rule

Approval was sought to suspend the Council's Standing Orders to consider at a future meeting whether to issue member dispensations where a member was unable to, throughout a period of six consecutive months from the date of their last attendance, to attend any meeting of the Authority.

Following the introduction of 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 4th April 2020, the Council was now able to operate remote meetings which removed the requirements for members to physically attend a meeting in order to be counted toward attendance at the meeting.

As a reduced number of meetings had now been agreed, there was an opportunity for most members to attend a meeting and not have to seek a dispensation to the six month rule.

Given that the Emergency Committee only approved the dispensations in March 2020, the Council's Standing Orders must be suspended to enable a decision of the Committee to be reviewed during the preceding six month period.

There were a small number of Members who did not currently hold seats on a committee and their only opportunity to attend a meeting would be that of Full Council. As a meeting of Council has not yet been scheduled, a report to the Emergency Committee would seek dispensations for those members affected.

Agreed that in connection with Minute No 3/20 (7) and (8) of the Emergency Committee taken on 18 March 2020, Council's Standing Order No. 29 be suspended to enable further consideration to member attendance dispensations at a meeting of the Emergency Committee in July 2020.

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47/20

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

The Committee noted actions taken by the Leader of the Council and officers in accordance with their delegated powers.

This meeting was webcast live and is available to view on the Council's website

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4E6XjY2-g5s&t=29s>

Meeting ended at 16:10