

## Minutes of the Corporate Review Committee Meeting held on 21 January 2021

Present: Colin Greatorex (Chairman)

### Attendance

Charlotte Atkins	Jeremy Pert
Mike Davies	Bernard Peters
Helen Fisher	Conor Wileman (Vice-Chairman)
Jeremy Oates	Susan Woodward
Ian Parry	

**Also in attendance:**

**Apologies:** John Francis

### PART ONE

#### 27. Declarations of Interest

No declarations were made at the meeting.

#### 28. Minutes of the meeting held on 17 November 2020

**RESOLVED:** That the Minutes of the Meeting held on the 17 November 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

#### 29. Staffordshire COVID-19 Residents Survey - Key Findings

The Leader of the Council, provided a report and presentation relating to the Covid-19 Residents Survey.

It was explained that the survey would inform the Councils recovery and business planning. The survey had closed in September 2020 and received the highest survey response for many years, this was attributed to the organisation and partners efforts in promoting the survey.

The main points arising from the 3,921 responses received from residents in the survey relating to their experience of Covid-19 were outlined:

- 63% negative responses – this was higher for those furloughed and those with a disability or limiting illness. Negative impact included reduced social interaction, not seeing family and friends and impact on wellbeing.
- 12% positive responses - this included 53% of residents saving money; many enjoyed spending time outdoors, spending time with friends and family and 32% explored their local area

- Behaviour changes - Over 50% of respondents had increased their digital use, 59% had carried out online shopping and 58% used online chat and social interaction.
- 52% of respondents had provided help and support to others and were willing to do so in the future.
- 29% had received support during the pandemic, mainly receiving essential supplies. 80% of support was from family and friends. The majority receiving support were over 65 year olds and many were shielding.
- Respondents key concerns in next 3-6 months were about the economy – particularly about business survival, jobs and employment, which were key to recovery.
- Respondents were concerned about the environment, in particular feeling safe, returning to public spaces and to normal life
- 40% mentioned the economy as the biggest challenge but also an opportunity to develop post lockdown.
- Communities – respondents were positive about building on community action, a key element of recovery, and to strengthen and empower communities.

The Leader of the Council highlighted the need to respond to the findings outlined in the report. The Committee discussed the survey findings and the following matters and comments were highlighted by members:

- Pathways into support for people - It was recognised that Covid-19 had affected many different people who would not have otherwise required support. Different people were emerging from Covid-19 presenting with a range of different needs, particularly around alcohol.
- Unmet needs - people cannot navigate our systems
- Survey results had been made available - District information was available and had been shared with District Councils. Across all districts the responses were very similar. Members requested the information be sent to all councillors across the County.
- You said we did - Communication with residents included providing responses to individual issues raised and the response about what the Council was putting in place.
- The Under 35 Action plans age related coming out of this – comprehensive programme of work on economic development and employment to put support in place.
- How we communicate with different languages and cultures in the area. In terms of the survey tapped into existing mechanisms in communities in place volunteering, alternative translation formats , BAME communities and other.
- Disproportionate impact on people with disabilities was of concern, public health was looking at disability, mental health and addiction to have a more focussed approach. The impact more on people with disabilities and carers had been greater in second lockdown, parents and carers were worn out, mental health and wellbeing issues had impacted elderly and child carers.
- New and different needs – home schooling pressure on child and parents and pressures on schools. The situation and guidance had changed quickly and was different now to when the survey was completed. The pressures on individual

households had changed, first lockdown was relatively enjoyable, the second time was more stressful for many who had to balance work with home schooling.

- There were concerns raised about some parents/carers drinking more. It was recognised that each family had its way of coping with lockdown whether drinking or getting outside more. The benefits of getting outdoors and the subsequent health outcomes could be factored into the County Councils environment work and include Health in all policies agenda – working closely to ensure parks and open spaces meet the needs of all areas.
- Population Health work Integrated Care System – can be explored through H&C scrutiny cttee.
- Volunteer fatigue was of concern there was more volunteer capacity in the first lockdown, in the second lockdown it did seemed to be reduced

The Committee highlighted the need to communicate with the audience moving forward, to chart how people feel in 6-12 months and to make sure people know about support available to them.

**RESOLVED:** That the comments of the Corporate Review Select Committee be referred to the Cabinet Member.

### **30. Digital Inclusion**

The Cabinet Member provided a report and action plan relating to the Digital Strategy.

The Cabinet Member highlighted that since March last year a great amount of work had been undertaken to provide digital support internally and externally to communities. The Council adapted the way it worked and provided services, the need to reshape the digital programme. The action plan appended to the report identifies the breadth and depth of the actions required to make the change and he emphasised the need to continue working with community groups and voluntary partners, as well as considering good practice from other Councils. He thanked officers for the hard work moving at pace to address the issue and indicated the Council was in a good place to take forward the digital inclusion action plan.

Members were informed that there was a Cabinet paper in February relating to the Digital strategy and Digital programme – digital inclusion was a large part of the documents to Cabinet. Members views were welcomed on how we develop this plan and to consider and comment on the work being undertaken to tackle digital exclusion in Staffordshire.

Members raised concerns relating to digital exclusion, highlighting affordability, low income, families access to the internet and school children access to learning on line. Concern that low income families would still have decisions to make on what to spend money on food or internet we need to support families, vulnerable children and disadvantaged residents and members want to ensure that an increase in the digital divide was avoided and to consider the issues of disadvantage exposed by Covid over the last year. The Cabinet Member acknowledged the concerns raised and indicated that there was a need to work with partners including the Government. The need for

more equipment, including second hand equipment and equipment for schools, and access points were important. The Council need to re-start work with Citizens on line and good things foundation, there was also work in early stages towards Digital Good neighbours scheme – sharing wiFi. The voluntary sector were identifying where we can support - Staffs connect, Do it Staffordshire and Community help points.

The need to work with partners, government and schools to address the issue of inequality exposed by Covid-19, IT access being one of them was expressed. It was highlighted that good access to internet should be treated as the 4<sup>th</sup> utility and that pressure should be put upon govt and providers to make sure there are reduced tariffs for those people who are on low income and that every child has access both internet and a device moving forward.

The ongoing work was reported as follows:

- Support to schools, to offer devices to ensure that all young people have access that schools can address access individually or for families.
- Support families to access virtual family hubs to access all services required of them.
- Lobbying larger organisations to lift the cap and limitations to accessing 4G networks.

The following matters were highlighted through member questions, comments and responses of the Cabinet Member were noted:

Affordability – there was concern that some families in most need would not be able to afford access to the internet or a device, even with a reduced tariff. The Cabinet Member referred to his earlier response relating to low income families and advised that 1566 digital devices had been provided by government, schools and trusts have requested further devices since September 2020.

Network coverage - was considered critical and concerns were raised about the lack of network coverage, with 16,000 premises within the County without access. it was considered that the action plan must focus on these households who are working from home and accessing schoolwork and doctors appointments and that the digital infrastructure was as important as physical infrastructure.

Sense of pace -The Cabinet Member reassured members that the sense of pace was there and advised that the Council had to move with pace at the start of the pandemic, work was ongoing to progress the action plan and reviewed regularly by a task and finish group – the Digital working group.

Milestones - Members indicated that the action plan seemed to miss what the benefit of the plan was and how much progress had actually been made. It was acknowledged that the benefits and progress detail in the plan needed more work, it was work in progress and a more detailed plan would be brought back to Committee.

Alternative routes and refusal to use digital means - Some residents did not want or were unable to use online services. The options available for these residents was questioned. It was highlighted that the lockdown had complicated residents accessing services which were not operating in normal way, because the frontline offices was not available to them and libraries had to close. The Cabinet Member indicated that

alternative access for residents could be through voluntary groups working with Parish Councils that have access to website and can connect to services and information. He indicated that he was working with one parish to open up dialogue and develop better connections with the Council to engaging with residents and to spread the ability for residents to connect, one scheme was underway – the ‘Hello Lamppost Scheme’.

Members recorded their appreciation to officers who have been going the extra mile to help residents who were finding it difficult to access services such as blue badge and disabled parking facilities.

Service Level Agreement (SLA)– It was felt that the level of engagement with residents and the timescales to respond to public enquiries was important. An SLA with residents would ensure that services will hit targets and respond to people within agreed timelines which would build confidence in online services. The Cabinet Member indicated an SLA agreement should be in place and agreed to check that this was the case.

It was advised that the Digital strategy would be considered by Cabinet in February, highlighting the this was Digital first , not digital only strategy. The Council will move forward with the digital offer a number of years. He advised that where telephones had been turned off, in the main people were ok with it and a number of alternative options were in place, they could go to libraries for support. In current situation, with libraries closed, the Council was looking at what could be done in the short term, residents have reached out to families and friends for support and there were a variety of support networks available to residents. WE need to promote the various support networks outside the CC.

The feedback from members today would inform the action plan and online offer.

**RESOLVED:**

- a) That the report and detail relating to the Digital Strategy be received and noted.

**31. Scrutiny of the Medium Term Financial Strategy 2021-2026**

The Committee considered the draft report which provided an overview of the Councils MTFs working group which once agreed would be presented to Cabinet 27<sup>th</sup> January - the report and recommendations. An executive response to recommendations will be also be provided.

The Working Group presented a different set of questions this time and external speakers provided support and an external perspective and best practice form other Local authorities as different approaches taken elsewhere. Positive consensus on the recommendations and a comprehensive document.

They also welcomed further contributions from external witnesses in the future.

**RESOLVED:**

1. The report was agreed.
2. That the report be referred to Cabinet for consideration

**32. Work Programme**

**RESOLVED:** That the Work Programme was agreed.

**Chairman**