

COVID-19 RECOVERY SCRUTINY PANEL

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

on Thursday, 21st April, 2022 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor Will Bostock in the Chair;

Councillors Jim Blagden, Dale Grounds,
Kevin Rostance, Caroline Wilkinson and
Daniel Williamson (Vice-Chair).

Apologies for Absence: Councillors .

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

In Attendance:

CP.12 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary or Personal Interests and/or Non-Registrable Interests

No declarations of interest were made.

CP.13 Minutes

RESOLVED

that the minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 17 March 2022, be received and approved as a correct record.

CP.14 Voluntary Sector Organisations - Recovery and Progress Post Covid

The Chairman introduced the item and warmly welcomed Teresa Jackson (Ashfield Voluntary Action), Janis Abraham (Citizens Advice Ashfield), Elden Skinner and Matt Pike (Our Centre) to the meeting. The representatives from the voluntary sector were in attendance at the meeting to give Members an insight into the challenges they faced and the resulting impact on their delivery of much needed services during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Teresa Jackson - Ashfield Voluntary Action (AVA)

The onset of the first Covid-19 lockdown took the organisation a little by surprise and within only a couple of days, staff were working from home with computer equipment set up and phones diverted.

It was a huge learning curve for staff and volunteers to quickly get to grips with delivering support from home and meeting virtually online but the transition was achieved. It was noted anecdotally that many organisations nationally were not as lucky and had to shut down leaving many vulnerable and elderly adult without the support they desperately needed.

Systems were quickly put in place to ensure residents were receiving deliveries of food, medications and money (through a loan system) and the

national grant funding received by AVA helped to cover the cost of the food that was distributed.

Partnerships with other organisations were key during the Covid-19 lockdowns and Ashfield District Council were a valuable support mechanism during this time. The golden number provided by Nottinghamshire County Council also proved to be a great signposting support to both voluntary organisations and residents alike.

In relation to the current situation following the worst of the pandemic, AVA were continuing to support Ashfield's residents in a variety of ways but pharmacies were now delivering medications and many people were slowly venturing back out into their local communities to shop and socialise etc.

The numbers of volunteers had dropped since the early days of the pandemic as many volunteers were furloughed staff from other organisations, that had now returned to their places of work. However, many volunteers still worked tirelessly for AVA and room usage at the site was increasing as groups were beginning to emerge again following the final lockdown.

The whole experience had made many organisations more robust with a wider view of the world in general. Through necessity, the implementation and usage of digital technology at AVA had come on in leaps and bounds which had proved to be invaluable and would remain an integral part of the organisation. AVA was now even teaching digital access to residents as required. Local communities had been brave and supportive throughout the pandemic and were to be congratulated.

Janis Abraham - Citizens Advice Ashfield (CAA)

At the start of the pandemic, Citizens' Advice Ashfield had to transition immediately from a face-to-face client consultation method to digitally which worked extremely well and continued to be a much more effective method of communicating. As an addition, much more information was delivered through media channels during the pandemic and this had also remained an effective tool for the organisation's service delivery.

Staff and volunteers had to learn new phone and webchat systems quickly which did result in the loss of some volunteers in the beginning. However due to the accessibility of remote digital working, volunteers could now be recruited from wider afield with no requirement to reside locally. The traditional face to face consultation service, whilst still available, would not be returned to fully as the hybrid facilities now on offer were far more effective at delivering the support required.

In the early stages of the pandemic, the legislative changes had proved to be very challenging to understand and disseminate to ensure that all staff and volunteers remained abreast of the requirements. Many volunteers were also having to contend with upheavals in their own lives (i.e. loss of jobs) alongside trying to ensure the services they were providing to clients was accurate and in accordance with regulations.

CAA staff stayed in contact with volunteers via remote meetings on a daily basis to ensure that supervisors were available to offer support and advice as

required. The type of clients that required assistance changed during the lockdowns with many looking for support in relation to employment/career and Covid safety enquiries as opposed to the more traditional advice in relation to housing and debt management. This change in client landscape had proved to be beneficial in the longer term as staff and volunteers had ultimately widened their knowledge and expertise accordingly.

Support from Ashfield District Council throughout the pandemic had been greatly appreciated alongside the government grant funding received. For the future it was to be acknowledged that the direct funding from the Council ultimately kept the CAA doors open and the open and supportive dialogue with Council staff continued to be a huge help to the organisation.

Elden Skinner and Matt Pike - Our Centre

Looking back, it seemed amazing that the organisation had been through such times and had managed to continue to support its local communities throughout the pandemic. The whole concept of Our Centre was to provide transport to residents to enable them to live and socialise within their communities which then suddenly changed to remaining indoors indefinitely.

Our Centre quickly had to become conversant with the changing legal requirements and to provide safe, socially distanced travel for residents requiring hospital appointments etc. Fortunately, volunteer numbers remained high with many people continuing to turn up in their cars to offer assistance.

However, the reality of social distancing and cleaning requirements meant that one assigned job went from around one hour on average to two/three hours to ensure vehicles were compliant with safety regulations. Volunteers were amazing at picking up these journeys and providing safe, secure travel for residents.

As the pandemic progressed many journeys involved taking residents for their vaccines alongside any further scheduled appointments. It was to be acknowledged that networking and support amongst the local voluntary organisations was amazing during this time and these relationships have continued and flourished post pandemic.

Our Centre currently had 653 individuals on its books who received excellent ongoing support through phone calls, buddying-up and transport services. A nervousness about getting back out into the community was still being felt but many people were now eager to get back to living life again and many groups were keen to get re-started and start meeting in person.

Question/Comment:	Response from Representatives:
I have a huge amount of respect for you all. Thank you for all you have done to learn and support the residents of Ashfield throughout the pandemic. Can you say what your organisations will need most moving forward? (Councillor Jim Blagden)	The security of continued direct funding would enable the organisation to continue to flourish and support Ashfield residents (CAA) Again, the security of continued

	<p>direct funding and a push for message reinforcement from all partners to elderly/vulnerable adults, that it is now safe to venture back out into local communities. Also, there is an increasing need for available spaces in Sutton in Ashfield to host groups as demand is now increasing (AVA)</p> <p>A continuation of the excellent infrastructure and support that has built up between voluntary sector organisations, the Council and the NHS during the pandemic (Our Centre)</p>
<p>Well done for all of your fantastic work and commitment during the pandemic. Could you advise how you are now recruiting new volunteers following the pandemic? (Councillor Daniel Williamson)</p>	<p>Yes, we now have much more scope as we can recruit volunteers from further afield due to the ability to undertake remote consultations. Training is also available online which is helpful. The CAA is also intending to have more of a presence in the District with proposals for 13 additional locations in the future.</p> <p>Actual recruitment is taking place online with intensive training for 6 months following appointment. The training is very good and is sought after. During the pandemic and beyond the number of clients has not decreased so this is testament to the professional advice and support that was and continues to be provided (CAA)</p> <p>We haven't changed how we train volunteers and recruitment is done through initial adverts and connections within the communities. All volunteers are DBS checked and trained to a high standard. Volunteers are not allowed to accept money as 'thank you' gifts from clients but residents can make donations to the organisation. Training is given to offer a kind, friendly service but boundaries are in place to ensure relationships remain professional. Recent volunteer</p>

	figures have increased which is pleasing to note (AVA).
In relation to request for travel following the pandemic, is this now increasing due to relaxed social distancing measures? (Councillor Daniel Williamson)	<p>Prior to the pandemic, figures showed on average 37,000 annual passenger boardings. This went down to 10,000 during the pandemic as due to social distancing measures, only individuals could be transported. Groups are now able to travel together again so this figure is rising. Our Centre cannot carry members of the public on its vehicles, residents need to be registered with the organisation to qualify. The need is definitely still there and the organisation wants to continue to assist anyone that is struggling to get about.</p> <p>As an organisation we are also now seeing the effects of isolation with reductions in fitness levels and clients subsequently having greater needs. (Our Centre).</p>

On conclusion of the presentation and ensuing discussion, the Service Manager for Scrutiny and Democratic Services and the Chairman thanked the voluntary sector representatives for their insights into the challenges and impacts of service delivery during the Covid-19 pandemic and their attendance at the meeting. The time taken to inform and speak to the Panel had been greatly appreciated.

RESOLVED

that the insights and contributions made by the three voluntary sector representatives regarding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on services and support to local communities, be received, noted and welcomed.

CP.15 COVID-19 Recovery Scrutiny Panel: Progress to Date

The Service Manager for Scrutiny and Democratic Services presented the report and took the opportunity to reflect on the work and achievements of the Panel to date. Having been established in June 2020, the Panel had worked extremely hard throughout the pandemic to endeavour to give a voice and support to local communities, organisations, public sector bodies and employees.

Frequent Panel meetings were subsequently held with any outcomes and recommendations from the discussions being reported to Cabinet by the Chairman/Vice Chairman as required. The Panel welcomed a variety of guests across the meetings who spoke to Members about their experiences regarding the ever-changing pandemic landscape including lockdown closures, PPE, employee and patient health, the vaccination programme, safe

customer environments, mental health issues and much more.

Invited guests were as follows:

Ashfield District Council

Chief Executive, Service and Assistant Directors
Corporate Finance Manager (and Section 151 Officer)
Senior Economic Development Officer
Town Centres and Markets Manager
Senior COVID Business Support Officer
Leader of the Council
Service Manager for Place and Wellbeing

Outside Organisations

Martin Rigley, Chairman of Discover Ashfield
Gary Jordan – Chair of Mansfield & Ashfield 2020
Richard Fuller – County Battery
Ewa Tinklin – Twisted Tinks Modern Barbers
Nina Bianco – Kirkby Sales and Exchange
Ray O'Connor – The Shop, Sutton
Sam Handley – Swiftool Precision Engineering Ltd

Nottinghamshire Police

Inspector Mark Dickson

Sherwood Forest Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

Richard Mitchell - Chief Executive

Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Clinical Commissioning Group

Rosa Waddingham – Chief Nurse
David Ainsworth – Mid Notts Locality Director

Sports and Leisure Management - Everyone Active

Lorenzo Clarke – Ashfield Contract Manager.

Through presentations, discussion and debate at all the meetings, Members had witnessed examples of amazing partnership working across all the sectors to provide support and guidance to local communities throughout the pandemic.

Mention was made of the sterling work undertaken by the original Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Panel, Councillors David Hennigan and Jim Blagden respectively. Both Members were extremely proactive in the earlier days of the pandemic and worked tirelessly to keep everyone informed as to progress.

The information that the Panel received from local businesses at the November 2020 meeting was invaluable and some examples were formulated into case studies by the Council's Economic Development Team and used for ongoing planning support.

In the early stages of the Panel's work the Vice Chairman, Councillor Jim Blagden, suggested that a Covid memorial would be a fitting tribute to key workers and 18 months later funding was now secured for four memorial

benches to be located in each of Ashfield's areas. Children from Holgate School in Hucknall had taken part in developing designs for the benches and this contribution would be recognised by the Chairman of the Council at a later date.

A set of potential recommendations were then read out to the Panel and discussed accordingly.

The Scrutiny Research Officer concluded the update by congratulating the Panel Members on their commitment and contributions towards the excellent outcomes from the Panel. So much had been achieved over the past 18 months and all the invited guests had been more than willing, during very challenging times, to attend the meetings and contribute towards helping others. It was proof that working together was a recipe for success.

RESOLVED

that the following recommendations be presented to Cabinet at its next meeting in June 2022:

- a) the tireless work of the voluntary sector during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, be commended;
- b) the Council to continue to build and nurture the relationships forged with its partners during the pandemic and to further develop its role as a community leader providing pivotal central support to all parties;
- c) the Communications Team to continue to prioritise the Council's relationship with Ashfield's voluntary sector, providing an effective conduit for the dissemination of up to date information and signposting services, in a timely manner, as required;
- d) to continue to support Ashfield's residents and offer encouragement and guidance to enable reintegration back into their local communities with particular focus on working with organisations supporting vulnerable groups;
- e) the Council to continue its focus on ensuring available grant funding is effectively administered to local businesses and organisations to assist with the reinvigoration and support of Ashfield's local economy following the pandemic.

(During consideration of this item, Councillor Dale Grounds left the meeting at 7.55pm.)

The meeting closed at 8.17 pm

Chairman.