



SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

10:00-13:05

10 June 2020

Present: Councillors Wright (chair), Ryan (vice chair), Carlo, Driver (substitute for Cllr Manning), Fulton-McAlister (M), Giles, Grahame, McCartney-Gray, Oliver, Osborn and Sarmezey,

Apologies: Councillors Sands (S) and Thomas (Vi)

1. Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Public questions/petitions

There were no public questions or petitions.

3. Minutes

RESOLVED to approve the accuracy of the minutes of the meeting held on 6 February 2020.

4. Covid-19 recovery report

The chair invited the leader of the council to present the report. He said that everyone had been impacted by the pandemic and the city needed to redesign services with an emphasis on supporting the vulnerable. The council was working with partners, including other local authorities, and represented the most significant urban area in Norfolk. Citizens had taken the lockdown seriously but the pandemic had not disappeared.

Local government would be a key partner in building structures to allow the country to move forwards and the leader had written to the Prime Minister to remind him of how important local government would be in this and to ask for sufficient funding to be able to carry out this work.

The chair invited the chief executive to address the committee. The chief executive said that the report covered three areas – impact, response and priorities. The council was consulting with a range of partners including residents and businesses and would

develop a more detailed action plan. A dashboard of measures would be progressed through the corporate leadership team and cabinet.

The number of cases and deaths from Covid-19 had been relatively low in Norwich due to a range of factors including geography and the demographic of the city. The behaviour of residents had played a large part in this alongside the work of the NHS and the emergency services.

The council had concentrated on keeping vital services running and supporting the city's vulnerable residents. A community response hub had been set up within a week which showed that the council could make change at pace. The revenues and benefits team had been paying out grants to small businesses and the hardship fund had been used to reduce council tax bills to zero for the most vulnerable residents. All those sleeping rough had been offered accommodation. The council had embraced different ways of working and it was anticipated that the organisation would become more flexible to offer a better work / life balance.

The council would continue to lobby central government to ensure that it was compensated for the additional expenditure and reduced income as a result of Covid-19 but it would also need to continue to look at savings.

The chair asked whether the council had been required to carry out means testing when processing the small business grants. The chief executive said that there was no means testing as the guidance stated an emphasis on speed with elements of due diligence. The government had confirmed that it would be accountable for any fraud committed by applicants.

In response to a member's question regarding a revision of the council's Commercial Property Investment Strategy in light of the Covid-19 situation, the leader of the council said that investments in commercial assets was not a recent activity and had been an integral part of council funding over the last few decades. Recent investments were a reaction to funding cuts from central government and the council had been successful in mitigating these over the last ten years. Purchases were carefully selected, with some properties in the city, which would help with the recovery. The member questioned whether investment in renewable energy had been considered. The leader of the council said that the recovery blueprint was a document that would be developed and he could not predict what the condition of the economy would be in the coming months. The document would be reviewed alongside additional opportunities that came up as part of the changing economy.

A member asked whether the changes to service delivery and the fact that the council may not be reimbursed by central government for money spent during the pandemic, would result in any compulsory redundancies. The chief executive said that the report set out the impact of Covid-19 on the council's finances, which was significant and although the council had a healthy level of reserves, those would need to be maintained for the future so options for savings would need to be explored. The council wanted to avoid an impact on the workforce so would need to look at how to increase incomes. A recruitment freeze had been initiated and vacancies would be reviewed by the Corporate Leadership Team. Each service budget was being reviewed line by line to identify savings but the council wanted to avoid redundancies as far as possible. He wanted to look to internal talent where possible and policies

would be followed including redeployment where appropriate. The leader of the council said that the council had not made any compulsory redundancies over the last ten years, where other councils had. The council wanted to maintain frontline services and the staff that had delivered these.

A member questioned whether the shift to online contact with the council would mean that residents without access to the internet would be disadvantaged. The director of strategy, communications and culture said that the shift to online contact was for those who were able to get online to contact the council that way to provide resilience for those who were not able to use online services.

In response to a members question regarding the death rate from Covid-19 in Norwich, the chief executive said that the figures in the report were deaths in hospitals and there was no information on where those patients had come from.

A member asked how the council would support those who were on zero hours contracts and how the delivery of basic food parcels would continue for the vulnerable. The leader of the council said that work had been undertaken with the Living Wage Foundation alongside a wide network of partners across the city on a good employers charter. The council was also aware of the shortcomings of the social security system so would continue to pressurise central government to improve those welfare structures. The chief executive said that the council was looking at how to wind down the work of the food hub in a managed way. The demand had dropped significantly and people would be directed to support from community groups and charities.

In response to a members question about the re-opening of non-essential shops and signage around social distancing, the leader of the council said that there was signage in place in the city centre, including the market. He said that the council would like to close some streets to cars, such as Magdalen Street, St Benedict's Street and Upper St Giles but with the termination of the joint highways agreement, the proposals would needed sign off from Norfolk County Council. This agreement had been asked for as a matter of urgency due to the city being a major urban area.

A member referenced paragraphs 4.32 to 4.36 of the report and asked how many rough sleepers had turned down assistance from the council. The chief executive said that he was not aware of any rough sleepers that had turned down assistance. Compassion was fundamental to the Pathways model and the council was continuing to engage with those that needed help. The leader of the council said that at the beginning of the lockdown, the housing team had been proactive and had undertaken a lot of preventative work so that there was sufficient accommodation to meet demand.

A member said that although they weren't aware of anyone refusing assistance, there were still a number of community groups providing food for large numbers of people. The chief executive said that all those sleeping rough that the council was aware of, had been offered assistance around accommodation, with medicine and food deliveries to that accommodation, in order to keep people in a safe environment.

A member raised concerns around transparency of services with partners such as the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP). The leader of the council said that the LEP was a key partner working with local councils and information from the LEP was in the public domain. As the council's representative on the LEP, he could pass on any

queries or comments but also said that members could contact the LEP directly with concerns.

A member asked that with the focus of the recovery around house building whether there would be programme of retro fitting housing across the city using the council's purchasing power or the Towns Fund. He also asked that in light of the council being reliant on car parking income, whether reducing the number of cars coming into the city would be looked at. The leader of the council said that the council was encouraging people to walk and cycle where possible, but the car parks were an integral part of the wider regional economy and providing transport links to get people into the city. Higher use of electric vehicles would still mean that car parks would be needed for the foreseeable future but a wider reform of public transport would be welcome. There needed to be a green economy model going forwards, including retro fitting and looking at sub-standard housing and the council would continue to lobby central government around this.

A member commented that although flexible working could have benefits, it was important to remember that homeworking could bring other issues such as social isolation and overloading of responsibility. The chief executive said that he agreed that wellbeing needed to be considered in regard to flexible working. Staff would be given the choice and unions were being actively engaged around this.

(Members took a short break at 11:50 and the meeting reconvened at 12:00)

A member said that there were gaps in the impact, especially around higher education. The city was likely to see a fall in student numbers which would have an impact on the city centre economy. The report also referred to opportunities to promote sustainable travel and she said that there needed to be a change in how to make short journeys within the city. With regards to reducing carbon emissions, the report should reflect a change of 13% less emissions across the city, as recommended by the Tyndall Centre.

A member commented that he was concerned about the aging population of Norwich and that the city was coming out of lockdown too quickly. He asked what the plans were around this. The chief executive said that in terms of test and trace, Norfolk was one of eleven beacon local authorities and a management plan was being developed through the Norfolk Resilience Forum. There was some uncertainty around local lockdowns and local authorities did not currently have those powers. The council was working closely with public health and other local partners to ensure that the city was opening as safely as possible, within the limitations.

A member questioned whether the powers outlined in paragraphs 5.66 and 5.74, relating to licensing and environmental health, gave powers to close down a workplace if the employer was found to be infringing on the guidance. The chief executive said that through a combination of environmental health and public health powers, a building could be directed to close.

A member commented that social distancing would need to be monitored as some shops had measure in place for this, however, there was little footfall in the city. She asked whether there were any statistics on the increase in domestic abuse during the lockdown and what wraparound services were available. The chief executive said that the Norfolk Resilience Forum was made up of several groups and representatives,

including a domestic abuse group. Council officers also had involvement and more detailed work was being undertaken around this. Members would be updated as the work progressed.

RESOLVED to ask cabinet to consider:-

- (1) Amending bullet point 2 under section 7, Climate change and the green economy' in the recovery themes and key actions summary on p31 of the report to reflect the recommendation of the Tyndall centre to reduce carbon emissions of Norwich by 13 % annually
- (2) Amending bullet point 4, under section 4 'business and the local economy' section, in the recovery themes and key actions summary on p30 of the report, from 'consider the opportunities to further promote sustainable travel in the city, building on the already well-advanced measures already in place' to 'consider the opportunities to further promote sustainable travel *on whole route approaches*, building on the already well-advanced measures already in place' to
- (3) Lobbying the LGA and central government for all district councils to be given some of the powers and financial resources that the Health and Safety Executive has, to allow the city council to enforce social distancing if employers are not complying.
- (4) At section 8.4, include trade unions to the list of groups to be consulted on this document.
- (5) Redoubling efforts with Norfolk County Council to ensure social distancing measures around the city centre are in place as soon as possible.
- (6) Including further references to the impact of Covid-19 on the insurance industry regarding aviation, and families and young people, particularly in reference to education, including local universities.
- (7) Revising the Commercial Property Investment Strategy to reflect the changes in the economy due to Covid-19 and how this could drive a green economy.
- (8) Investigating the use of purchasing powers to undertake a retrofit programme on housing as a key part of driving the economic recovery.
- (9) Looking at alternative sources of income to car parks in the city.
- (10) Looking at the experience of other local authorities which are pursuing a circular economy to take advantage of the fact that Norwich has two recycling centres in development.

CHAIR