

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 4 March 2020

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Shimkent Room - Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Sarah Mead (Chair), Margaret Notley (Vice-Chair), Stephen Booth, Adrian Brown, Teresa Callaghan, Alex Farquharson, John Mead and Loraine Rossati

In Attendance: Councillors: Jim Brown, Maureen McKay (HCC Health Scrutiny Committee) and Jeannette Thomas (Portfolio Holder – Housing Health and Older People)

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6.00pm
End Time: 7.20pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Liz Harrington and Claire Parris.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 8 JANUARY 2020

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Community Select Committee meeting held on 8 January 2020 be approved as a correct record.

3 PUBLIC HEALTH DISCUSSION ITEM WITH HCC DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH

The Director of Public Health (Public Health Service - Hertfordshire County Council), Jim McManus, was in attendance at the meeting. He gave an update on the new Coronavirus strain (COVID-19). The Director informed Members that the majority of the UK population remains at low risk of the virus. The situation was rapidly changing. Case number reports were never accurate due to lags in reporting and changes in the definition. The Director highlighted that older people and those with pre-existing conditions were at risk of a severe form of the disease. COVID-19 was being treated from other viruses because of the ability to spread while showing no symptoms and the speed of growth of numbers.

The Director advised the Committee that COVID-19 was moderately transmissible but there was no need to panic. Coronaviruses were mainly transmitted by large droplets spread through coughing, sneezing and contact with infected secretions. Currently, there was no dedicated drug for the virus and there were no expectations

of a vaccine any time soon. The public health phases were containment, delay and mitigation. Authorities were being urged to plan for all the phases. The Director advised that the strategies to prevent spreading were containment, social distancing, good hygiene and cleaning frequent touchpoints.

Members pointed out that there were no COVID-19 advice posters on local buses. The Committee sought clarification on guidance for rail commuters, airline passengers, schools, religious events and other public gatherings. In his response, the Director confirmed that the Public Health team were systematically working with stakeholders including bus operators, Network Rail and train operators. The Director encouraged everyone to adopt good hygiene practices such as washing hands with soap and water often, using hand sanitiser gel if soap and water were not available and covering one's mouth and nose with a tissue or sleeve (not your hands) when one coughs or sneezes. Professor McManus stated that people should consider minimising contact and avoiding areas that could potentially expose one to risk. He advised that Public Health (Hertfordshire) would consider engaging volunteers to distribute leaflets in the vicinity of train or railway stations and bus stations. Members recommended the use of the existing Metro newspaper network to distribute updates on COVID-19. With regard to air travel, the Director referred to recent flight cancellations to areas heavily affected by the virus. It was pointed out that airlines were intensifying cleaning regimes. Travellers were urged to avoid flying to countries and areas where there were high chances of coming into contact with someone with COVID-19. People with vulnerable health were advised not to fly.

The Director of Public Health stated that those responsible for work places, schools, shopping outlets, halls sports establishments and other public buildings should prioritise sanitisation of high risk touch points such as handrails, elevator controls and door handles. Professor McManus confirmed that banknotes could carry bacteria or viruses such as COVID-19. The advice regarding banknotes was that people should wash hands after touching banknotes and if possible to use contactless payments instead. The Director also confirmed that the use of anti-bacterial wipes would add an extra layer of protection.

In response to a question regarding guidance for care workers, Professor McManus stated that carers should minimise contact if there was a high risk of contracting COVID-19. The use of clinical masks would be recommended in some cases. Vulnerable people should consider using online shopping and banking services. Members were informed that telephone visits would be the best option in certain circumstances. Long term plans would include social care services registers to facilitate appropriate care for the vulnerable.

With regard to religious gatherings, the Director of Public Health confirmed that faith groups had a role to play in the fight against COVID-19. He reported that FaithAction was Public Health England's strategic partner for information campaigns. The Director commended the Council for its viable partnership with local faith groups. He confirmed that Public Health was available to engage with all faith groups in the County and to share guidance on COVID-19.

Members raised concerns regarding fear and uncertainty in the public. The Director

acknowledged the information gaps and stressed the importance of disseminating accurate and regular updates to the public. He advised that the public should take a measured approach and not assume that colds and flu would lead to COVID-19. With regard to one case linked to a school in Stevenage, the Director informed Members that health officials and school governors had gone to the school to reassure teachers, pupils and parents. The general advice was to encourage everyone to practice good hand hygiene and maintain a safe distance (at least 1 metre or 3 feet) from anyone coughing or sneezing and to avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth. Members agreed to take the message back to schools and communities.

The Director of Public Health highlighted the importance of behaviour change in the fight against COVID-19. It was indicated that the public should re-consider the frequency and necessity of public events such as church meetings, political gatherings and sports events. Professor McManus stated that it was no longer advisable to share communion cups, trays and spoons and to shake hands or exchange hugs in public gatherings. Banning or reducing the frequency of public gatherings would be justified depending on the number of cases in an area. Members were informed that it was vital to foster community resilience and prepare the public for psychological trauma resulting from COVID-19. The Director informed the Committee that a guidance document had been prepared for election canvassers. Canvassers were advised not to touch surfaces such as door handles and handrails, avoid shaking hands or sharing pens and paper.

Members welcomed recent announcements by the government that those in self-isolation would be entitled to sick pay from day one and that COVID-19 had been declared a notifiable disease. However, there were concerns that some people would not be keen on self-isolation. The self-employed and those under zero-contract hours would be under pressure to work while ill so as to earn a living and this would put colleagues and customers at risk. It was also noted that some workers did not earn enough to qualify for statutory sick pay. The Director of Public Health pointed out that making COVID-19 a notifiable disease would allow companies to claim compensation through their insurance policies if the spread of the virus led to cancellations or loss of business.

Professor McManus informed the Committee that since corona virus was a new virus strain it was still too early to have significant levels of reliable data to enable modelling and better preparations for the disease. The Director informed Members that following a swab and testing, registered medical practitioners (RMPs) had a statutory duty to notify the 'proper officer' at their local council or local health protection team (HPT) of suspected cases of certain infectious diseases. All proper officers were obliged to pass the notification to Public Health England within 3 days of a case being notified, or within 24 hours for urgent cases. The standard notifiable disease procedure would be discarded if there was an influx of cases.

The Director of Public Health reported that there were pressures on the NHS 111 (non-emergency) number, Public Health England helplines and medical laboratories. Public Health Service (Hertfordshire) had established a COVID-19 helpline for schools so as to relieve pressure on the 111 number, ensure consistency of advice and fill in any gaps in the NHS 111 service.

The Chief Executive thanked the Director of Public Health for guidance and regular updates to local authorities, schools and other public and private institutions in Hertfordshire. The Chief Executive reported that Professor McManus had taken time to provide updates to SBC officers during working hours and outside normal working hours. It was reported that despite the communication challenge surrounding COVID-19, the Director was always frank and open. The Chief Executive informed Members that SBC had a Business Continuity Plan in place. The Council would continue to provide regular updates to Members and staff. In his reply, the Director of Public Health commended measures that had been put in place by the Council.

The Chair informed the Committee that due to the COVID-19 health emergency, the Director of Public Health would not be in a position to discuss other public health issues affecting Stevenage.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That Members liaise with the Director of Public Health regarding the posting of COVID-19 advice leaflets on public transport
2. That the Strategic Director (RP) circulates to all Members the latest guidance for election canvassers
3. That the Scrutiny Officer liaises with the Director of Public Health regarding scheduling a meeting to discuss other public health issues affecting Stevenage

4 **HEALTHY STEVENAGE STRATEGY**

It was **RESOLVED** that the item be deferred to a future meeting of the Community Select Committee.

5 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

None.

6 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

7 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIR