

West Sussex County Council – Written Questions

12 February 2021

1. Written question from Cllr M Jones for reply by **Cabinet Member for Adults and Health**

Question

It is recognised that frontline workers are more likely to be exposed to COVID-19 at work and therefore health and social care workers have been prioritised for vaccination. Can the Cabinet Member tell me if she agrees with my view that teaching staff, nursery staff and other frontline workers such as the Police force and members of the Fire and Rescue service are also at considerable risk of contracting the virus whilst fulfilling their employment.

Given that many teachers employed by the County Council have continued to deliver education in schools to those children of key workers throughout the pandemic and that the Fire Service has played a crucial role in the county council in response to COVID-19 since March last year, can she tell me whether she has already or would agree to write to the Health Secretary urging him to prioritise teaching staff, nursery staff and frontline blue light staff who have not yet had the opportunity to be vaccinated?

Answer

The NHS COVID-19 Vaccination Programme is led by the NHS (Sussex Health and Care Partnership). The County Council is providing support where needed.

The NHS has been instructed by the Government to strictly follow advice from the [Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation \(JCVI\) for roll-out of the vaccine to priority groups](#), focusing on the top four priority groups first (1. residents in a care home for older adults and their carers; 2. all those 80 years of age and over and frontline health and social care workers; and 3. all those 75 years of age and over, all those 70 years of age and over and clinically extremely vulnerable individuals).

The Government considers the JCVI is best placed to determine prioritisation based on scientific evidence, understanding of risk and most effective use of available vaccine (as detailed below). It would only be possible to broaden eligibility to new groups if those currently included were de-prioritised. The Government's approach therefore enables the vaccination programme to be targeted effectively by ensuring ongoing decisions about prioritisation are made by the JCVI.

JCVI advises that the first priorities for the COVID-19 vaccination programme should be the prevention of mortality and the maintenance of the health and social care systems. As the risk of mortality from COVID-19 increases with age, prioritisation is primarily based on age. The order of priority for each group in the population corresponds with data on the number of individuals who would need to be vaccinated to prevent one death, estimated from UK data obtained from March to June 2020 (see [reference 3](#)):

1. residents in a care home for older adults and their carers

2. all those 80 years of age and over and frontline health and social care workers
3. all those 75 years of age and over
4. all those 70 years of age and over and clinically extremely vulnerable individuals [\[footnote 1\]](#)
5. all those 65 years of age and over
6. all individuals aged 16 years [\[footnote 2\]](#) to 64 years with underlying health conditions which put them at higher risk of serious disease and mortality [\[footnote 3\]](#)
7. all those 60 years of age and over
8. all those 55 years of age and over
9. all those 50 years of age and over

2. Written question from **Cllr Oxlade** for reply by **Cabinet Member for Adults and Health and Cabinet Member for Children and Young People**

Question

A year on from the start of the first nationwide lockdown it is clear that the effect on many residents' mental health will be severe, wide ranging, and long lasting. Indeed, the Children's Commissioner for England has warned that the [damage to children's mental health caused by the pandemic could last for years](#) without a large-scale funding increase for children's mental health services.

More than half of adults and over two thirds of young people have said their mental health has worsened during lockdown restrictions and many mental health charities state this is just the beginning of a mental health crisis.

I also understand that the number of alcohol-related deaths in England and Wales between January and September 2020 have increased significantly.

Could the Cabinet Member tell me:

- (a) Whether there has been an increase in the number of alcohol related deaths and those who have taken their own life between January and September 2020 compared to the same period in 2019;
- (b) What additional funding the County Council has been provided with to reach young people and adults experiencing mental health issues;
- (c) What increased support has been delivered through Youth Emotional Support and West Sussex Wellbeing; and
- (d) What plans are being put in place to prepare for a potential mental health crisis.

Answer

- (a) Alcohol related deaths and suicide:

Alcohol related deaths

On 2 February 2021, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) released [provisional national and regional data regarding alcohol related deaths between January and September 2020 compared with the same period in 2019](#).

Nationally, a 16% increase in deaths related to alcohol-specific causes was observed in 2020 compared with the same period in 2019. It should be noted that the ONS data relates to alcohol-specific deaths, where deaths are a direct consequence of alcohol misuse (for example, wholly attributable causes such as alcoholic liver disease).

ONS noted increases in the North East and London, but stated that, even at a regional level, caution was required when comparing year-on-year quarterly rates due to the relatively small number of deaths. While the County Council will look to undertake similar analysis using ONS methodology, small numbers mean there is unlikely to be a significant difference.

At a county-level and lower tier local authority level, given small numbers, Public Health England (PHE) publish three-year pooled information and the 2017-19 data was published on 2 February 2021. For West Sussex for the three-year period, there were 270 such deaths in 2017-19.

Suicide

In relation to suicide data, deaths caused by suicide are investigated by coroners; given the length of time it takes to hold an inquest we cannot at present state the total number of suicides that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic.

At a national level some provisional data for January to September 2020 was published in December 2020 but this was heavily caveated – notably that the **lower** number of deaths registered in the second quarter “likely reflects delays to inquests caused by the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) on the coroner’s service in England and Wales”. Figures at present may therefore be an underestimate due to delays.

- (b) The County Council has been awarded £200,000 to commission a pan-Sussex Self Harm Learning Network with NHS colleagues at the Sussex Health and Care Partnership. Running over two years, it will be co-produced with children and young people (CYP) and their families.

The programme will enable school staff and parents to access courses, information and support to help identify and support children and young people in primary and secondary education who may be at risk of or engaging in self-harm behaviour. As part of this approach, two self-harm and distress tolerance Webinars are taking place on 25 February and 11 March 2021, for both education staff and parents/carers.

More widely, additional investment in mental health provision has been led by the NHS, both specifically during COVID-19 and more generally. As joint commissioners across health and social care, the County Council has also been involved in planning for further additional investment in mental health provision.

- (c) Youth Emotional Support and West Sussex Wellbeing:

Youth Emotional Support

The YES Service has been flexible during the pandemic, in moving to an online offer. However, not all children and young people (CYP) have felt able to

engage through this medium. Referral patterns are following school terms/opening and closures and are rising on those patterns.

An overall increase in funding to the YES service of £500,000 was received from the Sussex Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) for 2020/21, however this was agreed pre-COVID-19. No new funding has been received for 2021/22 from the CCG or from within the County Council with regards to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) budget.

The YES contract is funded by the CCG and is currently commissioned via Early Help in the County Council. Two posts within this service are funded by the CCG and the Council until April 2021; options are currently being explored for provision post April 2021.

Some targeted investment may be received around COVID-19 and admission avoidance which the County Council will have to bid for on behalf of individual children and young people. This will only support a few of the children either stepping out of inpatient settings or at a significant risk of admission.

West Sussex Wellbeing

West Sussex wellbeing supports adults holistically in the context of their life circumstances.

Although the majority of people work with the programme to set and achieve personal goals around lifestyle, we should recognise that in doing so this supports their emotional wellbeing as well as their physical health. The programme more recently introduced alcohol advisors as part of each team, who can offer not just brief advice regarding alcohol (an established part of its offer) but also extended brief advice.

During lockdown, case studies from Wellbeing have shown both the value of the programme in this regard, as well as the challenges people are faced with regarding their drinking during this difficult time.

Additionally, a link to the suicide prevention campaign 'Warning Signs' (aimed at middle aged men and those who care for them) has been included on the [West Sussex Wellbeing website](#), as well as advertising the new Sussex Bereaved through Suicide service, which is a bereavement support offer for those affected by a suicide, whether recently or historically.

- (d) Partnership working across all sectors, including the community and voluntary sector, specialist providers, and commissioners is key to supporting communities across West Sussex. Developments include:
- Development of a discharge to assess model to support people to be discharged from hospital in a timely way and avoid admissions wherever possible.
 - Access to a mental health helpline via NHS 111.
 - Increased support for children and young people in crisis.
 - Use of innovative digital technologies including virtual appointments across a range of service areas.
 - Launch of the [e-wellbeing website](#).

- Ongoing development of the Mental Health in Schools programme.
- Launch of [Foundations for our Future](#) responding to independent review of provision across Sussex.
- Ensuring pathways for access to social care and for those in need of a mental health act assessment are robust.
- Refreshing the West Sussex Suicide Prevention Strategy 2017-2020; a specific priority for action includes preventing suicide in people with mental ill health and for those who have co-occurring mental ill health and alcohol/substance misuse.
- Further initiatives focus on suicide prevention awareness in the workforce, debt crisis service in Crawley, with a specific focus on supporting people in debt who have a mental health challenge, a pan-Sussex real time surveillance system to enable the Council to identify in real time all suspected suicides in West Sussex to provide prompt support to families and communities.

3. Written question from Cllr Atkins for reply by Cabinet Member for Education and Skills

Question

I declare a personal interest as a local authority governor of Durrington Infant and Junior Federated Schools.

In the light of the recent announcement by Mr Williamson, Education Secretary for an extra 300,000 laptops and tablets to be bought to help disadvantaged children in England learn at home, and in the light of the research by the University of Sussex which found that nearly one in five less advantaged parents said they struggled with home-learning during the lockdown, can I be assured that some of these laptops will be delivered to the schools in West Sussex for disadvantaged children including the disadvantaged children of Durrington Infant and Junior Federated schools.

Answer

In January 2021, Mr Williamson announced that a further 300,000 laptops were being purchased by the Government and made available for disadvantaged children across the country. These laptops are being added to the current 'access to technology scheme' which was launched in September 2020. At the beginning of September, the Local Authority registered a nominated member of staff at each school with the Department of Education to ensure that schools would be able to access the laptops in an efficient manner.

The allocation of laptops for each school is based on the number of children in the identified year groups of 3 to 11 and the number of children in receipt of free school meals as per the last census. Based on the above criteria, Durrington Infants does not have an allocation; however the Junior school have been able to order 44 devices which is an increase of 35 since the original allocation of nine provided in September.

It is possible for the school to query the allocation of devices and to do so it must provide the Department of Education with clear evidence that they have more children in need than the data has historically identified. The nominated member

of staff has access to the portal and would be able to submit the request and evidence.

4. Written question from Cllr M Jones for reply by Cabinet Member for Education and Skills

Question

Can the Cabinet Member please tell me:

- (a) How many fines have been issued to parents for not sending their child to school (unauthorised absences) since 1 April 2020 due to parental concerns about the current pandemic;
- (b) What guidance has been given to head-teachers regarding unauthorised absences due to parental concerns about the current pandemic;
- (c) How much the parents have been fined; and
- (d) If possible, provide details of the time period between the period of absence and the issuing of the fine.

Answer

- (a) The County Council does not issue fines but instead issues Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs). The Council issues a FPN when a school refers the case to the local authority for action. In most cases of absence, schools will have explored all other means to encourage attendance. FPNs are a time-limited offer to a parent to accept their liability for the criminal offence of failing to ensure regular school attendance (S.444 Education Act 1996) by way of paying this FPN in a designated time period (28 days) rather than the offence be brought before the Courts.

Each referral submitted to the FPN team is considered on a case-by-case basis and evaluated within the evidential framework along with whether the situation is suitable for this method of disposal. To issue a FPN the County Council must be satisfied that the evidential requirements for the offence mentioned above have been met in full.

The Fixed Penalty Notice (FPN) Team records the referral and subsequent FPNs by three categories which are all defined as unauthorised absences. These categories are:

- Unauthorised holiday in term time (G coded absence).
- Arriving after the registers have closed ('U' coded absence).
- Other unauthorised absence ('O' coded absence).

The team do not log additional factors on their FPN records as to whether the current pandemic has contributed toward the period of absence.

Between 1 April 2020 and 5 February 2021 the data held indicates that 330 FPNs have been issued to parents of which:

- 200 were associated with absence for unauthorised holiday in term time
 - 3 were associated with punctuality issues and late arrival at school
 - 127 were associated for other unauthorised absence
- (b) Throughout the pandemic the County Council has continued to provide updates and support to headteachers on school attendance and engagement as the expectation around school attendance changed and evolved. All advice and guidance reflected the Department for Education position on these matters.

In addition, The Pupil Entitlement: Investigation Advice line offers guidance for schools, parents and other professionals.

All advice and guidance issued, when schools were fully open, highlighted that schools should:

- Remind and reassure parents that risk assessments and protective factors are in place in their establishments to allay any fears.
 - Offer flexible approaches to help parents toward re-integration.
 - Direct parents to the wealth of information that was available on the County Council web pages around returning to school (this will be updated post 22 February 2021).
 - Provide parents with information on the Government's expectation in regard to attendance at school.
 - Advise that the law around school attendance had been re-stated and that the decision to refer to the County Council for consideration of issuing of FPNs are at the Headteachers' discretion and that such referrals be would managed accordingly.
- (c) The cost of a FPN is stipulated in the legislation and is issued at the rate of £120 per parent with a 28 day payment period. If the parent offers settlement for the FPN within the first 21 days, the amount is reduced to £60 per parent.
- (d) The time period between the period of absence and the issuing of the fine is impacted by the timeliness of the referral submission from the school. The preference is for referrals to be submitted at the earliest of opportunity. However, it is recognised other factors may impact upon this and at times the FPN team has received referrals at the start/end of term breaks. To offer a general overview of the impact of the referral timing there were 163 FPNs issued for unauthorised absence during September 2020. Of these:
- 23 were issued in September 2020;
 - 79 were issued in October 2020;
 - 40 were issued in November 2020; and
 - 21 were issued in December 2020.

5. Written question from Cllr Quinn for reply by Cabinet Member for Environment

Question

Members were recently notified that the County Council has decided to abandon its electric vehicle charge point network procurement because the proposed provider sought changes to the proposals which fundamentally differed from the published tender. I understand the Cabinet Member is reviewing her options and next steps. Can the Cabinet Member please tell me:

- (a) What options are open to her to take this matter forward;
- (b) Whether new technology or delivery options in this arena have come to the fore since the decision to procure the contract was taken;
- (c) Whether or not the abandonment of the procurement is likely to impact on delivering the aims of the electric vehicle strategy which includes enabling a charging infrastructure to be installed to prepare for public use ahead of the ambition of all new cars in West Sussex to be electric by 2030; and
- (d) How much the abandoned procurement process has cost to date and the extent to which those costs are to be met by the County Council.

Answer

- (a) The overall aim remains to secure investment in a substantial county-wide public charge point network without capital investment by the County Council. A contract was sought under which a provider would take on the planning, funding installation and operation of the network.

Under review are:

- (i) Thorough consultation with potential providers about whether the market is still interested in providing such a solution under this model and whether any modifications, such as a longer contract duration, would make this a more attractive proposition.
 - (ii) The pros and cons of using a framework to meet the same objective. Since the original decision to commence procurement, new frameworks have become available as alternative routes to the market.
 - (iii) Whether there are external funds that can be secured in advance to make the offer more attractive.
- (b) The Council is not aware of any significant relevant new technology developments, but is keeping tabs on this as an evolving and innovative sector.
- (c) The County Council and all District and Borough partners remain committed to achieving the ambition and commitments made in the Electric Vehicle Strategy and to working together to achieve this after evaluating the most appropriate model.
- (d) Other than officer time, there have been no financial costs to the County Council or partners as a result of the abandonment. The experience gained to

date will be valuable in reframing and speeding up delivery under whichever model is deemed appropriate.

6. Written question from Cllr Quinn for reply by Cabinet Member for Fire & Rescue and Communities

Question

Lock-down arrangements as a result of the pandemic have seen people's day-to-day lives drastically alter and has resulted in families having to spend long periods of time together at home. Furthermore, the economic effects of the pandemic are also causing hardship, anxiety and placing additional stress on individuals and families.

Given that more than 3,000 arrests were made for domestic abuse-related crimes in Sussex during the first coronavirus lockdown, can the Cabinet Member please tell me:

- (a) What additional funding has been provided by central Government to deliver additional support to those at risk of or experiencing domestic violence in West Sussex since the start of the pandemic;
- (b) What this has been able to deliver; and
- (c) Whether additional funding is required and/or expected?

Answer

- (a) In Sussex the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) receives funds from the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) to commission victim services. Some of the funding is allocated to services that operate across Sussex and some to organisations that deliver a service in West Sussex only. The County Council works with the OPCC to agree how the funds are best used.

From the beginning of the pandemic central government has recognised the increased risk of domestic abuse and made additional one-off grant funding available to support victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence during lockdown. The criteria for this funding was specific to increasing accessibility and provision for victims.

The OPCC completed a needs assessment with current providers and undertook a communications campaign to encourage services not funded through the MoJ to apply for this funding. As a result of this needs assessment Sussex was awarded an additional £690,000. The OPCC allocated the funding based on the needs assessment. Some of the funding was allocated to pan-Sussex services and some to those who provide a service in West Sussex only. Other funding was provided to services in East Sussex and Brighton and Hove.

- (b) Information is provided, as outlined in the tables below, on the services that have been allocated funding through the OPCC and who have received additional COVID-19 grant funding. These are shown as those who provide a service across Sussex and across West Sussex.

Table 1 – Pan-Sussex services

Service	2020/21 MoJ funding	Additional COVID Grant
Victim Support multi-crime service	£450,000	£30,224
Veritas Justice Stalking advocacy service	£160,000	£24,726
Daisy Chain Project DA Legal Support	£50,000	£23,393
Mankind male support for sexual abuse	£40,000	£8,540
Children’s Sexual violence advocate service	£69,000	£30,718
Young witness service for courts	£73,000	£15,345

Table 2 - West Sussex only services

Service	2020/21 MoJ funding	Additional COVID Grant
Safe in Sussex DA provision	£34,925	£69,430
My Sisters House DA provision	£51,310	£49,670
Life Centre Sexual Abuse provision	£40,000	£163,000
Streetlight support for women exploited through prostitution and sex work	£30,000	£10,000

In addition to the locally allocated funding, central government also allocated money to some national services, including Victim Support, to develop an on-line chat function to increase accessibility. This has been implemented in Sussex, increasing access to this service for West Sussex residents.

- (c) The Government has recently announced further funding will be made available from April 2021, as follows:
- £20.7m for local, community-based sexual violence and domestic abuse services, helping to reduce the amount of time survivors wait for support. Male specific services will see a 60% funding increase following a significant increase in demand for support from men and boys.
 - £16m to recruit more independent sexual violence and domestic abuse advisers – increasing their numbers by around 400 meaning more victims of all ages can access this vital support.
 - £2m for smaller specialist organizations helping BAME, LGBTQ+ or disabled victims.
 - £1.3m for remote and online services – allowing more victims to access support while at home.

The allocation of this funding is yet to be decided and the County Council is working with the OPCC to ensure the services to West Sussex residents are included in any applications for funding.