

BOROUGH OF REIGATE AND BANSTEAD

RECOVERY SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of a meeting of the Recovery Scrutiny Panel held Remote - Virtual Meeting on 14 October 2020 at 6.30 pm.

Present: Councillors K. Foreman, N. D. Harrison, R. Michalowski, S. Parnall, J. E. Philpott, S. Sinden and S. T. Walsh

Also attending: Councillor T. Schofield

8. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

9. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The Minutes of the last meeting on 15 July 2020 were approved.

10. SUMMARY OF RECOVERY WORKSTREAM ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE

Panel Members received a presentation on the Recovery work and achievements to date. It was recognised that focus of this Panel is the recovery of RBBC services and operations from the impact of Covid response initiatives, therefore the presentation focused on recovery activity. However, this needs to be placed in the context of ongoing Covid response activities and second wave planning. Areas highlighted included:

- **Communities and Vulnerable People** – hot food, food parcels, pharmacy collections and welfare calls were services that had been wound down although there was additional support for volunteers and foodbanks as well as ongoing work to support some single households. Limited activities had returned in the three Community Centres in line with government requirements.
- **Business and Economy** – Town and local centres had been supported to open including installing signage and working with local businesses and retailers. Additional small business grant funding had been made available.
- **Finance and Income** – Monthly returns were sent to MHCLG with Portfolio Holder oversight and the impact of Covid-19 was being considered as part of Service and Financial Planning.
- **Services and Projects** – Council services and activities were able to operate in a Covid-safe manner as services moved to 'business as usual'.
- **New ways of working** – a staff survey and Member survey had been carried out. An interim approach to staff working from Council offices in Covid-safe way had been agreed. Environmental opportunities and challenges from Covid-19 were being explored.

11. RECOVERY WORKSTREAMS - NEXT STEPS

Panel Members were given an overview of the next steps in the recovery work. The majority of RBBC operations and services for residents were now 'business as usual' and most staff were back in their day to day roles with Covid-safe modifications where required. Services such as civil enforcement work, patrolling car parks, refuse and recycling collections, greenspaces and virtual Committee meetings were running effectively. Council staff working remotely were delivering services as part of a changed working environment.

The Council was continuing to support residents at risk of homelessness. Business support for small businesses and engagement with larger employers and business networks and guilds continued. A Youth Hub project had received DWP funding to help young people into employment and the Economic Prosperity team was talking to town centre bodies about promoting Christmas trading. The New Ways for Working workstream's focus was on planning for a permanent return to offices as well as changes to ways of staff working and future formal and informal Council meetings.

Covid-19 second wave response – Panel Members asked about ongoing work on the Council's planned response to a second wave or spike of Covid-19 infections. Emergency planning for a second wave has been a focus in recent months, and includes scalable measures to respond to different restriction scenarios. This has taken learning from the 'first wave'. This work was being carried out alongside day to day delivery of services for residents and usual business continuity plans. The Incident Management Team (IMT) continues to take the lead role in relation to Covid response, and will continue to communicate with the Recovery Steering Group (RSG) about Covid response activities that will need to be 'recovered' in due course. Planning has included how staff would be redeployed as needed.

RBBC was working closely with community organisations and volunteers to plan support for vulnerable people. Some response activities would be scaled up again in the event of a second wave but others such as RBBC delivering hot food were not planned, instead services from other organisations or the voluntary sector would be used. It was unlikely that the garden waste service would be paused in the event of a second wave.

Panel Members asked how response planning for a spike in the virus dovetailed with the ongoing recovery work. Members also asked to what extent ongoing services could continue if there needed to be an enhanced response to Covid-19. The flow of information would be maintained between response (IMT) and recovery (RSG) to keep services running safely.

12. DISCUSSION AND QUESTIONS

Panel Members asked questions about and discussed the following areas:

Communities and Vulnerable People

- **Food banks** – the Council was working closely with food banks around the borough to secure agreements on providing and delivering food parcels to vulnerable residents. Council facilities at Reading Arch Road were being used as the main storage point and central food collection.

- **Locality meetings with local organisations and voluntary groups** were successful during the first wave and will be restarted in the event of a second wave. Members asked for a list of partner organisations involved, the geographic areas and how quickly these could be up and running again if needed in a second wave response to reassure Members about support available. Members asked which third party organisations would run services that RBBC provided in the first wave such as hot food.
- **Supporting homeless people** – it was noted that demand for temporary accommodation to support single homeless had gone up as a result of the first wave, and the Borough was continuing to support rough sleepers, using some additional government funding for this. While the courts are now open for eviction hearings, they are prioritising cases where the tenant has 12+ months of arrears. Any new notices seeking possession will be for 6 months rather than 2, giving the Council more time to work with affected residents. The Executive Member for Housing was working with the Housing Team on plans to respond to any future increase in demand for homelessness services and support.

Business and Economy

- **Youth Hub** – funding from the Department for Work and Pensions had been confirmed to set up a project with Tandridge District Council for an East of Surrey Youth Hub to support young people to access training and skills development, work experience and employment opportunities. A communications plan would support this new service once launched. This was part of the ongoing work to tackle youth unemployment which was rising in the borough.
- **Live local work local** was a project to target young people and employers alike, developing a website targeted at schools, linking students to career opportunities and identify career suggestions, and a second website for local employers to advertise jobs available locally.
- **Ongoing business activities** – as business lunches could not take place at the Town Hall, the economic prosperity team was promoting virtual business seminars and networking events. Members asked for more information about attendance for these online events. Anecdotally, business had picked up for smaller local food shops as residents avoided large supermarkets and requested local deliveries of food.

Finance and Income

- **Financial impact of Covid-19** – the Council had submitted its application to central government for recovering Covid costs and was waiting for a response. It was confirmed that the Government's definition of lost income excluded commercial income such as rent from third parties. Members asked for the list of definitions of what constituted commercial income, for example, did this include services paid by neighbouring councils such as fraud investigation.
- **Council Tax non-payment** – the shortfall in Council Tax payments was estimated to be £1m compared to previous years (including the collection for Surrey County Council and the police) although it was noted that due to agreed payment plans some of this would be recouped but over a longer period of time. The impact on next year's budget was being reviewed as part

of the ongoing Service and Financial Planning work. The Council was taking a sensitive approach to help residents who were struggling to pay Council Tax offering repayment plans over a longer period. Council Tax relief grants had been awarded to the most vulnerable residents. The Council is expecting to have to issue up to 1,000 summonses, although this may be restricted by the Magistrates Court. We have not yet issued any summonses this financial year. Members asked for further information about the efforts that RBBC has made to support those people with Council Tax arrears and the criteria for deciding which cases to take to court.

- **Budget Scrutiny Panel** – Overview and Scrutiny's Budget Scrutiny Panel would be constituted at the next Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting and scrutinise Service and Financial Plans and the likely impact of Covid on the Council's finances. More detail would be included in the November budget report to Executive.

New ways of working

- **Support for staff** – Members asked what support was available for staff working from home such as making sure that the home working environment was suitable, supplying desks and chairs if needed and checking on the welfare of staff. Staff had been encouraged to carry out a workspace self-assessment. Some staff who had limited space to work from home were able to work from the Town Hall with permission from their Head of Service. Larger PC screens, keyboards and office chairs were also available where needed. There was a package of support for staff welfare. The recent staff survey had shown that there were positive sides to working from home although some staff missed the social element of work. Other staff wanted to continue to work from home more often after the end of the pandemic.
- **Environmental challenges** – many residents were working from home during the pandemic and this had reduced the level of commuting, cutting car emissions. Less positive outcomes included the need to heat individual home-workers' homes over winter months and the increased number of online deliveries. Also, people were less keen to use public transport so promoting walking and cycling was important.
- **Fly tipping** – it was noted that hundreds of fly-tipping incidents had been reported which was having a negative impact on the local environment. Offenders were being persecuted if they could be traced. New strategies were needed to adapt to this increased threat. Members asked for details of action taken to deter fly-tipping given the increase reported in Borough News.

Covid-19 – second wave response – Members asked for more information about preparations for the second wave response to Covid-19, how they would be updated about this ongoing work and what was in place if Reigate and Banstead was considered a Tier 3 or high-risk area. Limited funding was available to deploy Covid marshals, if there was a second wave. Members asked if the Council was preparing to use this funding.

The Recovery Scrutiny Panel's feedback was an agenda item at Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 22 October. The next planned Recovery Scrutiny Panel was due to take place in January. An earlier meeting would be considered, if needed,

following the Budget Scrutiny Panel meeting and December's Overview and Scrutiny Committee discussions.

The Meeting closed at 8.16 pm