

S28. Coronavirus Update: Lessons Learned

The committee considered a report by the Chief Executive providing an update on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Falkirk area and the work carried out to date to identify the lessons learned. It highlighted the ongoing impact of the pandemic for the Council, the ongoing actions taken to mitigate through response and recovery and the measures taken to reinstate resilience exercises for business continuity purposes.

At the time of reporting, 88.2% of the Falkirk adult population had received two doses of the vaccine, members questioned why this % was not higher. The Head of Integration explained that the vaccine programme was ongoing, but the vaccine remained a personal choice. The public were encouraged to receive the vaccine and the programme had no deadline.

Members then referred to the vaccine programme for 12-15 year olds and asked for an update on how it was going. The Acting Director of Development Services gave an update on the booster programme stating 30,119 people had received their booster as of 10 November 2021. In relation to young people, 4,426 had received their first vaccine which equated to 60.3% of the young population.

The committee noted the reduction of carbon emission through reduced travel to work and heating/lighting of buildings and questioned how returning to work would negatively impact this progress. Mr Duff explained that an updated Transport Strategy was underway whilst continuing to promote green travel plans. Most recently, the Foundry was involved in the active travel plan promotion including the 'Take the Right Route' initiative - electric bikes were on offer and encouraged staff to take alternative modes of transport. Furthermore, working from home was still being promoted and therefore, reduced travel to work. A staff survey on how they travel to work would also be undertaken to help reduce travel. In terms of service operation, carpooling and the use of electric vehicles was promoted. The Chief Executive echoed that the blended approach to working was important to reducing carbon emissions, particularly when taking into consideration on the use of buildings.

Members noted the introduction of the 'greenest route' software on Google Maps in the United States - it would take into consideration travel time and average speed, allowing the app to offer the journey which omitted the least amount of CO₂.

The Director of Corporate and Housing Services responded to a question regarding what initiatives were in place that focussed on staff members mental wellbeing during the pandemic. He explained that the Council was very mindful of the welfare of staff across the workforce and implemented several initiatives to support employees. Examples included the establishment of a Wellbeing Group which met regularly and was made up of employees across the Council - the purpose was to gather feedback on how staff members were feeling. Furthermore, regular updates were posted on the Council's website, this would come in the form of 'Question and Answers' from employees as well as links to websites that help with welfare.

Discussions between managers and employees were not limited to tasks but included points of staff welfare – this sentiment was extended to colleagues relations as well. Welfare checks were also extended to those frontline workers.

The committee then referred back to the reduction of carbon emission and asked if this was mitigated by the increase of house carbon through working from home. Mr Duff explained he was not aware of specific work that had been undertaken by the Council on the effects of carbon due to homeworking, however, there had been national interest. He stated that it was recognised the volume of work that had to be done in terms of climate change and therefore this point could be examined in the future.

The Scottish Government had delegated powers to relevant local authority officers in terms of implementing the vaccine passport scheme, the committee asked how the Council prepared for this. The Chief Executive clarified that this would lie with Environmental Health colleagues whilst the Acting Director of Development Services explained the officers were beginning to undertake this work. The work focused on areas such as how to encourage nightclub operators to implement the vaccine passport guidance - early steps on how to do this were already published by the Scottish Government. Mr Duff recognised the quick pace of this area of work and explained that issues could arise from resource capacity to monitor.

Following a question on whether any concerns had been raised regarding the booster vaccine roll out, Mr Lawrie stated that there had been some due a variance in efficiency when compared to the initial roll out. However, he explained that there had been ongoing work nationally to improve co-ordination. The Head of Integration was unaware of specific issues but gave this feedback to NHS colleagues. He reiterated the pressure on the NHS currently, particularly in Falkirk Community Hospital which saw staff being relocated daily to cover essential services.

Members referred to the increase in community spread of Covid-19 as a consequence of the easing of restrictions and asked how this would be tackled as we enter winter when resources face greater pressure anyway. Mr Lawrie explained that the spread was a local and national area of concern – winter planning arrangements were in place, but it could be necessary for NHS services, and others, to be withdrawn to cope with the situation. Mr Thom stated that the problems services were facing now were different compared to the beginning of the pandemic – staff were leaving carer roles to work in other industries such as hospitality; this was a national problem. He recognised that the Forth Valley area was still experiencing high numbers of Covid-related hospital admissions and therefore NHS Forth Valley was under pressure, particularly in relation to low staff members. A variety of recruitment tactics had been implemented to promote the profession in the hopes to reduce vacancies – vacancies were not solely linked to the easing of restrictions, some industries such as care homes faced historical issues of recruitment levels. If the situation worsened, Mr Thom explained that there would have to be an evaluation of the services provided – health and social care professionals believed the position being

faced at in this moment in time was worse than at the beginning of the pandemic due to the easing of restrictions. Work was undertaken to consider the use of spare capacity, which had arisen in areas such as long-term care which had declined since March 2020.

Following a question on whether there was capacity at the Falkirk Community Hospital, the Head of Integration stated that space which was allocated for other services was already being utilised at the hospital. Furthermore, a lack of staff was a prominent issue which meant that agency staff were relied upon – this was seen nationally across the NHS causing competition between health boards for staff. Therefore, even with increased capacity, issues would not decline as staff would not be available. In terms of using Armed Forces resources, Mr Thom expressed they were beneficial to a limited extent as what was required would be professional care.

Members then discussed their experience of receiving their booster vaccine.

Decision

The Scrutiny Committee:-

- (1) noted the attached report on the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and**
- (2) noted that resilience exercising and testing of Business Continuity Plans will recommence involving the Council and its partners.**