

## **COVID-19 Update and Financial Update:**

### **Overview and Scrutiny engagement**

As set out in a [briefing note](#) published on 3 November, the council is currently operating streamlined Overview and Scrutiny arrangements, allowing officers to focus on the response to COVID-19 and support Wiltshire communities in the context of ongoing restrictions.

On 26 November 2020, the Wiltshire COVID-19 Response Scrutiny Task Group met to consider the aspects of the COVID-19 Update and Financial Update report to Cabinet relating to COVID-19, with Cabinet Members and officers in attendance. The Financial Planning Scrutiny Task Group met to consider the aspects of the report relating to finance, with officers and the Cabinet Member for Finance, Procurement and Commercial Investment in attendance. The notes of these meetings are presented below.

### **Wiltshire COVID-19 Response Task Group – 26 November 2020**

#### **Health and care**

1. How is the council supporting care homes to facilitate visits, particularly for people living with dementia, in the run up to Christmas?

The council has provided guidance stating that visits can remain unless an infection outbreak is identified. When outbreaks do occur, the council makes immediate contact with the care home and provides support.

2. There are concerns about the possible closure of the HFT centre, Furlong Close, Rowde, which supports people with learning disabilities. Though it is early in the process, we wish to understand how the council can ensure that this will not adversely affect residents.

It is the decision of HFT (the provider) to close. However, the council is very aware of the impact of changes to such provision on users and are working with HFT to minimise this.

3. The number of COVID-19 cases in Wiltshire seems to be rising, while in neighbouring areas it is not; is it clear what is the cause?

Infection numbers in Wiltshire are decreasing.

4. What is the current situation in Wiltshire hospitals re COVID-19 and what is the forecast? Does this impact the tier we may end up in?

Hospital occupancy rates do indeed have an impact on areas' assigned restrictions tier.

5. What is the approach to tackling localised COVID-19 hotspots?

The council's Public Health team monitors cases to identify any hotspots and take action where necessary. Hotspots usually represent whole households receiving positive results or sometimes contextual settings such as a business. The council deploys community champions to go to any hotspots and undertake "myth-busting" and offer advice and support.

6. What measures are being taken to address the potential rise in mental health cases caused by COVID-19 / lockdown etc?

The council is working closely with BSW CCG and the mental health support helpline has been extended until March 2021. The emphasis is on providing interventions before people reach a high risk of crisis and the supporting people discharged from hospital.

7. There is a concern that some elderly patients may be being sent home from hospital with COVID-19 and potentially risking the health of their carer, family, partner, spouse. How are these people being supported?

This would not be something the council would be involved in unless the patient was receiving care support from us. BSW CCG set the policy for discharge and this policy would take into account the health impacts of remaining in hospital as well as the patient's home situation.

## **Children and education**

8. Has there been an improvement to the number of pupils wearing masks on school transport? How is this being monitored?

Information provided by bus companies and directly from schools suggests that adherence levels are at around 80%. This is an improvement on previous figures and is particularly evident where schools are more involved in the management of school transport on site.

9. Has the provision of ICT equipment to ensure continuity of learning for all pupils (but especially disadvantaged learners) progressed as planned?

Yes.

10. The report shows a reduction in exclusions for the first term, but feedback to councillors from school staff seems to indicate some difficulties in sustaining good behaviour after months out of school. Will the council continue monitoring behaviour related issues (including exclusion figures)?

Yes, this will continue to be monitored on a weekly basis and the council's Education and Skills Service supports schools with behavioural issues where appropriate.

11. Free school meals (FSM):

- a. Has the council been informed of the Government's plans for support during the Christmas and Easter holidays in a way that will enable the council / schools to reach out to, and inform, families in advance of the holidays?

This is addressed under the question regarding the Winter Support Scheme below.

- b. Paragraph 7 in the report states that, "We have helped 1,351 Children whom were issued with free school meal (FSM) payments in the October half term in Wiltshire, which equates to 678 Individual households."

Approximately 16% of these children were from families entitled to FSM. These payments were provided on request, based on need.

12. Funding issues (especially as Wiltshire is one of the lower funded local education authorities):

- a. Are impact assessments planned to monitor the impact of schools having to reallocate some funding to respond to issues linked to Covid-19, rather than providing planned (or previous) interventions and support for pupils?

The council is gathering case studies to highlight the financial impact of COVID-19 on schools and early years providers and these studies will be shared with the Department for Education (DfE).

- b. Can anything be done to support schools that may be experiencing budget issues linked to unexpected costs (e.g. supply staff, investing in PPE and additional costs of soap, hand sanitiser and paper towels)?

Government has provided additional funding for the exceptional costs faced by schools due to COVID-19, up to a maximum of £13k per school.

- c. Does the council know if there are plans for school staff to be "higher" on the COVID-19 vaccine priority list?

The [vaccine priority groups](#) have been set nationally and at present there is no special prioritisation for key workers other than care home workers.

13. What steps are taken by schools when sending children home to self-isolate to ensure that home education is taking place and pupils are staying home and being safe? What can the council do (or is already doing) to support this; in effect monitoring “truancy”?

A clear process is in place. The council’s Education and Skills team provide support for pupil home learning, with issues regarding ICT, safeguarding and FSM all addressed, with social care involvement where appropriate.

The council does not have a role in monitoring truancy, but schools will be aware if pupil’s work is not being uploaded and should contact parents with any concerns.

14. More children are being home schooled; how is the council monitoring their mental and physical well-being?

A clear process is in place. All families with a child sent home from school due to quarantine are contacted within 2 weeks. This is followed up if a response is not received, though it is parents’ choice to engage with the council. Additional resource is being considered in order to meet the increased demands.

15. Is the council concerned that the pressure on demand for young people’s mental health support could lead to very high threshold to access services?

Referrals to children’s mental health support services did increase during lockdown, but are now returning to pre-lockdown levels. An increase in demand of 10-30% is now anticipated, meaning that Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust (which provides Wiltshire’s CAHMS) may need to make difficult decisions regarding the allocation of resources. Weekly monitoring of the system is undertaken by the Bath, Swindon and Wiltshire Clinical Commission Group (BSW CCG).

16. Could further information on paragraph 54 be provided (forecasted growth in demand for children’s support and safeguarding services), which states, “We are in the process of reviewing this in light of the number not meeting the expected level at this stage”? Has demand been lower than forecasted?

Since the start of the pandemic, there has been 1,100 fewer contacts into the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) than in the previous year. However, contacts are now increasing again. Due to factors like fewer children attending GP appointments and reduced youth work provision there are fewer “eyes on children”, so the council is working with partners to mitigate these risks. The DfE is aware of this as a national issue and a communications campaign is being developed.

17. How will eligible families be identified (do they need to register)? Does the council have any more information on the school holiday activity fund and who will have access? How will the council inform families of this?

The council's priority is to tackle fuel poverty and hunger over the winter. To avoid unnecessary bureaucracy, officers are looking at using 80% of the grant funding for those families entitled to FSM or Early Years support, with direct monthly payments allocated through schools. The remaining 20% would be used to support vulnerable adults and families.

## **Leisure and Libraries**

18. What are the procedures regarding mobile libraries when they are visiting nursing homes?

The staff operating the Homes Mobile Library Service adhere to the same rigorous hygiene controls as all library staff e.g. wearing face coverings, using hygiene supplies for personal and workplace cleaning, and not coming to work if unwell.

Each care home has been asked if they wish to receive a delivery of books and the majority (over 50) have taken up the service. Visits are at a prearranged time and the Mobile Manager does not enter care home premises, dropping the deposit collections at the door.

All books returned via the service are quarantined for 72 hours and staff handling the books do so under strict hygiene controls – washing hands before and after making up the deliveries.

19. Can it be confirmed if leisure centres will be opening on 3 December when this lockdown ends?

Yes, Wiltshire Leisure Centres will open from 3 December. We are pleased to confirm that Calne Community Campus will also be opening, following improvement works.

20. Is there opportunity for certain sports facilities to open, like open air non-contact sports?

We await updated guidance from Sports England and Government. In areas under tier 2 restrictions, public attendance can resume inside and outside subject to rules regarding social distancing and numbers.

21. Will leisure centres be used as vaccination centres?

The council has been approached regarding use of its leisure centre car parks for administering flu vaccinations and is currently looking at the specifications for this.

## **Economy**

22. There are grants now available for green recovery schemes; how is the council ensuring that there are enough qualified people to deliver these grants, or that residents are informed about suitably qualified suppliers?

Press releases have been published, as have articles in the business e-news alerting local businesses to the opportunity and encouraging them to sign up to the TrustMark scheme. It is worth noting that problems are being experienced with this scheme nationally and is likely to be re-booted shortly.

The council is liaising with Wiltshire College to talk about how we can assist on this agenda. It is a complex area as it requires sufficient demand from employers for training providers to invest in the kit needed to deliver the training.

The council is investing £289m over 10 years to retrofit its housing stock. This will give some certainty to providers and employers to invest in the relevant skills.

23. How are the business support grant schemes identifying and making people aware of what is available, particularly very small businesses?

The council has a very active communications programme associated with grant application and delivery. Messages are communicated via press releases, its regular business newsletter and the usual regular messaging through Wiltshire's network of Town Councils, SWLEP Growth Hub, Wiltshire 100, Chambers of Commerce and other business support organisations such as the Federation of Small Business, Business West and Visit Wiltshire.

The council's contact centre works in partnership to triage businesses, assisting and signposting the support where appropriate.

24. What steps is the council able to take for small business owners to diversify and develop new ways of working?

The grants available are the most obvious and concrete financial support which is allowing businesses to survive. In many cases this is giving businesses the breathing space to pivot their offer for both the short term and medium term.

The council works in partnership with other business representative organisation groups (as listed above) to provide the most appropriate support. At this time the majority of funded support is delivered through the SWLEP Growth Hub <https://growthhub.swlep.co.uk/>. The Growth Hub provides advice, support and training with regard to diversification and small business growth and Business Navigators provide specialist support for SMEs.

25. Regarding employees sent home from work with COVID-19 symptoms, what is the council doing to promote the support and funds available to employees and employers?

We are publishing these through a communications strategy and being proactive in advising people of the payments schemes available. Details of the support available is on the council's website and open for applicants, with over 400 applicants received so far.

### **Safe spaces**

26. What lessons have been learnt when delivering the new walking and cycling schemes? How will these be applied, particularly lessons learned around identifying priorities and consultation?

Consultation is taking place with stakeholders on these schemes. Further information will be provided [circulated to the task group on 30 November 2020].

### **Planning**

27. Time limited Section 106 money may be lost due to delays enforced by COVID restrictions. Is there any way those time periods could be extended?

If delays are experienced then a "deed of variation" can be applied and the Section 106 team will be tasked with monitoring this.

### **Homelessness**

28. Can the council outline what the outcomes for homeless people have been from the additional funding for homeless people?

29. How has it supported the delivery of the longer-term Homelessness strategy?

This information will be provided [circulated to the task group on 30 November 2020].

## Financial Planning Task Group – 26 November 2020

### COVID-19 and Finance update

1. The task group received the Cabinet update report on finance. The report is high level, identifying any changes since the previous quarter 2 (period 6) report and reflecting the situation in period 7.
2. The council has received additional grants to cover the period of new restrictions from 5 November 2020. An additional £4M for the Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF), £1.108M for COVID-19 Winter Grant Scheme, £0.128M for Rough Sleepers, £10M for Additional Restrictions Support Grant, £7.223M for Local Restrictions Support Grant and £0.050M for Domestic Abuse Capacity Building Fund. It is likely that these funds need to be spent this financial year (to 31 March 2021) and although the report assumes that any unspent funds can be rolled over, Government have announced for COMF that any underspend should be returned to Government.
3. The level of grant is determined by Government at a national level. For example, the Contain Outbreak Management Fund grant is calculated by population levels, at £8 per head.
4. In most cases the funding will likely meet local demand e.g. COVID-19 Winter Grant Scheme. The business grants will be distributed on a first come, first served basis. When spent in total the grant will not be topped up by the council. There is a risk of running through the funds particularly if there are future lockdowns.
5. The council has a clear picture of the net cost of COVID-19 response currently and the forecast is for a balanced budget even allowing for the loss of income e.g. from leisure budget. However, the council is still estimating potential latent demand which may emerge later e.g. looked after children. The cost of COVID-19 will have an impact for a long time after 31 March 2021.
6. The projective overall deficit 2020/21 has decreased over time. This is because the council took swift action introducing spending controls and an external recruitment freeze. There has been additional funding from other sources e.g. CCG and the council has received £32M of emergency funding while other support schemes have been confirmed e.g. loss income reimbursement scheme. This has brought the budget back into balance.
7. The overall position is still in the balance. It may continue to improve but there remains risk as there are 5 months of the financial year to go. That is why spending controls will remain in place.
8. At the end December the council will confirm the council tax base position. In terms of council tax there is potentially 1% growth. Council tax revenue projections have increased from earlier in the year; a slight increase from budget assumption which went to Cabinet on 3 November 2020. For business

rates the additional reliefs given at the beginning of year have masked the scale of the impact of COVID-19. The current assumption is that there will be no growth. There are still a lot of unknowns and risks. Total amount of reliefs given during COVID-19 is £67M; not sure what position will be next year.

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