

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

A meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board was held on Thursday 3 December 2020.

PRESENT: Councillors , M Storey (Vice-Chair, in the Chair), L Garvey, A Hellaoui, T Higgins, B Hubbard, T Mawston, C McIntyre, J McTigue, J Platt and Z Uddin

PRESENT BY INVITATION: Councillors D McCabe

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

OFFICERS: S Bonner, C Breheny, Cooper, G Field, C Lunn, T Parkinson and S Reynolds

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Councillors J Thompson, C Cooke, D Coupe, S Hill, M Saunders and A Preston (The Mayor)

20/50 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest received at this point in the meeting.

20/51 **MINUTES - OSB - 5 NOVEMBER 2020**

The minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board held on 5 November 2020 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

20/52 **EXECUTIVE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME**

The Chief Executive submitted a report which identified the forthcoming issues to be considered by the Executive, as outlined in Appendix A to the report. The report provided the Overview and Scrutiny Board with the opportunity to consider whether any item contained within the Executive Forward Work Programme should be considered by the Board, or referred to a Scrutiny Panel.

A Member made reference to the impending Transporter Bridge report and queried the origins of the problems referred to within it. In response, the Chief Executive advised that the report would cover the issues in full, but if there were any further questions after that report had been considered by the Executive, these could be raised at a future meeting.

NOTED

20/53 **MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19**

The Chief Executive provided a verbal update to the Board regarding the Council's response to COVID-19. The following points were made:

- In response to queries raised at the last OSB meeting, the following information was provided:
 - In relation to whether an extension to the Selective Landlord Licensing scheme could be sought / considered with a view to recouping time lost as a result of COVID-related delays to inspections, the Director of Adult Social Care and Health Integration had advised that although housing standard inspections had been suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic, plans were in place to undertake the originally intended volume of inspections within the current lifetime of the scheme. Consequently, as neither tenants nor landlords would be disadvantaged by the temporary suspension during the pandemic, it was felt that an extension to the scheme was not required.

- Regarding a request for an update in respect of the Council's approach to Christmas Free School Meals, this had been superseded by local allocation of a national Winter Grants scheme which the Government had announced (further details would be provided during the meeting); and
 - With regards to the impact of COVID-19 on staff absences / sickness / isolation relating to COVID-19 since 23/03/2020, and the further associated impact on Council finances, etc., further details would be provided during the meeting.
- In terms of the latest COVID-19 position, Middlesbrough's numbers had drastically reduced over the last 10-15 days; around 170 per 100,000 of the population, having been over 500 circa. 15 days previously. Across all of the indicators that the Government was suggesting would be used to determine which tiers Councils were placed in, a similar drop had been seen within those. Rates across population had reduced significantly in the over 60s and in the number of people in hospital, which mirrored the current trend across the whole Tees Valley. It was hoped that this trend would continue, and although 25-30 cases were still occurring daily, this was a significant reduction from the 100-plus cases seen previously.
 - When looking at the statistics in relation to indices of multiple deprivation, there was a higher prevalence of COVID-19 in deprived wards, although some of the work undertaken had shown that in some areas, for example Central Ward, this was lower than would perhaps have been anticipated. It was felt clear that this was due to testing activity, and therefore the testing strategy would focus on targeting poorer communities where take-up was known to be low.
 - Regarding the COVID-19 winter grant approach, it was explained that a circa. £700,000 allocation had been received from the Government to cover the period of the school holidays from January-March. This had superseded local plans that were being developed around a free school meals approach over Christmas and school holidays. Reference was made to an individual Executive Member decision being taken on 2 December 2020 in respect of this matter. It was explained that there was discretion for local Councils as to how the grant could be utilised - the only rule being that 80% of it should go towards families with children. Grants would be allocated to families with dependent children who were in receipt of Council Tax reduction, or that had children in need or most at risk, or were residents with children who were not in receipt of the Council Tax reduction scheme and fell outside of crisis support criteria. Payments had been extended purely beyond the free school meals cohort because there was an awareness that large numbers of residents had encountered financial difficulties, residents that did not fall into the free school meals category or were not in receipt of Universal Credit, for example. It was indicated that there were approximately 2200 households in the town that had never been in arrears previously with their Council Tax, but now were due to income reduction (e.g. through self-employment and / or furlough). Attempts were being made to target this as successfully as possible. Awarded monies would be utilised to meet the costs of food and winter fuel bills. Some of the allocation would be retained and work undertaken in partnership with Middlesbrough Environment City to create sustainability by avoiding a cycle of providing additional support every school holiday, but instead work with families to support them in cooking healthy, inexpensive meals at home, to become more ingredient aware, etc. An update in respect of this work would be provided at a future meeting.
 - Regarding the impact of COVID-19 on staff absence / sickness, it was indicated that circa. 160 staff were currently absent due to sickness, which represented about 5% of the workforce. Numbers had been relatively static throughout the COVID-19 period and had not yet impacted the Council's ability to deliver services to the public. Overall, this equated to 7.7% of working days that had been lost to COVID-19. At the beginning of the first lockdown in March 2020, COVID-19 accounted for circa. 25% of all sickness; as the first-wave eased, staff sickness also eased. This figure currently stood at just under 20% of all staff. In terms of the number of staff currently shielding,

either due to being part of the clinically extremely vulnerable cohort or being asked to self-isolate, there were 350 at the start of the first lockdown, which reduced down to 150 by the end of that period. Currently, circa. 150 staff were either self-isolating or shielding, the vast majority of which were able to continue working from home. There was circa. 1400 employees logged onto the Council's system at any one point in time, therefore being in isolation did not necessarily affect someone's ability to undertake their work.

- In terms of COVID-19 sickness as a proportion of all sickness, it was reiterated that the Council had not yet reached a point whereby the ability to deliver services had been impacted. There had been some issues experienced around refuse collection, but because there was an agile workforce in place, some staff had been moved from Area Care into that area to ensure that refuse could still be collected. Pre and post-COVID-19 productivity levels, overall, had remained the same throughout the period.

Following the update, Members were afforded the opportunity to ask questions of both the Chief Executive and the Director of Public Health. The following issues were raised:

- A Member queried whether the declining number of cases could be attributed to anything in particular. In response, it was explained that this was exceptionally difficult; the Council had done all it could to promote COVID-19 safe practices to reduce cases, but this was being undertaken at a time when cases were also increasing. It was felt that a lot of it was a consequence of nature.
- A Member made reference to the grant payments and queried how this would be distributed, i.e. would funding need to be applied for. In response, it was explained that the cohort had been identified. There would be an application process for those perhaps missed, but there was an awareness that, in respect of the 2200 households mentioned previously who had never needed to claim before, there may be some resistance to do so. In terms of the process for those individuals identified, a code would be sent to a mobile phone to enable the recipient to visit a shop and obtain a cash amount. It was felt that this afforded residents increased dignity and offered greater choice as to what the money was spent on – i.e. food, heating or water.
- A Member commented on the reduction in the rate of infection and acknowledged the work of both the Council and the public in helping to achieve this, with everyone working together.
- A Member queried whether Middlesbrough's figures were currently lower than before entering the second lockdown. In response, it was indicated that this was the case, with the current figures being at their lowest since the end of September 2020. Clarification was sought regarding the tier system, as Middlesbrough was in tier 2 at that time, but was now entering tier 3. In response, it was explained that Middlesbrough was in tier 2, but destined for tier 3. Discussion had been taking place at that time with the Government in terms of moving the Tees Valley into tier 3, but this was superseded by the national lockdown. The outcome of a review was expected on or before 16 December 2020, which would determine which tier Middlesbrough would be in beyond then. It was explained that, given the rates across the town, officials were arguing the case for tier 2, particularly in relation to the number of people in hospital, in critical care, prevalence amongst the over 60s etc. However, the issue was that the benchmark figure was unknown; rates were a third of what they were previously, but four or five months ago, the rate of 20 per 100,000 was considered high (Middlesbrough was currently at 170 per 100,000). It was felt likely that it would depend how other areas were performing and where Middlesbrough sat in the 'league table', but work and the argument for tier 2 would continue.
- A Member made reference to the vaccination programme and the map that had been released earlier on in the day in respect of where people would need to attend in order to be vaccinated. It appeared that the closest facility serving Middlesbrough's

residents would be located in Newcastle; a query was raised as to whether Middlesbrough Council and its Public Health teams would be lobbying in order to attain more localised provision. In response, it was commented that many people in Middlesbrough and other areas would be unable to travel that journey, either for health or financial reasons. For example, over one third of people in the Tees Valley did not own their own vehicle, and therefore the Council would be lobbying. Officials' assessment was that this was the first wave rollout of the vaccination and as the programme developed (with rollout to Community vaccination, etc.), local vaccination provision would be a necessity or it would not work, and therefore this would be discussed as the vaccination programme developed. Members would be updated on the progress made around this in due course. A Member commented that vaccination provision for the North East would be made from a Hub in Newcastle.

- A Member made reference to the BAME Community and individuals being at a higher risk from COVID-19, and queried whether there would be a priority for vaccination. In response, it was explained that this was currently unknown. At present, work was taking place with Central Government to develop a testing strategy for Middlesbrough, which was more advanced than the vaccinations strategy (that level of detail had not yet been reached). It was envisaged that the local vaccination programme would follow a similar route to the testing programme, where concentration would be on those delivering critical tasks such as care and those wishing to visit relatives, and then proceed onto more vulnerable groups (whether that be due to ethnicity, disability or where they lived). A programme would be developed locally; it was hoped that further information would be attained in the near future.
- A Member made reference to Middlesbrough Environment City and commended the work being undertaken. It was hoped that a previous scheme revolving around the provision of slow cookers and cookbooks in deprived communities would be repeated.

The Chair thanked the Chief Executive for his attendance and contribution to the meeting.

NOTED

20/54

EXECUTIVE MEMBER UPDATE: EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR ENVIRONMENT

The Executive Member for Environment, Councillor D McCabe, was in attendance at the meeting to update the Board on his aims and aspirations, progress made to date, and to highlight any emerging issues relating to his portfolio. The Director of Environment and Commercial Services was also in attendance at the meeting.

Prior to the delivery of the Executive Member's update, the Chair informed the Board that two call-ins had been accepted in respect of fortnightly bin collections, which would be considered at a separate meeting of the Board on 18 December 2020. Discussion of fortnightly bin collections was therefore restricted at this meeting.

The Executive Member made the following points as part of his update to the Board:

- **Green Strategy** – it was explained that the Council had set out to reduce its carbon emissions to net zero by 2029, and by 2039 for the town as a whole, which was well ahead of the Government's target of 2050. The Green Strategy was based on the ten One Planet Living principles, which were highlighted to Members. The updates, aims and objectives of the Green Strategy were outlined to the Board; it was explained that all Heads of Service had been involved in establishing working groups, each allocated one of the ten principles, to deliver an overarching strategy with partners, businesses and citizens. Accredited training in respect of the Green Strategy and green issues would be provided to all Heads of Service by Northumbria University. This was an ongoing piece of work; the strategy was expected to be completed in early 2021.
- **Trees** – in order to increase tree cover to the national average of 16%, the Council was committed to planting 15,000 trees by 2021 (tree cover was currently 11.8%). Certain parts of Middlesbrough, such as in suburbs, had good leaf cover, but this needed to be

increased in order to achieve the environmental benefits that it offered, such as clean air and biodiversity. In 2019/2020, 620 mature trees and 1,550 whips were planted. In the current year, 960 standard mature trees and 12,750 whips were being planted. Varieties included English Oak, Silver Birch and Lime. Community planting would commence from this month onwards in partnership with Middlesbrough Environment City.

- Wild Flower Areas – new areas, such as roundabouts and roadsides, were installed in October 2020 (as the spring window had been missed due to COVID-19). This equated to approximately 30,000 square metres. Significant work with Thirteen Group had been undertaken to achieve this. It was explained that wild flowers not only enhanced the visual appearance of the town, but would also develop into wildlife havens across Middlesbrough (which provided further environmental benefits, such as cleaner air).
- Teesaurus Park / Dino Park – due to wildlife habits and rare orchids being discovered on the site, previous plans to develop this area for use as an amphitheatre had been discarded. Following further consideration, a volunteer group of Community Champions had been given permission to paint the dinosaurs: the Council and two local companies had supplied paint for this purpose. During this process, footfall at the site had increased exponentially, with visitors coming from as far as Newcastle and York, who had learnt of the site and work being undertaken via social media. The Community Champions had cleared the area and continued to litter pick on a regular basis; paintwork had also been completed. An action team had been established, with further proposals being made for the area. This included the installation of new pathways and lighting, information boards regarding the different species of dinosaurs on the site, potential provision of catering facilities, and new play equipment. In terms of the lighting, local companies had been approached for sponsorship. There were nature walks available in the area and it was hoped that these would be further explored by visitors through this development work. Work was ongoing; Members would be updated accordingly.
- Urban Farm – work was moving forward with the Camphill Trust to introduce an Urban Farm in Middlesbrough. Planning Permission had been applied for and it was expected that the farm would begin to take shape in spring / summer 2021. Reference was made to COVID-19 and the impact that this had had on timescales affecting such projects, but it was hoped that progress would be made soon.
- Lower Ormesby Nature Reserve – this was a proposal for a new nature reserve to the junction of North Ormesby / Shepherdson Way and the A66. There was a rich biodiversity with a habit of grassland, reed bed and stream margins (Ormesby Beck) with 170 plant species recorded, including three species of orchid. 45 bird species had been seen / heard on the site, and 13 species of butterfly were to be found (including the increasingly rare Dingy Skipper Butterfly, which was a UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Species). Planning Permission had been applied for, which would be subject to assets. This could be developed into a commercial area, but in light of the biodiversity on site, it was felt that it should be removed from the Council's Asset Register and developed into a nature reserve (which would be within walking distance of the Town Centre). A report would be considered in respect of this by the Executive in the near future.
- Pothole Purge and Enhanced Highways Maintenance – the pothole purge was now almost complete, with excellent work being undertaken. The final Ward to be tended to (i.e. Trimdon Ward) was currently being addressed. Members were asked to report any areas that had been missed to the Executive Member, who would endeavour to have these addressed as soon as possible. In addition, as part of the pothole programme, an intervention programme of works was also in operation throughout the town. It was explained that road surfaces tended to break down during the winter months, with potholes then appearing. It was reiterated to Members that if any remedial works were required during this time, to please contact the Executive Member, or alternatively raise the matter via the Onestop system.

Following the update, Members were afforded the opportunity to ask questions and the following issues were raised:

- A Member referred to bins and Thirteen Group properties and explained that when properties were voided, bins were left in place and occasionally stolen / set alight. It was felt that the bins needed to be removed from empty premises until the next residents moved in. In response, the Executive Member advised that he would liaise with Thirteen Group in respect of the comments made.
- Following enquiries from two Members in relation to potholes / road resurfacing works, it was agreed that further information around projected completion dates regarding the A172 Stokesley Road (Parkway to Southern Cross), and Acklam Road and Hall Drive, would be obtained and forwarded to the respective Members.
- A Member referred to wildflower seeds and requested that all Councillors be made aware of the availability of these, either for collection from Middlesbrough Environment City or for distribution directly to them.
- Regarding the preservation of trees in relation to new housing developments, it was requested that Environment Services liaise with the Planning department to ensure that as many mature trees and hedgerows as possible could be preserved (e.g. through the issuing of Tree Preservation Orders) when new developments were approved.
- In respect of environmental enforcement, Members requested that statistics be provided to the Board in relation to: a) the number of people prosecuted, warned or fined for fly tipping activity, and b) the current wait times for both paid for and free collections. In relation to current and previous policy, comparator statistics to illustrate whether the wait times for the collection of bulky waste had increased or decreased since the change in policy were also requested.
- A Member made reference to grass verge damage and enforcement and commented that hotspot areas should be looked at, with grass verges being removed or tarmacked over. A Member made reference to discussion undertaken in respect of this matter at a recent meeting of the Economic Development, Environment and Infrastructure Scrutiny Panel, and commented that a bid for funding could potentially be made to the Capital Fund to allow for works to be completed in hotspot areas as soon as possible (as in some cases, works would not be undertaken until 2024 at the earliest).
- Regarding cycling and walking infrastructure, a Member made reference to the Government's announcement of a £2bn investment in cycling and walking, highlighting that:
 - £250m had been released to make temporary bus lanes, widen cycle paths, provide pedestrian access and lengthen cycle lanes; and
 - £175m had been made available for areas around schools, e.g. creating pedestrianised streets to enhance safety for parents and families taking children to school.

The Member queried whether further information could be provided to the Board to detail what plans were in place to make large scale and exciting changes to how travel was undertaken around Middlesbrough, and how the above national funding streams were being accessed. Further, to explain what expansive plans were being put in place to encourage cycling and an increased use of public transport.

The Chair thanked the Executive Member for Environment and the Director of Environment and Commercial Services for their attendance and contributions to the meeting.

AGREED that the information provided be noted, and the agreed action be undertaken.

The Scrutiny Chairs / Vice Chairs present at the meeting provided updates in respect of the work undertaken by their respective panels since the last meeting of the Board.

NOTED

20/56 **DATE OF NEXT MEETING - THURSDAY, 14 JANUARY 2021 AT 4:00 P.M.**

The next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board had been scheduled for Thursday, 14
January 2021 at 4:00 p.m.

NOTED

20/57 **ANY OTHER URGENT ITEMS WHICH IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIR, MAY BE
CONSIDERED.**

None.