



SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

BURNLEY TOWN HALL

Wednesday, 10th June, 2020 at 6.30 pm

This meeting was a remote meeting held under the Coronavirus Act 2020.

PRESENT

MEMBERS

Councillors A Tatchell (Chair), M Johnstone (Vice-Chair), H Baker, T Commis, D Ferrier, A Fewings, B Foster, P Gill, T Kennedy, S Khan, G Lishman, S Lone, L Mehanna, L Pate, A Royle and M Townsend

OFFICERS

Lukman Patel	– Chief Operating Officer
Rob Dobson	– Head of Policy and Engagement
Paul Gatrell	– Head of Housing & Development Control
Simon Goff	– Head of Green Spaces and Amenities
Kate Ingram	– Strategic Head of Economy and Growth
Asad Mushtaq	– Head of Finance and Property
Catherine Waudby	– Head of Legal and Democratic Services
Alison McEwan	– Democracy Officer
Imelda Grady	– Democracy Officer
Christine Wood	–

IN ATTENDANCE

The Leader and Executive Members, Councillors Charlie Briggs, Margaret Lishman, Gordon Birtwistle, Ivor Emo and Cosima Towneley

1. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 11th March 2020 were approved as a correct record.

2. Additional Items of Business

In accordance with the provisions of Section 100 (B)(4)(b) of the Local Government Act 1972 the Chair decided that the following item on business should be considered at item 11 of the agenda, the reason being to enable a timely response to the re-opening of the market.

Item 11 – Burnley Market COVID 19 Response

The item to be taken in private as it contains information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

3. Notice of Key Decisions and Private Meetings

IT WAS AGREED

That the 28 day Notice of Key Decisions and Private Meeting be noted.

4. The Council's response to COVID 19

The Chief Executive, the Chief Operating Officer and Heads of Service gave a presentation on the work that had been done within their service areas during the COVID 19 pandemic and also the work undertaken with partner organisations. They then responded to questions and observations from members.

All members before speaking praised the officers, staff and partner organisations for the significant work that they had done and were continuing to do during this time.

A summary of the questions and observations made by members and the responses given are as follows:

- Cllr Gordon Lishman

Q. looking forward, what is the short and medium term impact on the council finances and levels of reserves?

O. it would be unusual for things to return to normal quickly and the council should plan for possible 2nd and 3rd wave episodes of the virus before a vaccination became available.

Q. the North West economy was predicted to be the hardest hit by Brexit and combined with the pandemic what plans were there for the economy?

O. on the channels of communications and key messages to different audiences a communication strategy was going to be essential if there was a second spike of the virus in the autumn and the council needed to plan now and ensure clear messages were given if this happened.

Officers responded accepting that the recovery from the pandemic and Brexit would bring challenges. In respect of communications the Council was not working alone but with the Lancashire Resilience Forum and all partners, focusing on engagement with residents in Lancashire. In respect of council finances it was anticipated that there would be a £5m impact and the reserves situation was a critical issue, regular reports were being given to group leaders and to the Executive with more detail on the financial position. The Chief Executive said that Burnley was in a similar position to other local authorities and the Local Government Association had anticipated there would be a £6b impact across all local authorities in the country.

Cllr Andy Fewings

O. the 30-page presentation had been printed on one side which was wasteful and was also unnecessary as the presentation was being screened at the meeting.

Q. was there any commitment from the Government on the projected £5m shortfall?

Q. Homelessness during the crisis was being tackled but will this support continue after the pandemic? Could there be a commitment going forward.?

Q. Some residents were having a tough time personally and in areas where there was anti-social behaviour this had been exacerbated during lockdown. Could the reporting of ASB be more flexible as some residents did not have internet access and filling in diary sheets was too much for some people?

O. there was a lot of empty properties and with a recession forecast the council needs to do more in this area.

Officers responded that there was no commitment from Government regarding the shortfall but lobbying was taking place between all local authorities. In respect of homelessness officers were working with a multi-disciplinary team on the second phase and looking at a number of options on how to provide help for people. In respect of reporting ASB issues staff were providing support to residents and signposting residents to partners for help, the officer said she would be willing to look at flexibility of reporting but being mindful that in order for agencies to take action there had to be evidence to support the complaints. The officer would speak to Councillor Fewings separately on this issue. In respect of empty properties officers explained the work that was being undertaken on the acquisitions programme to buy and sell on properties, and working with owners of empty properties to bring their properties back into use through incentives and loans. Work was also being undertaken with the private landlord sector to promote landlord accreditation. There was a need to strategically plan for what was a limited resource and to direct it to where there would be the most impact.

Councillor Mark Townsend

O. Burnley's distribution of business grants was only 80% and £4m was in the bank which should have been out in the community. A deadline was set of April for distribution. A neighbouring authority had a 90% distribution rate and there was room for improvement in Burnley.

O. Government support was inadequate for local government and the £5m shortfall would require the council to set an emergency budget in the next few months. The priorities set in the February budget would be completely different now and money may need to be reallocated.

O. On economy and growth the presentation should have had a slide on job losses in the borough. All other local authorities and the LEP need to have a coordinated response. There was a need to provide an estimation of the scale of job losses over the next 12 months and how the council could then support businesses and the local economy.

O. in respect of the £16.7m infrastructure grant it was felt that the council had not done everything it could to hold the programme which kept people in work and created new jobs.

In response officers said that the league table of business grants published by the Government was misleading because some businesses in Burnley were not eligible for the money. Burnley`s distribution was at 86% and that 99% of the eligible grants applied for had been paid out. All the schemes in the infrastructure grant programme were going ahead but with a 6 – 8 week delay because of the pandemic and uncertainties of what work could be carried out. Schemes were back on track and all funding was secured to see them through.

Councillor Lian Pate

Q. what measures were being taken to keep in touch with children identified as vulnerable and also of new cases of vulnerable children because of being at home?

Q. Normally in summer holidays there would be provision to keep vulnerable children fed and also some guided activities to keep them occupied. What arrangements were in place to keep them active and on the right track at this time.?

Q. in the early days of the pandemic there were people who had no underlying health conditions but were classed as vulnerable such as the elderly, housebound or people with learning difficulties. As such they were not eligible for government support, they were still being identified now and it had taken 10 weeks for them to get a letter to allow them to get shopping support. Is the council confident that all people have been identified and what steps were being taken to assist those people who don't use social media or buy newspapers because they are shielding.?

Q. what analysis has been done on the financial impact on the third sector which provide essential services to the vulnerable, the impact of lack of fundraising etc. At what point are those services in Burnley Together to be wound up and what steps were there in place to bring them back if there was a second wave or increase in cases?

Q. the council has an IT strategy but there is a lack of a digital strategy and was there plans for a short term digital strategy to deal with issues?

Councillor Bea Foster

Q. will the homelessness working group continue?

Q, There is concern that whilst evictions are not happening at the moment there could be a lot after the lockdown period ends.

Q. Regarding performance has an analysis been done on the hard to reach groups in communities, ages and ethnic backgrounds etc who have been helped? A lot of third sector organisations are struggling and they are the ones helping the most needy.

O. On LRF and education and early years, concerns about vulnerable children not being in school. Need to ensure the children are kept safe.

Officers responded that all partners were working hard to get children back in school as soon as possible but whilst following the advice from Director of Public Health. In terms of analysis of data the officer said that he would see if this information could be captured. The third sector was being supported and working with the CVS and Community Foundation, organisations had been able to apply for grants totalling £60k and many had been awarded the maximum amount of £5k. Regular meetings were happening with voluntary groups every two weeks. Regarding homeless officers were working with the Executive and the Homelessness working group would be reconvened soon. Officers were mindful of evictions and a number of different approaches were taken with landlords to find a solution when a case was nearing eviction point. Also action would be taken in cases of illegal eviction.

Councillor Margaret Lishman, Executive Member for Resources and Performance Management thanked all staff and councillors who were working really hard during the pandemic. Regarding the budget she said that there would be difficult decisions to be made to manage the shortfalls and that options were being explored. She also said there was a need to have detailed figures from employers on potential job losses and a broad strategy on how we lift the economy. Regarding schools and vulnerable children she referred to the work being done at Shuttleworth College and said it would be a useful exercise for scrutiny to discuss with schools about how they were managing the situation. She reiterated that proposals were being taken to the Homelessness Working Group which would be reconvened soon and in respect of the charities she said that she was working with the Chair of the CVS and in contact with all its members to get a position statement from them on what the future looked like for them so that a coherent picture could be established. She said scrutiny had a massive role to play and thanked members for their involvement.

The Council Leader thanked members for their constructive comments tonight and paid tribute to officers for their support during this difficult time.

Councillor Cosima Towneley , Executive Member for Community and Environmental Services, referred to the £41.6m provided by the Government to date which was more funding per capita than the national average and the reason it hadn't all be spent was that the council was being careful with the public purse and ensuring all claims were valid.

The Chair thanked officers for their presentations and indicated that there would be three items for the July scrutiny meeting, the Notice of Key Decisions and Private Meetings, COVID 19 and an update on the Housing Review, and the work programme. He asked members to submit in writing any further questions linked to the presentation so that officers could provide a response which would be picked up at the July meeting.

5. Exclusion of the Public

That the public be excluded from the meeting before discussion takes place on the item relating to Minute 6 because in view of the nature of the business to be transacted if the public was present there would be a disclosure to them of exempt information within the meaning of Paragraph 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

6. Burnley Market COVID 19 Response

Kate Ingram reported on proposals being taken to the Executive on a recovery plan for Burnley Market including revised opening times and a rent support package and outlined the options that had been considered.

Councillor Mark Townsend commented on the options and said that option 2 (b) should be considered and gave the reasons. He asked that the Executive members present note his comments when considering the report at their meeting on 16th June.

IT WAS AGREED

That the report be noted.

7. Work Programme 2020/21
