



Scrutiny Response and Recovery (People) Task and Finish Group Final Report



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Foreword - Chairman of Scrutiny Committee

On 31 January 2020, the first case of Covid-19 was confirmed in the UK. The first death occurred on 5 March 2020.

The Council's Leader and Chief Executive posted a letter to every household in the Borough on 28 March 2020, and this was done to ensure that it was also received by those without internet access. The letter advised that the Community Support Hub had been set up and explained how residents could obtain assistance if needed.

The Council continued to provide services and, once Parliament had passed legislation, held its first virtual public meeting on 9 April 2020. This was a meeting of the Planning Committee.

The Scrutiny Committee held a Workshop on 16 July 2020 to identify items to be added to the Scrutiny Work Plan. During discussions it became clear that Scrutiny Members were keen to look at the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on local residents and how their well-being had been affected.

Support for the local community during and in the wake of the pandemic would be critical to the recovery process and therefore it was proposed that Scrutiny evaluate and analyse the response of the Council and external organisations to identify lessons learnt and any areas of weakness in order to provide recommendations, which might help to provide a template for dealing with any future similar emergency situation.

At the Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 1 September 2020, it was decided that two Covid-19 Response and Recovery Task and Finish groups would be formed, with one related to People issues and the other related to Place issues.

Following the tragic death of George Floyd in the USA, there was an anti-racism motion approved by Council on 22 July 2020. The Council resolved to reaffirm its commitment to promoting equality and fairness for all, condemning all forms of racism.

Council also requested Scrutiny Committee to consider the government's recently published "Covid-19: Understanding the impact on BAME communities" report and consider the implications for Council services and the community and make recommendations to Cabinet including learning from past mistakes to ensure they are not repeated.

This is the report of the Covid-19 Response and Recovery Task and Finish Group (People).

Councillor Pat Cumbers
Chairman of Scrutiny Committee

Members of the Task and Finish Group



Councillor Pat
Cumbers
(Chairman)



Councillor
Ronan Browne
(until May
2021)



Councillor
Robert Child



Councillor
Chris Fisher



Councillor
Rebecca Smith
(until May 2021)

Key Points

The Covid-19 pandemic was an event that tested the ‘system’, it tested the public sector’s ability to deliver services and it tested the resilience and resolve of individuals, families and communities up and down the country. The key task of the Task and Finish Group was to uncover the reality of how the pandemic impacted upon the residents of Melton Borough.

In attempting to do this, Members gathered evidence relating to the national context, therefore evidence on mental health, digital exclusion, the impact of the pandemic upon the BAME community, unemployment statistics and debt was received. The Group then reviewed the following evidence in relation to the Melton Borough: finance, the Council’s response, test & trace support, homelessness, physical health & wellbeing, support services and local vaccination statistics.

Members commissioned a survey in order to obtain more information on how residents coped during the pandemic. The key takeaways from the survey was that, overall, residents felt well supported by the Council and partners. There were complaints about access to some GP services being extremely difficult at times, however evidence suggests that GP services nationwide struggled during the pandemic.

The survey also highlighted growing inequality in the community, with a section of the population benefiting from the pandemic through reduced costs (e.g. no commuting, no dining out or day trips) and another section of the population becoming disadvantaged as a result of the pandemic (e.g. reduced income, having to rely on savings or credit, isolation, limited access to online services and not being able to get appropriate GP care).

What the study showed was that the majority of problems faced by residents were not caused by the pandemic but they were exacerbated by it.

What the study didn’t quite capture, but was experienced by Members of the Group, was the sense of community spirit that developed, especially at the beginning of the pandemic.

Background and Introduction

On 1 September 2020, the Melton Borough Council Scrutiny Committee approved the establishment of the Response and Recovery (People) Task and Finish Group. The review was instigated as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the need to adapt existing policy and practice and develop new policy and processes in order to provide a focused response to support the residents of the Borough.

On 17 September 2020 the Task and Finish Group met for their preliminary scoping meeting. The Group identified issues and areas that they would like to explore further and also agreed the timetable for the review and made some revisions to the Terms of Reference.

It was agreed that the following topic areas would be included in the review:

- i. Finance
 - Unemployment and welfare benefits.
(including debt and Universal Credit)
 - Homelessness
- ii. Health
 - Mental Health
(Social Isolation and digital exclusion)
 - Physical health and wellbeing
(Director for Public Health report on Covid-19 impact on BAME)
- iii. Community
 - Support Services
(Council Services/External Organisations/Voluntary Sector)

The Group agreed they would commence the review by establishing an evidence base which would include performance statistics, review of current policy and process and draw on the experiences of residents of the Borough, Officers and other stakeholders. Evaluation of this evidence base would clarify the issues and assist with the identification of the underlying causes. The Group, with Officer support, would then move on to consider options for improvement, feasibility of options for future delivery and the way in which outcomes could be measured and monitored. This would be translated into a set of recommendations to be presented to Scrutiny Committee for approval and following review by the Chief Executive, further recommendation to Cabinet in September 2021.

Process and Methodology

As detailed within the scoping document, it was agreed that the enquiry would take the form of:

- Desk-based review of papers
- Observations
- Information from national organisations including the Office for National Statistics.
- Workshops / Focus Groups
- Interview of officers and stakeholders
- Calling witnesses to give evidence
- A survey (which utilised both electronic and paper forms) to obtain the views of local residents

A summary of the evidence collated can be found below.

Timetable

Date	Actions
17 September 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First meeting: Summary/Background • Review Terms of Reference • Agree timetable and scope of review
27 October 2020	Meeting to consider the Financial aspect: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unemployment and welfare benefits • Homelessness
10 December 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mental Health - Physical Health and Well Being • Note the consideration of the People survey.
2 February 2021	Meeting to consider the Community aspect: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support Services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Council Services - External Organisations - Voluntary Sector
June 2021 – August 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People survey
18 August 2021 & 14 September 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To discuss format and content of final report
By email	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To agree the final recommendations and report for Scrutiny Committee – 21 September 2021
October 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report to Scrutiny Committee • Review by Chief Executive • Report to Cabinet – 13 October 2021

Summary of Evidence Considered

A summary has been provided for each piece of evidence considered by the Group during the review.

Full details of any of the evidence listed can be obtained from democracy@melton.gov.uk quoting the Response and Recovery Task and Finish Group (People) and the reference number detailed below.

Surveys

E1. People Survey

- A survey was launched on 15 June 2021 and was open for eight weeks. The survey asked residents about how the pandemic had affected their physical mental and financial well-being. In addition, the survey aimed to understand how residents' needs had been supported since the beginning of the pandemic and gain an understanding of how effectively the Council and its external partners responded to it.

The survey was intended to provide a significant quantity of local information for the final report, as the information would come direct from Melton residents and would include information specifically related to the situation in Melton Borough.

It was also expected that the survey would be easily accessed on the Council's website but unfortunately accessibility was not as good as anticipated. This has meant that the response was lower than had been anticipated and has not provided as much useful local information as the Group would have wished.

The Group are very grateful for the survey information received. The information has been extremely useful and combined with evidence from officers and external partners as well as national information will help the Council plan for the recovery and provide a template for dealing with any future emergency.

Who took part?

There were 159 responses received, of which 155 were received electronically and 4 were received in a physical format. There was a mixture of people of different ages who took part in the survey, however a deeper look established that 38.4% of respondents were aged 56 and over. In terms of the female to male split, 72.3% of all respondents were female. In terms of households 47.2% of respondents lived with a spouse or partner, which was the largest group. This was followed by living with spouse or partner and children with 27.7% of respondents in that grouping.

- Evaluation of Survey Results

Domestic Abuse

According to the ONS, an estimated 5.5% of adults aged 16 to 74 years experienced domestic abuse in the year to March 2020. It must be noted that domestic abuse involving victims older than 74 years was not included in Police records at that time but that has since been rectified.

The survey showed that 1.25% of respondents had been victims of domestic abuse during the pandemic but it is unclear how representative that statistic might be because of the very low response to the survey.

Employment

In terms of employment the survey identified a slight decrease in full time employment with 40.3% of respondents stated that they were in full time employment before the pandemic began compared with 39.6% currently. Unemployment also fell with 5.7% stating that they were unemployed before the pandemic compared with 5% currently. These figures can be explained by the increase of those people in part time employment as 16.4% of respondents stated they had part time employment before the pandemic compared with 17.6% currently.

Income

Before the pandemic, 10.7% of respondents stated that they were struggling financially, currently 28.9% of respondents have stated that their current income does not meet their needs with 21.7% (6.3% of all respondents) of these stating that their income is insufficient to meet the basic costs of living.

Finance – Savings, Borrowing and Benefits

During the pandemic 35.2% of respondents stated that they had to use savings to support themselves financially. 11.3% borrowed money from friends or family, 8.2% borrowed from a bank and 8.2% had to use benefits or universal credit. In reviewing the comments, the reasons for this were varied. They ranged from needing to in order to cover bills and living costs to, maintaining a certain level of lifestyle such as a healthier lifestyle and paying for the usual extras, e.g. Christmas and birthday gifts.

Diversity

Our own research, a summary of which can be seen in section E9, indicates that nationally, members of the BAME community suffer disproportionately in relation to housing, employment, finances and health.

Seven members of the BAME community completed the survey but they were only 4% of all respondents. Of those seven, five (71.4% of the seven) alleged they had been discriminated against because of their ethnicity, by the Council or a partner organisation.

However, because we received such a small response to our survey it would be very unfair to conclude that the Council or any partner organisation might be as discriminatory as indicated by the 71.4% statistic.

From our experience as Councillors, we have never once heard it suggested that such blatant discrimination exists within the Council or within any of our partner organisations.

Discrimination is unacceptable but the allegations have been made and they must be addressed.

Of all respondents, 16.4% stated that they had a disability and a further 16.4% stated that they were identified as being at higher risk. For context, Scope (the disability charity) estimates that 20% of the UK population has a disability.

Health

In looking at how the pandemic has affected respondent's health, 27.7% stated that they either mostly agree or completely agree that their physical health had been adversely affected during the pandemic. A total of 32.1% of all respondents stated that they either mostly agree or completely agree that their mental health had been adversely affected by loneliness or isolation and 23.9% of all respondents either mostly agree or completely agree that their mental health had been adversely affected by financial worries. A total of 54.1% either mostly agree or completely agree that it has been difficult to arrange a GP appointment during the pandemic and a total of 52.2% of all respondents either mostly agree or completely agree that it has been sometimes difficult to obtain medical treatment for non-Covid illnesses during the pandemic. In looking at the comments made by the respondents, there was a clear dissatisfaction with Latham House surgery, however dissatisfaction with GP provision has been a common theme nationwide during the pandemic, as evidenced in section E8 of this report.

Digital

In terms of digital accessibility, only 1.3% of all respondents stated that they did not have the sufficient computer skills to obtain necessary information from the internet, including the Council's website and Universal Credit.

A total of 86.2% of all respondents stated that they had access to the internet via a home device such as a smartphone, laptop, PC or tablet. For context

13.2% of respondents skipped the question, so it is unclear whether they don't have access to such a device or they did not want to answer the question.

No respondents stated that they accessed the internet via a public connection (e.g. library) or that they had no internet connection but one respondent did say that they had a poor internet connection.

Support Services

The survey shows that most people neither agreed nor disagreed that the services mentioned had been good. It cannot be known for certain, but it would appear likely that those who expressed no opinion did so because they had not used the service.

Melton Borough Council

Of those who expressed an opinion, 51 agreed or mostly agreed that the Council had provided a good service, compared with 19 who disagreed or mostly disagreed.

NHS Hospitals

Of those who expressed an opinion, 71 agreed or mostly agreed that the NHS Hospitals had provided a good service, compared with 18 who disagreed or mostly disagreed.

Local GP Service

Of those who expressed an opinion, 37 agreed or mostly agreed that the Local GP Service had provided a good service, compared with 59 who disagreed or mostly disagreed.

The Job Centre

Of those who expressed an opinion, 8 agreed or mostly agreed that the Job Centre had provided a good service, compared with 6 who disagreed or mostly disagreed.

Melton Community Hub and the Voluntary Sector

Of those who expressed an opinion, 31 agreed or mostly agreed that Melton Community Hub and the Voluntary Sector had provided a good service, compared with 8 who disagreed or mostly disagreed.

Evidence Sessions (Expert witnesses/stakeholders)

E2. Finance – Revenue & Benefits Manager and Customer Services Team Leader

- Nick Sach, Revenues and Benefits Manager and Nicky Oliver, Customer Services Team Leader attended a meeting held on 27 October 2020 to provide Members with an overview of how the pandemic had affected the Council's finances.

Key Points

- i. The housing benefit caseload had decreased due to claimants transferring to Universal Credit. Of those on housing benefit 686 recipients of housing benefit were of pensionable age and 499 recipients were of working age.
- ii. The Council Tax caseload was fairly static, with 1,057 recipients of Council Tax support being of pensionable age and just over 1,200 recipients of working age.
- iii. Unpaid Council Tax had increased by £940,000. The net liability for 2019/20 had increased by £1.3m. Collection rates had decreased slightly and due to Covid-19, the Council had been limited on recovery action. However, some action had re-started but a re-start on summons action was to be confirmed.
- iv. The current unpaid rent on Council dwellings had increased by £5,000 (from £322k to £327k).
- v. Former tenants rent arrears had decreased by £17,000. This figure fluctuated and could be slightly misleading (e.g. when a current tenant with arrears becomes a former tenant).
- vi. There had been an increase in calls to Customer Services (2019/20), of 300 calls with 143 of these calls were directly linked to Covid-19.
- vii. Of the number of calls where Customer Services staff were able to ascertain what the call was regarding, there was an increase of 84 housing benefit calls, 30 Council Tax calls, 46 NNDR calls and 42 homelessness calls.
- viii. Of the total 4,328 calls dealt with, there was an average call time increase of almost 3 minutes between September 2019 and September 2020. These calls were handled with no additional staff resources.

E3. The Council's response

- The Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic was outlined to the Group at the meeting on 27 October 2020.
- In March 2020, the Council sent letters to every home in the Borough, providing information and useful contact details. Those identified as needing to shield from the virus were contacted by GPs.

The Melton Community Support Hub

- In April 2020, Members were briefed on the new Community Support Hub which had been set up by Melton Borough Council. The Council's website directed people to the Hub for information and assistance during COVID-19. The Hub also sought volunteers and help from other organisations and its priorities were to ensure that vulnerable people and shielding residents received food, prescriptions and necessary help.
- Between April and October 2020, the Hub had received 404 food support requests and had provided 2,662 free food bags. As of February 2021, the Hub was dealing with 78 people.
- As of February 2021, the Hub had helped 212 people to access prescriptions. In addition, the Hub had undertaken welfare checks, regular phone calls to lonely and isolated people, befriending, signposting for physical and mental health and wellbeing issues and advice/signposting for other services as required.
- Case studies, in relation to the Hub, were presented to Members. The case studies are representative of residents who the Council would not normally have interacted with pre-pandemic, unless they were referred for specific vulnerabilities. The pandemic brought to the attention of the Council, residents who have a problem or multiple problems which they, with the help of family and friends, would have managed pre-pandemic but as a result of the pandemic and associated lockdowns appeared less able to cope. The case studies relate to residents who had the following issues: Alzheimer's, debts as a result of declining health, debts caused by the shutting down of industries during lockdown, domestic abuse and mental health issues.
- Members received a presentation on the Hub in February 2021. The key points were:
 - i. The Hub was incorporated into the work of the Case Management Team to manage the fluctuating demand, as they were ideally placed to identify and address other issues.
 - ii. The Hub harnessed the community effort successfully and oversaw the development of additional groups within the wider partnership and support structure.
 - iii. The vaccination effort was actively supported at the Hub.

Me and My Learning

- 175 residents had presented to Me and My Learning with 2 or more problems. The Covid-19 related issues dealt with by Me and My Learning included financial, Universal Credit, housing, mental health (including loneliness and isolation), domestic abuse, substance abuse and an increase in referrals for the elderly (making sure they had enough contact and the help they needed).

E4. Test and Trace Support

- The test and Trace Scheme has been a key strand of the Council's pandemic 'people' response. The scheme was implemented at pace, with very last-minute guidance and it has been an important lifeline for people who would otherwise have been left without income or may have felt unable to self-isolate for financial reasons. The information below has been provided by Nick Sach, Revenues and Benefits Manager.

Why the scheme was created?

- The Government introduced the Test and Trace Support Payments alongside a Discretionary Payments scheme to support people on low incomes who are unable to work from home and have been asked to self-isolate and their income has reduced as a result of this. Eligible residents can apply to Melton Borough Council for a Test and Trace Support Payment of £500.

How long will the scheme last?

- The Government have announced that the scheme will continue until the end of March 2022. The Government will continue to:
 - i. cover the cost of all payments made under the main scheme
 - ii. make £20m a month available for discretionary payments, and
 - iii. provide funding for administration costs related to the scheme.

Main Scheme

- The main scheme eligibility criteria were introduced by Government and is as follows:
 1. You or your partner must be currently receiving Universal Credit, Working Tax Credit, income-based Employment and Support Allowance, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, Income Support, Housing Benefit and/or Pension Credit
 2. Have been asked to self-isolate by NHS Test and Trace either because they've tested positive for coronavirus or have recently been in close contact with someone who has tested positive. In addition to this you must have responded to messages received from NHS Test and Trace and have provided any required information.
 3. Be employed or self-employed.
 4. Be unable to work from home and will lose income as a result.
- From 8 March 2021 there was a change made to the scheme to allow the following:
 5. If you need to take time off work and, are the parent or guardian of a child or young person that has been told to

isolate. For example this could be due to someone in their nursery/school bubble testing positive.

Discretionary Scheme

- In addition to the main scheme the Government also made funding available for a discretionary scheme. Eligibility criteria for the discretionary scheme were set at a local level. The discretionary scheme eligibility criteria are as follows:
- In order to be eligible for a Discretionary Support Payment, a claimant must meet points 2 - 4 set out in the main scheme. Point 5 is also applicable in relation to the discretionary scheme. Applicants must also meet the following criteria:
 1. Resident within the Borough of Melton
 2. Are not currently in receipt of Universal Credit, Working Tax Credit, Employment and Support Allowance (Income Based), Job Seekers Allowance (Income Based), Income Support, Housing Benefit and/or Pension Credit; and
 3. Will face severe demonstrable financial hardship, as a direct result of not being able to work whilst self-isolating. There are certain circumstances where applications will not normally be considered.
- However, the Council reserves full discretion in regards to the scheme.

Applications received to date

- As at 5 August 2021, 337 applications for both the main and discretionary scheme had been received. A breakdown of success and unsuccessful applications across the two schemes is as below:

	Main Scheme	Discretionary Scheme
Successful applications	134	27
Unsuccessful applications	63	113

- The categories we record for unsuccessful applications for returns to the Department of Health and Social Care are:
 1. Applicant is not employed or self-employed.
 2. Applicant fails criteria: unable to work from home and will lose income as a result.
 3. Applicant fails criteria: in receipt of eligible benefit. Applicant can still be successful for discretionary fund.
 4. Applicant rejected for other reason – Which could include them being above the earnings and income threshold on the discretionary scheme.

- Officers are confident that no residents have been left without vital support to self-isolate safely. As with any scheme there have been unhappy residents that fall outside of the eligibility criteria. Evidence of challenges in administering the scheme and meeting local needs were shared by local authorities at a national level, leading to changes as the scheme evolved (such as ability to provide funding to parents required to self-isolate).

E5. Homelessness

- At the meeting on 27 October 2020, the Group received evidence on the affect that the pandemic has had upon homelessness. A further update was provided at the meeting held on 18 August 2021.
- During 2019/20, there was a significant increase in households presenting to the Council as homeless and this was not anticipated to decrease during 2020/21. Data showed a peak in homelessness presentations from July 2020 – August 2020. The number of homeless people in October 2020 was 177 and the housing options case load, as of 6 August 2021, was as follows:

New cases awaiting assessment	36
Advice and assistance	14
Prevention stage	9
Relief stage	20
Main homelessness duty	50

- In 2019/20, there was a total spend of £149,000 for placing homeless people in B&B accommodation, which resulted in a £114,000 overspend. In 2020/21, the Covid-19 related B&B accommodation spend was £251,177 of which £47,000 had been recuperated through successful grant bids.
- A large shortfall in the Council’s budget was anticipated and the Council would have to agree its priorities. It was recognised that homelessness pressures were a nationwide issue. The Council was doing a good job but there was always more improvement to be made, particularly concerning resources.
- Overall, the Council was doing very good work. It was dealing with relatively high numbers of homeless people for the size of the Council. There are four full-time staff equivalents in the Housing Solutions team and they were multi-tasking.
- There had been 7 homelessness presentations as a result of a Section 21. This was low but presentations were likely to increase once court action had re-started. A concern was raised that as house prices continued to increase, disposing of a property was more attractive than continuing to lease it, leading to a Section 21.
- Concerning void properties, contractors ability to undertake repair work had been reduced through lockdown. This created a backlog, which was being worked through. Initial information on turnaround times and re-let were

encouraging. Principles had been identified to turn voids around as quickly as possible and to the required standard. There was progress but it was slower than was wanted.

- In terms of homelessness prevention, in 2021/22, quarter 1, the Council had received 67 new presentations, of which 13 (19.4%) were prevented.

E6. Mental Health

- Members were informed at their meeting on 10 December 2020, that Mind, NHS, WHO and University of Cambridge have conducted research regarding the deterioration in Mental Health over the pandemic and the impacts of loneliness and social isolation.
- The mental health charity Mind reported the following:
 - i. More than 60% of adults and 68% of young people have said their mental health had worsened during lockdown.
 - ii. Many people (51% adults and 55% young people) surveyed without previous experience of mental health problems, experienced poor mental health during lockdown and have seen their mental health and wellbeing decline.
 - iii. More than half of adults and over two thirds of young people said that their mental health had become worse during the period of lockdown restrictions, from early April to mid-May.
 - iv. Restrictions on seeing people, being unable to go outside and worries about the health of family and friends are the key factors driving poor mental health. Boredom is also a major problem for young people.
 - v. Loneliness has been a key contributor to poor mental health. Feelings of loneliness have made nearly two thirds of people's mental health worsen during the pandemic, with 18-24-year-olds the most likely to see loneliness affect their mental health.
 - vi. Many people do not feel entitled to seek help, and have difficulty accessing it when they do. 1 in 3 adults and more than 1 in 4 young people did not access support during lockdown because they did not think that they deserved support.
 - vii. A quarter of adults and young people who tried to access support were unable to do so. Not feeling comfortable using phone/video call technology has been one of the main barriers to accessing support.
- In summary, the organisations concluded that the societal impact of the COVID-19 pandemic had been broad and very challenging. No aspect of normal societal functioning had been spared. Quarantine and social distancing had been deemed necessary measures to prevent the virus from spreading but also led to elevated levels of loneliness and social isolation, which in turn produced physical and mental health related repercussions. It was seen that by adopting appropriate steps to keep social and familial

connections, maintain healthy activities, and manage emotions and psychiatric symptoms could help relieve the adverse consequences of loneliness and isolation. The pandemic had illuminated the pre-existing threat to well-being that older adults frequently experience with social isolation and loneliness.

- In addition to this, 22% of the population lack digital skills or access to technology – this could exacerbate feelings of social isolation and lead to social deprivation as access to services and tools which are only available online are not available to those that may need it most.

E7. Digital Exclusion

The Digital Divide

- The Group received an article by the Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research (CCHPR) titled 'The Digital Divide'. The article stated that there are 22% of people across the UK who lack the right digital skills or access to technology and that the pandemic has excluded them as the country moved online.
- The article stated that of the eight million in the UK who don't use the internet, 90% suffer from other kinds of economic or social disadvantages, they are likely to be in the lowest income bracket and/or be disabled with long term health conditions. It is reported that in the East Midlands, 19% of benefit claimants have low digital capability.
- It was recognised that the pandemic did not cause digital exclusion but highlighted and worsened an existing problem. That problem being:
 - i. Children without internet access at home have been unable to take part in online education.
 - ii. People without internet access find it harder putting together a CV, applying for jobs, keeping track of their finances and applying for Universal Credit.
 - iii. In addition, with so many services online only, people without internet connection find it impossible to access those services.

Making Communications Work

- Members received a report from Ofcom titled 'Making Communications Work. The article was from April 2021 and found that data had suggested that the proportion of UK homes without internet fell during the pandemic but older and financially vulnerable are more likely to remain digitally excluded.
- The proportion of homes without internet access have fallen from 11% in March 2020 to 6% (around one and a half million) in March 2021.
- Around 60% of those without internet access have sought 'proxy' assistance. The most common form was assistance with buying something (57%), but proxies have assisted with sending emails or obtain information from the internet.

- Ofcom found that the groups least likely to have home internet access are aged 65+ (18% without access), lower income households (11% without access) and the most financially vulnerable (10% without access).
- Of those adults without internet access, 46% find the internet too complicated, 42% state that it holds no interest for them and 37% say a lack of equipment is a barrier.
- Nearly all children of school age had online access in the home, however 4% relied solely on mobile internet access during the pandemic with 2% only able to get online using a smartphone. In addition, 17% of children did not have consistent access to a suitable device for online home-learning and this increased to 27% of children from households classed as financially vulnerable.

E8. Physical Health and Wellbeing

- In considering physical health and wellbeing in the Borough, the Group received the following evidence:
 - i. Some sports groups were struggling to encourage participants back as there was still a lack of confidence to return to in-person activities, although the Physical Activity Team may provide assistance to getting people back into activities.
 - ii. Footfall at leisure centres was down.
 - iii. Members were informed that it was difficult to access GP appointments locally and this had, in some cases, lead to unnecessary hospital admissions.
 - iv. Figures had been requested from Waterfield Leisure Centre and these would be compared with figures from MBC and information circulated to the Group.
 - v. There was a feeling that Melton was focused on coping rather than being proactive and looking forward.

Local Context

- On 9 July 2021, Latham House contacted every patient by letter to explain some of their problems and how they were being addressed but included a warning of a temporary but significant reduction in GP capacity from July to September. They reiterated that their priority would continue to be supporting patients to access healthcare.

National Summary

- Healthwatch, as reported by the British Medical Journal (BMJ) in March 2021, warned that across the country patients had struggled to access GPs during the pandemic.
 - i. Healthwatch found that, while remote appointments were more convenient for some patients, they did not meet everyone's needs.

This left some patients worried that their health issues would not be accurately diagnosed.

- ii. The report also found that some patients struggled to get appointments for regular health check-ups, treatments and drug reviews meaning that some were unable to manage their condition.
 - iii. Responding to the report, the Chair of the British Medical Association's GP Committee stated that while waiting times throughout the NHS have been a struggle during the pandemic, it is indicative of the wider problem of a lack of resources and funding that the entire health service had been experiencing for decades and something that is responsible for the majority of the points raised in the Healthwatch report.
- The i Newspaper reported on 26 August 2021 that GP Clare Gerada, president-elect of the Royal College of General Practitioners, predicted that general practice would collapse within months unless urgent action is taken.
 - On 1 September 2021, the i newspaper reported that Jamie Jenkins, former head of health analysis at the Office for National Statistics, stated that the UK has some of the lowest numbers of GPs per population in Europe.

E9. Impact of the pandemic upon the BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) Community

National Summary

- The Public Health England report 'Beyond the data: Understanding the impact of Covid-19 on BAME groups' highlighted the increased risk that BAME groups have of catching Covid-19 and dying from Covid-19.
- The report stated that per 100,000 population people from a Black ethnic group had the highest rate of infection with 486 in females and 649 in males. The lowest rate of infection was found in people from a White ethnic group with 220 in females and 224 in males.
- People of a Bangladeshi ethnicity had around twice the risk of death when compared to people of White British ethnicity. People of Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, Other Asian, Caribbean and other Black ethnicity had between 10 and 50% high risk of death when compared to White British.
- Death rates from Covid-19 were found to be higher in Black and Asian ethnic groups when compared to White ethnic groups. This was the reverse of previous years when all-cause mortality rates were lower in Black and Asian ethnic groups.
- Public Health England concluded, via discussions with stakeholders, that Covid-19 did not create health inequalities, but rather exposed and exacerbated longstanding inequalities affecting BAME communities.
 - i. The study found that BAME groups tend to have poorer socioeconomic circumstances which consequently led to poorer health outcomes.

- ii. Economic disadvantage is also closely associated with the prevalence of smoking, obesity, diabetes, hypertension and cardio-metabolic complications which all increase the risk of disease severity.
 - iii. Public Health England also found that people of Black, Asian and other minority ethnic groups may be more exposed to Covid-19 and therefore are more likely to be diagnosed. Increased exposure was experienced via occupation (a high proportion of BAME groups were key workers and in occupations that led to increase exposure to Covid-19), population density, use of public transport, household composition and housing conditions.
- The report sets out a number of requests for action across the following domains:
 - i. Research and data – This is to deepen society’s understanding of wider socio-economic determinants and improve recording of faith and ethnicity.
 - ii. Policy – This element ensures long term sustainable change, helps establish cross government infrastructure to drive change, address occupational risk and help mitigate the impact of race crime.
 - iii. Communications – More specifically with community leaders to enhance the reach into BAME communities ensuring guidance and media is culturally appropriate and available in a wide range of languages. This approach also includes using different approaches to mitigate fears and encourage uptake of vital prevention services.
 - iv. Anchor institutions – The scaling up of prevention services in a targeted way. The development of strategies to rebuild trust with health and care services. The co-production of solutions with BAME groups and faith leaders. The provision of safeguards to mitigate risks for all front-line workers.
- Stakeholders, who were interviewed by Public Health England for the report, discussed the role local government played during the pandemic. It was recognised that local government played a critical role in ensuring services were available for the most vulnerable in society, however there was concern for the decade of cuts in local government funding which had diminished the ability of local authorities to address the wider and structural issues that placed BAME communities at risk. This included the following: reducing poverty, reducing social exclusion and improving living and housing conditions for the most marginalised communities including the homeless, migrants, gypsies and travellers. There was recognition in the innovation deployed by local government in response to the pandemic, however it was felt that resources need to be provided to meet the growing and pervasive needs that emerge post-Covid.

E10. Support Services (Council Services/External Organisations/Voluntary Sector)

Community Safety

- A summary of the evidence received in relation to Community Safety by the Task and Finish Group is as follows:
 - i. The data held by the Community Safety Partnership was useful and provided a good overview of crime in the Borough.
 - ii. During lockdown, crime had increased slightly, particularly violent crime (antisocial behaviour, domestic abuse etc.) and rural crime (theft of farm machinery etc.).
 - iii. Drug crime was a concern for most within the community and this had been an area of focus for Leicestershire Police, resulting in an increase in drug detection.
 - iv. There were many initiatives and a great deal of robust work being undertaken by Police and the Community Safety Partnership throughout the Borough (action plans, multi-agency partnership working, effective community work to identify priorities and focus action).
 - v. Although crime was on the increase, the approach to this was very proactive.

Melton Community Support Hub

- A summary of the evidence received in relation to the Community Support Hub by the Task and Finish Group is as follows:
 - i. The Community Support Hub was established by Melton Borough Council in March 2020 to co-ordinate help and support for residents throughout the Borough, during the pandemic.
 - ii. The information the Community Support Hub provided was regularly updated and its website was deemed to be excellent (including extensive information and hyperlinks to Government advice etc.).
 - iii. The website did not include data on how many people had been helped by the Community Support Hub and it was suggested that this information was of interest and could be added.
 - iv. The Community Support Hub had linked volunteers and organisations with those in need to deliver food parcels and prescriptions and to tackle loneliness.

The Melton Learning Hub, Melton Mowbray

- The Melton Learning Hub is a charity providing alternative learning for young people who are not in mainstream education. The Learning Hub includes Voluntary Action Melton, a community transport scheme, as well as the Venue, a social youth hub based at MBC's Phoenix House.

- Early on during the pandemic, Melton Learning Hub offered use of the Venue facility to the Melton Community Hub along with the assistance of Learning Hub employees and volunteers.
- The Learning Hub paid for food deliveries from Fareshare and received donated food from Sainsbury's, Morrisons, Samworths (Dickinson & Morris pork pies), other local businesses and members of the public.
- The Learning Hub would pack and deliver food and prescriptions with the assistance of additional community volunteers to residents in need. This continued until March 2021 when the Melton Learning Hub passed their remaining supplies to the Melton Storehouse who also provided food bags and toiletries to residents in need during the pandemic.

Melton Furniture Project

- The Melton Furniture Project, based in Park Road, Melton Mowbray, collects quality used furniture for sale to the public, with a reduced price for those in receipt of benefits.
- The Project's annual accounts explain that lockdown caused closure and the furlough of staff, however there was urgent need for essential furniture, especially beds as many people, including elderly, had moved in with relatives and friends.
- The required furniture was selected and left in the car park for safe collection, at no cost, to grateful 'customers' including Harborough District Council.

Volunteers

- Members received an article from the National Council of Voluntary Organisation (NCVO) on what happened to volunteering during the pandemic. The article was from August 2021.
- The NCVO stated that 62% of adults in England, who responded to their survey, volunteered their time at least once in the past year and 42% of those did so at least once a month, however this does not give the whole picture as formal volunteering, through a club or group, has seen a substantial fall.
- In 2019/20, 23% of adults volunteered formally at least once a month and 37% did at least once a year. In 2020/21, the figures fell to 17% and 30% respectively.
- The discrepancy between the number of volunteers and the fall in formal volunteering can be explained by the rise in informal volunteering, which is offering unpaid help to someone who is not a relative.
- The NCVO stated that the 'volunteering gap' between younger and older people narrowed over the last year. This was because many older people isolated during the pandemic and younger people stepped up to offer support to those who isolated.

- There was an increase in the proportion of unemployed people who volunteered. While people across all employment statuses who volunteered informally increased by a fifth, there was a 43% increase for those who were unemployed.
- NCVO research also found that as the country emerged from lockdown, there has been a recovery in formal volunteering.

Age UK Leicestershire and Rutland (L&R)

- Each Age UK is independent, and Age UK L&R is the largest Age UK in the UK. The Borough of Melton has an aging population and there is a need to support people to live, age well and to be independent. Age UK L&R works closely with partners to achieve this.
- Age UK L&R has a building in Melton Mowbray, Gloucester House, and operates day centres with referrals from social care and community mental health teams.
- Age UK L&R offers a range of activities and services in the Borough, many of which were developed in response to the pandemic, including: indoor bowls, over 55's group, luncheon club, bereavement service, telephone befriending, home care, shopping, cleaning, handyman, footcare.
- A food friendship project has been set up to help older male carers which includes: training sessions, learning how to cook and providing an opportunity to socialise.
- Age UK L&R delivers two contracts across the whole of Leicestershire which are for advocacy and dementia support.
- In conversations with the Council, regarding the concerns they have about digital exclusion amongst older residents, Age UK mentioned that they did have funding for a 'keeping in touch' service, which included the loan of tablets. They have the opportunity to apply for additional funding and are keen to discuss further with the Council.
- The organisation are a key partner and they have expressed interest in becoming part of the Melton Helping People Partnership Board.

Children and Youth Groups

- A summary of the evidence received in relation to children and youth groups by the Task and Finish Group is as follows:
 - Leicestershire County Council delivered a core group work programme for children, which included:
 - Feeling Safe Group – for those aged 8 and older who had experienced and witnessed domestic abuse.
 - Bounce Back Group – promoting emotional health and wellbeing.
 - SEND Group – for young people with special educational needs and disabilities.

- d) A group for children and young people with caring responsibilities for the family members.
- e) A group for children aged 8 and older who were involved in risk taking activities and negative peer associations. This was delivered by the youth justice and families teams working together.
- ii. Other youth groups also operated including: Bottesford Youth Club, the Scouts, Venture House, cricket and sports clubs, Belvoir Bees for those aged 6 and older to participate in sports with trained coaches.

Community Activity

- A summary of the evidence received in relation to community activity by the Task and Finish Group is as follows:
 - i. Quizzes – these were popular and easy to organise. Councillor Glancy had held a Christmas Quiz Night, which had been very much enjoyed.
 - ii. Doorstep drinks – an idea for good weather. Neighbours sit outside their homes (socially distanced), to spend time with each other.
 - iii. Gardening days – residents gather (socially distanced) to clear and tidy green space.
 - iv. Swapping events
 - v. Many residents have been ‘clearing out; and have placed unwanted items outside their homes for others to take.
 - vi. Charity collections – it was important to highlight that this involves obtaining a licence and co-operating with the charity.
 - vii. Zoom singing, zoom chatting (with knitting), zoom dancing, listening to bands and choirs together, exercising together, virtual tours of the White House, Disney World, the Statue of Liberty, London, the Sistine Chapel and Graceland etc.
 - viii. Socially distanced walks or exercises.
 - ix. Holding an event in the Country Park, with bands, choirs etc.
 - x. Over the last two weeks residents had been litter picking, which was good for the environment and mental health.
 - xi. Members of the Melton Matters Wombles Group had been litter picking and had collected 95 bags of rubbish to date.
 - xii. It had been noticed by residents that dog fouling had increased during lockdown.

Statistical Data

E11. Unemployment and Welfare Benefits Statistics

- Summary of evidence

This data was presented to Members at their meeting on 27 October 2020.

National Data

- i. In September 2020 there were 1,250,000 people unemployed, which was an increase of 209,000 from 2019.
- ii. The Treasury Office for Budget Responsibility had suggested that unemployment may peak at 4 - 4.5 million by the end of 2020.
- iii. Between September 2019 and September 2020, the number of employees had fallen by 673,000.
- iv. The number of people in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance was 2,700,000, which was an increase of 120% since March 2020.
- v. The number of job vacancies had increased from April to June 2020 but were 40% less than 2019.
- vi. The 16-24-year-old age group had been the worst affected.
- vii. The number of redundancies had increased from June to August 2020 to 227,000, which was the largest increase since 2009.

Local Data

- i. The approximate number of people in employment had not changed over the last few years.
 - ii. Up to June 2020, 83.3% of working age people were in work, compared with 82% of working age people in 2018.
 - iii. The DWP advised that 3 local employers were potentially making 350 employees redundant.
 - iv. Brooksby Melton College had made 11 employees redundant. Its income had dropped, there were a lack of apprentices and its theatre, equestrian centre, events, catering and student accommodation had suffered as a result of Covid-19.
 - v. The DWP were unable to confirm the types of job lost and the types of people made unemployed in the Borough.
 - vi. The numbers of new benefit claimants had increased by 1346, compared with September 2019, 243 claimants were aged 18-30.
 - vii. The DWP were unable to confirm the number of Universal Credit recipients who had requested advance payments.
- **Green Jobs**

The Global Citizen reported, in May 2021, that research by the Green New Deal UK has shown that the UK could replace roles expected to be lost permanently as a result of the economic fall-out from the pandemic by investing in green jobs. These jobs could include roles in wind, solar power and retrofitting homes in order to make them more energy efficient. It is estimated that nearly one million jobs would be lost in the next two years however, at a cost of £68bn, a total of 1.2 million green jobs can be created in the UK inside the next two years.

- The Local Government Association outlined in their Green Jobs report that the green economy is booming and projected to grow at a rate of 11% a year between now and 2030. By 2030 there could be an extra 694,000 green jobs created.

E12. Employment of young people during the pandemic

- The Office for National Statistics, 11 May 2021, stated the following regarding young people's employment:
 - i. Young people's employment rate saw a large decline in 2020 compared with 2019, while their unemployment and economic inactivity rates increased. The reason for this could be partly contributed to by the imposition of lockdown restrictions which had considerable impact on industries with higher employment concentrations of young people, such as the consumer-facing service jobs in wholesale and retail trade, accommodation and food services, and human health and social work activities, where homeworking was less likely to be available.
 - ii. After an initial fall in young people in full-time education in the first few months of the pandemic, the proportion of young people in full-time education increased in the second half of 2020, reaching a new high of 46.8% in Quarter 3 (July to Sept) 2020.
 - iii. The number of young people employed in the accommodation and food services industry who moved to unemployment or economic inactivity increased by more than 50% in Quarter 2 (April to June) 2020 compared with Quarter 2 2019.
 - iv. Young people who worked part-time moved from employment to economic inactivity at a faster rate than they moved to unemployment in 2020.
 - v. Young people's labour mobility (job-to-job moves) declined more during the pandemic than for older age groups.

E13. Vaccination Statistics

- As of 15 August 2021, the rate of vaccination uptake in the Borough was 89.0% for the first dose (second highest in the County, after Harborough District) and 78.6% for the second dose (third highest in the County, after Harborough and Blaby Districts). This compares to rates in England of 79.0% for the first dose and 68.1% for the second dose. In Leicester City the rates are 69.7% for the first dose and 57.6% for the second dose.
- Comparing Melton data to Middle Layer Super Output Area (MSOA) level for first dose, the highest is Bottesford, Harby and Croxton Kerrial at 92.8% and the lowest two MSOA are Melton Mowbray South at 86.3% and Melton Mowbray West at 85.6%. As the take up, within the Borough, has been reasonable there has been no 'deep dive' into the data to determine groups where there may be low take up. For Leicestershire the deep dive on data

has been carried out in areas of Charnwood, which has the lowest uptake of vaccine for both first and second dose.

E14. Debt

- The Group considered information from the report 'Coronavirus Impact on Debt and Savings' published on 6 July 2021. The report included statistics provided by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), the Bank of England, the Resolution Foundation, Citizens Advice, Turn2us and other organisations.
- The report found that, on the whole, household savings had risen and debt had remained at a similar level. Although some households, particularly those with low incomes, have, since the start of the pandemic, run down savings and increased debt. The most affected groups are: renters, people from BAME backgrounds, parents and carers, disabled people and those who were shielding and young people.
- Renters
 - i. The FCA found that 42% of renters were worried about falling behind on rent payments.
 - ii. The Citizens Advice found that, between February and November 2020, 26% of renters had fallen behind on bills compared to 9% of homeowners.
 - iii. The Citizens Advice found that, between February and November 2020, 13% of renters were behind on their Council Tax compared to 5% of homeowners.
- People of BAME backgrounds
 - i. The FCA found that, between February and October 2020, 32% of consumers from BAME backgrounds fell behind on bills or missed a payment compared to 15% of consumers from a white background.
 - ii. In September 2020, the poverty charity Turn2us found that 45% of people from a black ethnic group said that they are unable to afford an emergency cost of £250, compared to 26% of people from a white ethnic group and 27% of people from an Asian ethnic group.
- Parents and Carers
 - i. The ONS found, in July 2020, 22.2% of parents said they had to borrow money or use credit more than before the pandemic. This compared with an average of 13.3%.
 - ii. The Citizens Advice found that, in July 2020, 23% of people with caring responsibilities had fallen behind on their bills compared with 6% of people without caring responsibilities.
 - iii. Between February and November 2020, Citizens Advice found that 30% of people with children aged 5 or under fell behind on bills compared to 14% of all adults.
- Disabled people and shielders

- i. In July 2020, Citizens Advice found that 22% of those who were shielding had fallen behind on their bills, compared to 14% of all adults.
 - ii. Turn2us found that, in September 2020, 46% of disabled people used at least one form of debt since March compared to 33% of people with no disability.
- Young People
 - i. The FCA found, in July 2020, that 19% of those aged 25-34 sought debt advice in the preceding six months, compared with 2% of those aged 55-64.
 - ii. Turn2us found that in September 2020, 57% of people aged 18-24 had used at least one form of debt since March compared to 20% of people aged 55+.
 - iii. Between February and November 2020, Citizens Advice found that 27% of people aged 18-35 were behind on their bills compared to 4% of people aged 55+.

Conclusions

MAIN ISSUES IDENTIFIED	LINK TO EVIDENCE	PROPOSED SOLUTION(S)	RECOMMENDATION
<p>1. The pandemic had led to an increase in youth unemployment which has had knock on repercussions in respect to debt issues. As younger people are more likely than older people to have issues with debt.</p>	<p>E11, E12, E14</p>	<p>Jobs fair for those aged 16-24 in Melton. The Council should identify the types of job which are most likely to be available in the future in Melton.</p> <p>The jobs fair could include signposting and this would include signposting for apprenticeships, careers, job opportunities, job-hunting, CVs, self-employment, further training and possible education, including on-line.</p>	<p>R2</p>
<p>2. The pandemic has given people the chance to reflect on environment around them and how to be greener. The Prime Minister has often stated that the country needs to “build back greener”.</p>	<p>E11</p>	<p>The LGA advised in July 2020 that demand for green jobs will increase rapidly as the country transitions to net zero emissions. Nearly 694,000 direct jobs could be created by 2030. Even during the pandemic, new jobs were created as lifestyles have changed.</p>	<p>R2</p>
<p>3. Homelessness has been an issue for the Council for a considerable number of years, however the pandemic has exacerbated this issue. Homelessness has a devastating impact upon the individuals and families experiencing it and</p>	<p>E5</p>	<p>One of the key elements in tackling the issue of homelessness is awareness.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - tenants need to be aware that the Council can advise and support them - landlords need to be aware that if they contact the Council before notice is served then it might be possible that a solution could be found to suit all parties involved - there also needs to be a general awareness that 	<p>R1</p>

<p>the Council suffers financially as well.</p>		<p>there could be underlying reasons as to why the tenant finds themselves in the situation that they are in. Those reasons need to be discovered and resolved.</p> <p>It is for this reason that it is recommended a communications campaign needs to be implemented.</p>	
<p>4. The pandemic has seen a fall in formal volunteers. Whilst this has been coupled with a rise in informal volunteers, what this does mean is that fewer volunteers have had background checks.</p>	E10	<p>A Volunteer Fair which will hopefully attract back former volunteers and gain the informal volunteers.</p>	R4
<p>5. It is unclear how much digital exclusion exists in Melton Borough, however we know digital exclusion exists. This makes it difficult for those excluded digitally to access services, particularly if they are primarily online services.</p> <p>It is important to note that digital exclusion also applies to those, mostly children, who do not have easy access to appropriate equipment. When the Council updates IT equipment, it</p>	E7	<p>A review of all Council services to ensure that the digitally excluded are able to access them.</p> <p>Explore, with partners, possibilities of getting the digitally excluded digitally educated. This could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - increasing the help which the Council provides in the Computer Suite at Phoenix House. - the Council could consider using the Kick Start scheme, to employ a 16 to 24 year-old on Universal Credit or at risk of long-term employment, to help residents develop their digital knowledge. - Age UK has a Digital Buddy training video which provides guidance on 	R5

<p>should consider ways that children without necessary equipment can be helped.</p>		<p>supporting older people with digital technology and how it could benefit them to learn essential digital skills.</p>	
<p>6. The survey suggests that members of the BAME community have experienced discrimination from the Council or one of its partners. In addition, evidence suggests that members of the BAME community have been disadvantaged as a result of the pandemic.</p>	<p>E1, E9</p>	<p>Any suggestion of discrimination by the Council or a partner is a very serious allegation. Unfortunately, there was little information about the circumstances of the discrimination. It is therefore imperative that the Council reviews its existing monitoring process and addresses any incidents of discrimination.</p> <p>Also, in light of the disadvantages faced by the BAME community during the pandemic, the Council has a duty to do all it can to assist the BAME community in the Borough.</p>	<p>R6</p>
<p>7. The number of respondents to the survey was lower than anticipated, therefore the data is not as rich as it could be.</p>	<p>E1</p>	<p>The survey was originally due to be open for six weeks however, due to a poor response, that was extended by two weeks. Engagement with the lead officer for communications in respect to future Scrutiny studies where consultation and engagement may be required is crucial to ensure there is clarity on expectations, timescales and visibility/reach of consultation exercise.</p>	<p>R3</p>
<p>8. Residents have benefited from the Helping People Partnership Board but it has, at times, acted like a 'shadow Council'</p>	<p>E10</p>	<p>The Helping People Partnership Board needs to do the following</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ensure that it is representative of relevant partners who can deliver an effective and 	<p>R7</p>

<p>with little oversight from non-Executive Members. There is also a lack of knowledge and understanding at what the partnership actually does.</p>		<p>collaborative approach to health and wellbeing in Melton.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ensure that it incorporates Covid recovery/insights, needs and trends as a standing agenda item to enable collective understanding and action planning, relevant to the remit of the partnership. - ensure that the outcomes of the partnership are made available to scrutiny members with an update report in six months. 	
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Recommendations

Following careful evaluation of the evidence, the Task and Finish Group believe that the following recommendations support the aims and objectives of the Council set out in the Corporate Strategy to respond to the issues identified by the study and summarised within this report.

The Group recognised that not all the issues discussed within the report were caused by Covid-19, however all issues were exacerbated by the pandemic and the resulting lockdowns.

It was further recognised that the Council is not able to solve every issue identified, so the resulting recommendations are where Members believe that the Council can have the biggest impact.

Recommendation 1 (R1)

That assurance is given to Scrutiny that the Council is being proactive in identifying and putting measures in place to prevent people from becoming homeless, with a particular emphasis on encouraging people to seek housing advice and support prior to them becoming homeless. This should take the following form:

- a. A proactive communications approach including a poster campaign (public facing communications that emphasises the need for people to contact the Council for advice and support as soon as possible and not when they have already become homeless).
- b. A proactive communications approach that encourages landlords to contact the Council before they serve a notice, to see if we can work together to address any issues and stabilise the tenancy.
- c. A proactive approach to engaging with landlords in the Borough (for example, through a landlords' forum).
- d. Readily available information and guidance about how the Council can help and prevent homelessness from occurring to begin with (for example, negotiating with landlords, addressing underlying issues that have led to the tenancy being at risk, implementation of support to stabilise the tenancy).
- e. An update report to the Scrutiny Committee in 12 months' time to demonstrate how successful the Council has been in preventing households from becoming homeless, and any lessons learned.

Reasons for Recommendation (R1)

The reasons for the recommendations can be categorised as follows:

- Legal

The Council have an obligation to comply with current homelessness legislation.

- **Financial**
Homelessness is expensive for the Council and prevention should reduce that cost. The estimate for the net amount chargeable to Council Tax in respect of Homelessness for 2020/21 is £151,960 and for 2021/22 this will be £89,350.
- **Health**
Evidence has shown that the mental and physical damage caused to an individual's wellbeing if they are currently homeless or about to become homeless increases compared to someone who has a place to live.
- **Well-being**
A homeless person has less chances of getting a job, forming relationships and potentially makes them more likely to be involved with street crime or alcohol / drugs addiction, we need early intervention and engagement to do all we can to help them. In addition, a homeless family could be placed in temporarily housing accommodation outside of their neighbourhood, which could be unsuitable as they would be removed from their support network and children would have to travel further to their school.

What it is important for both Members and Officers to understand is that prevention is crucial to reducing homelessness. The categories, as outlined above, gives the reasons why the Council should act at the prevention stage.

Recommendation 2 (R2)

As soon as practicable, the Council and appropriate partners should host a Jobs Fair for people aged between 16 and 24. It is recommended that the jobs fair should include businesses, the DWP, Brooksby-Melton College, advice services and sign-posting.

Reasons for Recommendation (R2)

Unemployment is dropping but employment for individuals between 16 and 24 is more problematic. They are more likely to have lost their job and less likely to find a new job. They are also more likely to have accumulated debt during the pandemic.

The mental health and wellbeing of young people who cannot find employment is worse than for other ages. Being aged 16-24 should be exciting and challenging as young people look to find their place in the adult world believing they might never be employed is thoroughly demoralising.

It will also be an opportunity for business leaders to identify growing industries such as the Green Economy.

Recommendation 3 (R3)

Engagement with the lead officer for communications in respect to future Scrutiny studies where consultation and engagement may be required is crucial to ensure there is clarity on expectations, timescales and visibility/reach of consultation exercise.

Reasons for Recommendation (R3)

The function of Scrutiny is expected to address the concerns residents have in relation to the Council's services as well as other public bodies. Conducting surveys is a reasonable and important way for Scrutiny to gather necessary information and evidence. Having a wide reach in order to gather as many views that are representative of the community.

Recommendation 4 (R4)

We recommend that the Council host a Volunteer Fair to be held at Parkside with as much publicity as possible to encourage as many charitable companies, voluntary organisations and possible volunteers to attend.

Reasons for Recommendation (R4)

Volunteers and the voluntary sector are a vital part of society and lives are changed daily for the better by volunteers. Volunteering is good for society but is also good for the mental health and welfare of the volunteers.

Most formal volunteers are aged between 65-74 but during the pandemic many volunteers of that age were shielding or preferring to self-isolate and they very often missed out on socialising. However they know the benefits of volunteering and as we return to normality are likely to return to the voluntary sector but it's always good to match volunteers with volunteering opportunities.

During the pandemic, there was a significant increase in informal volunteering to help with problems caused by Covid. Hopefully some of those volunteers would be interested in permanent formal volunteering.

Volunteering is also good for the unemployed as they gain opportunities to learn new skills.

Recommendation 5 (R5)

The Council should review its existing processes to ensure that the digitally excluded have the same access to services as digitally competent residents have. In addition, the Council should work with partners (e.g. Age UK) to ensure that the digitally excluded have every opportunity to become digitally included if they choose.

This could also be by increasing the help which the Council already provides in the computer suite at Phoenix House so that all residents, who wish, can obtain the necessary skills to access the internet. In addition, the Council should consider using the Government's Kick Start scheme, to employ a 16 to 24 year-old on Universal Credit or at risk of long-term employment, to help residents develop their digital knowledge (Age UK has a Digital Buddy training video which provides guidance).

Reasons for Recommendation (R5)

Digital inclusion is shown as likely to help improve the health and wellbeing of residents in many ways.

Leicestershire Districts ICT Partnership includes Melton Borough Council and the following is part of the Partnership's Vision for 2018-2022:

'Our residents will have had opportunities to learn and develop digital skills and have the confidence to use them'

Data suggest that during the pandemic, the proportion of UK homes without the internet fell, but older and financially vulnerable are still the most likely to remain digitally excluded.

COVID-19 did not cause digital exclusion but the pandemic has highlighted and worsened an existing problem. The digitally excluded have found it difficult to access services which became online only during the pandemic

Digital exclusion results in a financial cost to the Council because it is more expensive to communicate with those affected. It might need a meeting, a letter or a visit when an email would have sufficed.

Recommendation 6 (R6)

The Council should review existing processes for monitoring its treatment of BAME residents and ensuring that BAME residents are treated fairly. This should include looking to make improvements where required.

Reasons for Recommendation (R6)

The survey indicated that 5% of respondents considered themselves to be part of the BAME community. Most of those members of the BAME community believed that they had been discriminated against by the Council or a partner, however there was no indication of how or why the discrimination occurred.

The low number of responses to the survey meant that the BAME responses could not be considered representative of the BAME community. Nevertheless, any suggestion

of discrimination needs monitoring and must be addressed where discovered. The Council will not tolerate any type of discrimination.

Recommendation 7 (R7)

A refresh of the Helping People Partnership:

- a) To ensure that the Helping People Partnership Board is representative of relevant partners who can deliver an effective and collaborative approach to health and wellbeing in Melton.
- b) To ensure that the Helping People Partnership Board incorporates Covid recovery/insights, needs and trends as a standing agenda item to enable collective understanding and action planning, relevant to the remit of the partnership.
- c) To ensure that the outcomes of the partnership are made available to scrutiny members with an update report in six months.

Reasons for Recommendations (R7)

The Helping People Partnership Board has the potential to work for the benefit of the Borough's residents. With the adoption of our recommendation, the Group believes that the Partnership will become more effective, more collaborative, more transparent and more accountable.

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- Assistant Director for Governance and Democracy
- Assistant Director for Housing
- Case Management Team
- Customer Services Team Leader
- Democratic Services Team
- Department of Work and Pensions Melton Mowbray
- Housing and Neighbourhood Manager
- HR and Communications
- People Manager
- Revenues and Benefits Manager

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