

COVID-19 RECOVERY SCRUTINY PANEL

Meeting held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Urban Road, Kirkby-in-Ashfield,

on Tuesday, 27th July, 2021 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor Jim Blagden in the Chair;

Councillors Will Bostock, Dale Grounds,
David Hennigan, Kevin Rostance, Dave Shaw
and Caroline Wilkinson.

Officers Present: Lynn Cain, Ruth Dennis, Mike Joy and
Shane Wright.

In Attendance: Councillor Jason Zadrozny.

CP.1 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary or Personal Interests and/or Non-Registrable Interests

No declarations of interest were made.

CP.2 Minutes

RESOLVED

that the minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 2 February 2021, be
received and approved as a correct record.

CP.3 Covid-19 Recovery

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and gave a brief synopsis of
the work the Panel had undertaken thus far in relation to the Council's
response to the Covid-19 pandemic. He reiterated that there was still a long
recovery road ahead for everyone and the Panel's role was now to listen, learn
and provide ideas, suggestions and recovery initiatives to Cabinet for
consideration.

It was noted by all present at the meeting that the name of the Panel had been
changed slightly to reflect the new priority of 'recovery' as opposed to the initial
'response' phase in the early days of the pandemic.

Part of the report presented to Members included some excellent data and
service updates which had been received in respect of the following:

Collection Rates and Grant Payment Information
Environmental Health and Commercial and Environmental Protection
Neighbourhoods and Environment
Cemeteries
Parks and Open Spaces
Town Centres and Markets
Governance.

The Chairman wanted to place on record and personally thank all officers who had worked so tirelessly through the pandemic; Ashfield District Council had been exemplary in its response to the pandemic and went above and beyond to protect and support its residents and business communities through the lockdown periods.

Panel Members were also requested to note the Covid-19 guidance and restrictions update, as included in the report, and the ongoing efforts to roll out the vaccine programme which was at the heart of the nation's recovery. It was acknowledged that Covid-19 was something that people would have to ultimately learn to live with and Step Four of the Government's Roadmap was asking for everyone to continue to act carefully and remain cautious.

The Scrutiny Research Officer expanded on the Covid-19 guidance and restrictions update and reiterated that Covid-19 was something that people would have to ultimately learn to live with for the foreseeable future.

Businesses were now re-opening and being encouraged by local authorities to follow the principles set out in the working safely guidance. It was hoped that footfall in Ashfield's town centres would now pick up and the Council was promoting many initiatives to welcome people back and increase confidence within local communities to use the facilities.

Finance Team

In relation to the service updates, the Finance Team had submitted data regarding collection rates, business rate reliefs, business grants, council tax hardship payments and Test & Trace applications and payments. The Council had been very successful in administering the range of grants and had continually supported the business community through the pandemic.

Whilst discussing the current position in relation to the Test & Trace App, the Director of Legal and Governance (and Monitoring Officer) advised the Panel that as restrictions continued to be loosened, the Council had been advised through its Strategic Cell meetings that exemptions to isolation for critical workers (i.e., refuse and housing repairs staff) could now be applied for on a temporary basis notwithstanding that it was still intended by Government to cease almost all isolation restrictions from 16 August 2021 onwards.

Environmental Health Team

The Environmental Health Team had been heavily involved with protecting the safety of businesses and residents through proactively engaging with local businesses in relation to the ever-changing regulations and subsequent compliance.

At the start of the pandemic over 900 food outlets were contacted to ensure the right measures and controls were in place and during the pandemic almost 3,000 requests had been dealt with. The Team had also recently secured a dedicated Food Officer until March 2022 to undertake food inspections at higher risk premises and clear the backlog of inspections delayed due to the pandemic.

Neighbourhood and Environment Team

The Neighbourhood and Environment service had continued to deliver all its services although there had been times when staff shortages had been of concern due to many employees having to isolate due to being 'pinged' by the Test & Trace App.

Management had been proactive in the early days of the pandemic by instructing all managers to complete a daily electronic 'Sit Rep' sheet detailing the working arrangements and location of their staff for each day (i.e., in the office, working from home or isolation). Data from the capture of such information had shown that the Council had started turning the corner recently in relation to employee availability for work.

Cemeteries Team

A full service had been in place for the duration of the pandemic lockdowns and thankfully demand due to Covid-19 related deaths didn't subsequently materialise.

Town Centres and Markets Team

With the ending of restrictions and the subsequent reduction in Government guidance the number of Covid Information Officer roles had now decreased. Just the Senior Covid Information Officer (Ian Rotherham) currently remained with this role being concluded at the end of September 2021. The focus now was on reinvigorating the town centres and reviving the economy and a list of planned events included:

- Creation of an Arts Trail and Virtual Arts Festival
- Bringing Music to the High Street – evening event
- Promotion of local exhibitors
- Food Festival in Hucknall
- Painting of columns and high street furniture in Sutton
- Street entertainers on market days
- Christmas tree displays on shop frontages
- Improving flower displays.
- Deep scrub and clean of pavements
- Repair of streetlights and street furniture at Sutton
- Installation of cross street bunting where possible
- Smaller market stalls for easier positioning and tabletop sales on market days
- Monthly plant fairs
- Small fairground rides for town centre locations
- Seeking out of Farmer Market operators.

Footfall was increasing in all of the town centres with both Sutton and Hucknall achieving pre-Covid levels, but Kirkby was still struggling to achieve its previous rates of footfall at the current time. Retail provision had, however, shown a significant increase with 31 new takeaway shops and 52 new or repurposed shops overall. Members welcomed the information and suggested that it might be an idea to consider town centre re-invigoration in more detail at a future meeting.

Housing Team

Although not outlined in the report, the Scrutiny Research Officer gave a verbal update in relation to the Housing function and advised that staff had found agile working had assisted delivery of their service and relationships with private sector landlords continued to be forged. Officers were keeping a close eye on evictions to enable staff to offer support and guidance to any persons finding themselves homeless as required.

Poorly managed Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs) had been prioritised and the Team were working with landlords and in partnership, to raise standards of living for tenants wherever possible. Three housing posts were current out for recruitment and the Housing Register continued to expand with over 4,000 people now on the waiting list and in need of suitable rental accommodation.

Governance Team

The team were now back to facilitating 'face to face' Council, Cabinet and Committee meetings and had relaxed the two metre distance guidelines including the mandatory wearing of face masks in meetings. The Scrutiny function continued at pace with current reviews looking at climate change and tenancy support.

The Service Manager, Scrutiny and Democratic Services took the opportunity to address the Panel and reminded Members that the Scrutiny and Democratic Services Team had delivered a full service during the pandemic via virtual meetings and live streaming on the YouTube platform.

All external virtual meetings had now ceased as the temporary legislation to enable this had expired on 6 May 2021 although informal and internal meetings were still being held virtually (or as a hybrid version of both virtual and face-to-face) as required.

The Elections Team had delivered a PCC and County Council election with full Covid-19 restrictions still in place and had worked tirelessly to ensure safe and secure environments were in place for all voters across the District.

The Legal Team had continued to provide a full service of support to the Council throughout the pandemic although many court cases were currently being held in abeyance as court hearings had been suspended during the pandemic lockdowns. The Risk and Emergency Planning Team had also provided an exemplary service during the pandemic and had kept abreast of the ever-changing regulations with a determined focus on keeping Ashfield as safe as possible throughout.

The Director of Legal and Governance (and Monitoring Officer) considered that the Council was now moving positively into the recovery phase of the pandemic and meetings with the various Nottinghamshire strategy groups and cells were still taking place to guide and assist with this next transition. Covid recovery was now a weekly standing item on the Corporate Leadership Team agendas (CLT) and the recently compiled Annual Governance Statement contained detailed explanations as to how the Council had worked through the early stages of the pandemic from March to June 2020.

Virtual meetings had been a vital part of the Council's response to the pandemic and had allowed business to continue. A recovery programme for the Council was now embedded in the Corporate Plan and would remain a priority for some time to come.

Members thanked officers for their update and debated the current position as follows:

- acknowledgement that the Council needed to stay abreast of the vaccination take-up rates and continue to focus on areas of poor uptake to encourage vaccination across all age ranges
- a suggestion that an update on vaccination rates within Ashfield be presented to each Panel meeting
- huge appreciation and gratitude for the work undertaken by the Covid Information Officers over the past few months
- whilst recovery of town centres was vital, it was important that the Council did not ignore recovery of the smaller towns like Huthwaite, Stanton Hill and Selston
- recognition of the incredible delivery of the vaccination programme at the local centres by staff and volunteers alike
- concerns regarding fake and misleading news in relation to vaccinations for younger age groups and how the Council might mitigate against this on a local level, whilst encouraging uptake in Ashfield.

Forthcoming Work Programme

To endeavour to effectively plan the work of the Panel over the coming months, the Service Manager, Scrutiny and Democratic Services suggested that the work programme could stay in line with national themes and focus on Health, Economic and Social/Community recovery. From a local perspective the Council would be concentrating on community and economic recovery and then organisation recovery as required.

To ensure the Panel gave adequate time and consideration to each theme it was suggested that the work programme should be made up of both formal and information meetings to work through the recovery priorities effectively.

It was suggested that the Work Programme could be organised as follows:

Theme:	Considerations:
Economic	High Street and Town Centre Recovery. Long-term effects of Covid pandemic on local businesses. (Invite to Town Centres and Markets Manager to September 2021 meeting)

Community	Humanitarian Work. Continued contributions and assistance from the Voluntary Sector. Reduction in use of Foodbanks and its impact on residents.
Organisational	Service delivery to residents. Long-term financial impact to Authority. Organisational changes for employees.
Health	Updates on Vaccination Programme. Risks associated with low take up. Implications for longer term health of residents. Access to GP services and Doctors' surgeries.

RESOLVED that

- a) an informal Covid-19 Recovery Working Group meeting be arranged to take place before the next formal meeting of the Panel with a focus on economic recovery issues for the District;
- b) an invitation be extended to the Town Centres and Markets Manager to attend the informal Working Group meeting and assist Members with their deliberations as necessary;
- c) an update in relation to the Vaccination Programme and data regarding current 'take up' levels in areas of Ashfield be sourced and circulated electronically to Panel Members.

CP.4 Ashfield Commemorative Memorial - Verbal Update

The Chairman reminded Members that from its inception, the Covid-19 Response and Recovery Scrutiny Panel had wanted to create and install a fitting memorial to celebrate all key workers and their tireless efforts to keep people safe during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Further discussions had revealed the desire for the memorial to take the form of a commemorative bench and having spoken to the Leader of the Council, it was agreed in principle that there could be a commemorative bench located in each of the four areas of Ashfield (i.e., Sutton, Kirkby, Hucknall and the Rural Areas).

It was agreed that the Panel would come up with an initial design and having requested children at a local school in Hucknall to come up with some ideas, a design had been chosen and shown to Members at the meeting.

The Leader of the Council, in attendance at the meeting, confirmed that funding for the commemorative benches would not be a problem but suggested that the design would need further work and finessing by officers prior to any final design being agreed by Cabinet.

RESOLVED

that two preliminary recommendations be submitted to the next meeting Cabinet as follows:

- a) Cabinet be asked to identify funding for four commemorative benches to be located in suitable locations in Kirkby, Sutton, Hucknall, and the Rurals, as a tribute to the tireless efforts of key workers during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- b) following initial design suggestions by the COVID-19 Recovery Scrutiny Panel, further design work regarding the commemorative benches be commenced in line with identified funding.

The meeting closed at 8.23 pm

Chairman.