

PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a non-statutory meeting of the People Scrutiny Committee held on 17 June 2021.

PRESENT: Councillors Johanna Howell (Chair) Sam Adeniji, Charles Clark, Penny di Cara, Chris Dowling, Kathryn Field, Nuala Geary, Wendy Maples, Stephen Shing, John Ungar (Vice Chair) and Trevor Webb.

Mr Trevor Cristin, Diocese of Chichester Representative

LEAD MEMBERS: Councillor Bob Bowdler, Lead Member for Children and Families.
Councillor Carl Maynard, for Adult Social Care and Health
Councillor Bob Standley Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability

ALSO PRESENT: Mark Stainton, Director of Adult Social Care
Stuart Gallimore, Director of Children's Services
Darrel Gale, Director of Public Health

Councillors Abul Azad, Paul Redstone and Steve Murphy.

1 MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 11 MARCH 2021

1.1 RESOLVED to agree the minutes as a correct record.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

2.1 Apologies were received from Mr Simon Parr, Roman Catholic Diocese Representative and Ms Nicola Boulter, Parent Governor Representative.

3 DISCLOSURES OF INTERESTS

3.1 There were none.

4 URGENT ITEMS

4.1 There were none.

5 COVID-19 RESPONSE AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Mark Stainton, Director of Adult Social Care introduced the report and responded to a number of questions asked by the Committee. The key issues discussed included:

- **Sussex Care Homes BAME (Black Asian and Minority Ethnic) Staff Network:** Members asked for more detail about the first virtual network meeting of the Sussex Care Homes BAME Staff Network which took place in March 2021. In response the Director informed the Committee that despite some initial uncertainty amongst some attendees, the event was well-received. Attendees

welcomed the opportunity to discuss in an open and frank manner with both peers and system leaders the challenges they have faced during the pandemic. The meeting provided important feedback as it clarified to the Department the key challenges which are either unique to frontline BAME workers or which impact on all staff, but which are potentially more pronounced for workers in this group. Whilst a positive start, the Director informed Members that he accepts that the work undertaken so far constitutes only the first steps 'on a long journey' which will help identify and seek to address specific issues that BAME colleagues are facing.

- **Mandatory Covid-19 vaccination of care home workers:** The Committee discussed reports in the national media that the Government was considering introducing a mandatory requirement for care home staff to be vaccinated. Members were keen to understand the potential impact of this on staff recruitment and retention if there were significant levels of resistance to the measure and asked the Director to comment. In response Members were informed that although this is not currently government policy the Department are anticipating it will be a mandatory requirement. To provide some local context, the Director also commented that 95% of care home residents have received at least one dose of the Covid-19 vaccine and that 85% of staff had also received at least one dose. The Director also confirmed that the Department will always follow government advice and guidance on best practice in this area. Having said that a key challenge facing the care sector will be how to deal with staffing issues should vaccination become a mandatory requirement. For example, there are individuals who are unable to receive the vaccine for medical reasons. As a result, the care sector hope that if introduced any new measures will allow for some degree of flexibility to help manage individual staffing issues.
- **Support for Care Homes:** The Committee discussed the issues faced by care homes in East Sussex during the pandemic, noting reports in the national media regarding the financial challenges facing the care sector. The Committee therefore asked for more detail about the support provided to care homes in East Sussex and for figures on the numbers of care homes closed as a direct result of the pandemic. In response Members were informed that in addition to the slightly above inflation rate the County Council has paid for placements to private care homes, the Government has also provided significant amounts of financial support to the care sector. Despite this support, it remains the case that a significant number of care home residents tragically lost their lives during the pandemic. As a result, many care homes are experiencing financial challenges as they do have normal rates of occupancy. This in turn means the long-term viability of a significant number of care homes in the county is uncertain. As this is a national issue though the County Council, along with other local authorities, have reported concerns about the sustainability of the care home market to the Department of Health and Social Care. In terms of closures, Members were also informed that in East Sussex two Care Homes have closed as a direct result of Covid-19 outbreaks, with the residents being safely transferred to alternate care provision.
- **Covid-19 safety measures in care homes:** The Committee asked for more detail regarding the mitigations taken to prevent the spread of Covid-19 in care homes. More specifically Members asked about the issue reported in the

national media of Covid-positive hospital patients being discharged directly into care homes and whether this happened in East Sussex. In response, the Director informed the Committee that based on information from the two main NHS Acute (Hospital) Trusts in East Sussex, every patient was tested for the virus prior to hospital discharge. Furthermore, and in line with government policy, new admissions to care homes are required to isolate for two weeks. The Committee were also informed that where possible, care home staff have been divided into red and green categories to help further reduce the risk that residents are exposed to the virus. Furthermore, pathways have been established to deal safely with hospital patients who are medically fit for discharge, but who had tested positive for Covid-19. The pathways including admission to one of a number of designated care home settings within local NHS Community Hospitals. The Committee also sought clarity about the roles of Milton Grange and Firwood House in Eastbourne during the pandemic. In response Members were informed that Milton Grange was adapted to include a red unit which was dedicated to receiving Covid-19 positive clients (with its own staffing separate from the rest of the service). Firwood House has been retained as part of the Department's business continuity contingency plan in case of a catastrophic failure of a care home elsewhere in the county (such as a fire or flood). During the height of the pandemic Firwood House was 'effectively loaned' to the NHS for approximately a month as this helped local hospitals cope with the very high levels of demand caused by the pandemic.

5.2 The Committee RESOLVED to note the report.

6 PUBLIC HEALTH UPDATE

6.1 Darrell Gale, Director of Public Health introduced the report and responded to questions asked by Members. The key issues discussed included:

- **Lateral Flow Tests for Covid-19:** The Committee asked for the Department's views on the effectiveness of Lateral Flow Tests (LFT). In response Members heard that LFTs are widely accepted as a useful tool in limited circumstances. For example, and as LFT results can be produced quickly, they were used to help with the repatriation of lorry drivers to the continent over the Christmas period. Nonetheless the more accurate Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test should always be used for those with new symptoms. In response to a question about which agency pays for the Lateral Flow Tests used in care settings, the Committee were informed that the funding is provided by central government. Members also questioned the value for money of the LFT programme. In response the Committee Members heard that there is a general concern about the value for money offered by these tests if their use is not targeted effectively (as LFTs remain an effective tool for use in limited circumstances of the kind described above). Furthermore as LFT kits contain plastic it would also be appropriate for environmental reasons to limit their use to only the most appropriate circumstances.
- **Community Testing Programme.** In response to a question about what scope do local authorities have to undertake 'mass testing', the Committee heard that proposals are submitted to central government for evaluation and that applications can and have been refused.

- **Impact of the new UK Health Security Agency:** The Committee asked about the implications of the merging of Public Health England into the new UK Health Security Agency. In response Members were informed that with regard to changes at the national level, the Department is still working its way through the implications, but is focused on trying to ensure the strengths of the current system are maintained where possible. At the local level, the County Council will retain its core resources and funding for commissioned services such as the healthy child programme and so the Director does not believe the national change will have a significant impact on that role.
- **Programmes to reduce obesity and links to food security projects:** The Committee asked the Department to provide more detail on initiatives which aim to help reduce rates of obesity and the link between such programs and food security projects. In response, Members were provided with some examples of how obesity is being tackled locally. For example, and with regard to children's health and wellbeing, Health Visitors provide a key source of advice and guidance on promoting healthy lifestyles and advice on diet and nutrition. The Committee were also informed that additional funding has recently been received following a heightened national focus on tackling obesity. The Covid-19 pandemic has also helped raise awareness of the precarious nature of food security with Health Visitors providing feedback on the challenges some families are facing in this area. Whilst food security is not a major aspect of the Department's work, as mentioned above providing advice and guidance on diet and nutrition is part of the children's health programme. In response to a question about access to outdoor activities the Committee were informed of a number of related programmes. For example, last year the County Council linked with the Eastbourne and Lewes Walking Festival. Furthermore, and in the context of the pandemic, a modified version of the 'Beat the Street' game was provided with support last year (Beat the Street is a game which encourages individuals and groups to compete and earn points by exploring their area on foot or by bicycle). It was also clarified that Beat the Street is a relatively expensive programme to deploy and therefore it has recently only been operative in parts of the county where other local authorities have decided to provide support.
- **Delta Covid Variant in East Sussex:** In response to a question, Members were informed that Lateral Flow tests do respond to all variants of the virus. However, it is only through a PCR test that the actual strain of virus can be identified. The Committee also heard that current indications are showing that the Delta variant rates are low in East Sussex, with these estimated to make up around 50% of current cases (whereas nationally it is believed around 90% of new cases are of the Delta variant).
- **Healthy Weight programme.** In response to a question about the resumption of measuring of children as part of the Healthy Weight programme, the Director confirmed that it is anticipated this will recommence. However, it had not yet been agreed whether the programme would seek to 'catch-up' with those children who were not measured during the lockdown.
- **Killed and Seriously Injured (KSI) on East Sussex roads.** The Committee discussed the KSI rate in East Sussex and asked for more information on how

the budget for this area is spent and what work is being undertaken in this area. In response, Members heard that this is a particularly important area of activity as unfortunately East Sussex is an outlier in terms of the rate of people killed and seriously injured on its roads. It was also clarified to the Committee that funding in this area is all spent within the Communities, Economy and Transport (CET) Department of the County Council. Members were also provided with some examples of the innovative types of work being undertaken to reduce the local KSI figure. For example, research undertaken by Public Health indicates that sending reminder letters to individuals who have previously been penalised for speeding is beneficial. The letters remind recipients of the unpleasant experience of being fined and this seems to help influence behaviour and make it more likely that they will continue to avoid speeding in the future.

6.2 The Committee RESOLVED to note the report.

7 PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME

7.1 The Committee discussed its Work Programme which is comprised of a number of ongoing scrutiny reviews, reference groups and planned reports. In the context of the non-statutory meeting, Members agreed to submit their preferences for membership of a number of scrutiny groups which had been previously established. The Committee agreed it would consider the appointments at its September meeting. Membership of the following bodies was discussed: the Loneliness and Isolation Scrutiny Reference Group, the Health and Social Care Integration Programme (HASCIP) Reference Group, the Educational Attainment and Performance Scrutiny Reference Group and the Scrutiny Review of School Exclusions.

7.2 The Committee agreed that it would be beneficial to have an 'Away Day' which would allow it to focus on discussing and agreeing its priorities for the coming months. As a result, the Committee requested that arrangements are made for an Away Day to take place in the autumn.

7.3 The Committee noted the Council's Forward Plan of decisions in Appendix 2 of the report.

7.4 The Committee RESOLVED to:

- 1) Agree to hold an 'Away Day' work planning session in the autumn to discuss and agree the Committee's priorities for the future Work Programme, including topics for scrutiny reviews.
- 2) Submit preferences for membership of various scrutiny groups which the Committee would then consider at its next meeting.
- 3) Note the Council's current Forward Plan of decisions

Councillor Johanna Howell
Chair

