

Coronavirus: The Winkleigh Experience

INTRODUCTION:

1. This short note provides a balanced overview of the impact to date of coronavirus in Winkleigh, reflects on the positive ways in which our community has responded, and points towards how subsequent spikes of coronavirus, or different emergencies, could be managed in a better way, and discusses what we can learn from this crisis.

IMPACT OF CORONAVIRUS:

2. Torridge has been less affected by the direct effects of the virus than other parts of the country. Our local authority (TDC) is ranked 151 out of 151 similarly sized local authorities for cases. This may be due to the comparatively sparse, widespread population here – in contrast to urban centres; the lack of a significant BAME population; or the fact that there are relatively few residential establishments caring for the elderly here.

3. However, it is important to note that, as elsewhere, the number of cases is a function of the testing regime, and the numbers being published. Testing availability has, until recently, not been widely available, and the low number of positive cases in Torridge previously reported referred only to those under one part of the national testing programme. At the time of writing (13 July), the latest government data records 53 cases in Torridge. There is no local data available for the number of cases in Winkleigh itself, which is important for the future management of any localised outbreaks. However, it is worth re-stating that in our area the direct physical health impact has not been significant

4. Whilst then, cases are low in Winkleigh, it is significant to note that recent research indicates that sufferers and survivors of Covid-19 often suffer from long-term illness and disability resulting from the infection. There has also been a significant impact on the psychological and mental health of people in our community as result of the prolonged lockdown, social distancing, and shielding restrictions.

5. The most obvious other impact has been upon local businesses. Whilst some have kept trading, others have suffered severe loss of income despite the government support schemes. Some have re-purposed their business to meet local needs and services in different ways, but it may be many months before they return to financial health. This will have an enduring impact upon the living standards of many people. A fortuitous benefit of the recent period, however, has been the opportunity to reappraise who it is within our local community that should genuinely be considered as “key workers.” Many of the local services and businesses which are taken for granted in normal times become, during a pandemic, indispensable.

LOCAL RESPONSES: ALL IN IT TOGETHER?

6. The local response to coronavirus has illustrated some of the best characteristics of people within the Parish. People have complied with the regulations in good spirit. Beyond this,

initiatives taken by local people have been important in drawing the community together during these difficult times. The use of social media has been especially important in connecting people - the new Hollocombe Group has over 56 members, probably 90% of its population. Other individuals and businesses have made generous financial donations which have been used to meet local needs, whilst others have been flexible in allowing their land to be used by dog walkers unable to travel outside the village. All these contributions, however small, matter.

7. The Parish Council established and sustained an effective support helpline, which has been both of practical benefit locally and enhanced the reputation of the Council. The support service has 67 volunteers and 44 people being helped, more than once. TDC and DCC have been supportive in securing funds for distribution locally which have been of significant benefit. It is suggested though that the centralised nature of the government's response to the pandemic has impacted upon the ability of local government to play a full part in developing locally tailored responses to Covid-19.

GENERAL PRACTICE

8. The Wallingbrook Health Group comprising of the main surgery at Chulmleigh and branch surgery at Winkleigh has followed NHS and Public Health England's guidance to reduce the risk of infection to patients and staff. The practice attends regular weekly CCG webinar updates to ensure they remain updated of necessary changes which require implementation. The practice fed back the local village support services and NHS Volunteer Good Sam Service has been fantastic, the service provided to patients has been a huge benefit for the community. The practice was extremely fortunate in having sufficient supplies of PPE at the beginning of the pandemic. In line with all practices, they changed the way they operated, such as the provision of drive through blood testing for shielded patients, telephone, and video consultation. The practice was extremely fortunate in introducing eConsult (online consultation) at the beginning of the year whereas other practices across the country had to implement this significant change and communicate to their patients through the pandemic.

The practice is looking ahead to the winter and hired a porta cabin which has recently been installed at the Chulmleigh site to ensure the practice has sufficient space to assess any patients with symptoms, should there be any increase in patients presenting with COVID Symptoms.

The practice had made use of the Covid Help Service in Winkleigh by publishing the details, passing on information to patients and making contact directly themselves where necessary. The practice is providing regular updates on their Facebook pages, website, and notices at the surgery. The staff are to be congratulated for their hard work and commitment to the community.

SCHOOLS:

9. As with all schools Winkleigh Primary School had less than a days' notice to lock down and provide on-line learning by Monday 23rd March. Key worker letters were sent out on Friday 20th and key worker provision was in place by Monday 23rd. The school was conscious that although the work was there for children to do, many families would struggle to juggle family, work, and school commitments and the Headteacher and her staff felt that well-being was the most important factor to consider. The school prioritised the children of key workers and those who were vulnerable.

Having initially had no guidance the school has been inundated with updates from the Government and DCC, some days receiving as many as seven updates and bulletins.

In line with Government Guidance the school were able to offer provision to nursery, reception, year 1 and Year 6, then the school prioritised Year 5 due to age and local circumstances. At this point the school had reached full capacity in terms of space and staff

Children, teachers, and other staff have been confined to their own bubbles to reduce the chance of infection, where possible meals were taken outside.

Parents have been updated regularly, but to date the school has received no guidance from DCC or the Government on how much extra money will be available and when.

Planning is taking place for September with a focus on teaching English, Maths, PHSE and PE again ensuring that wellbeing is a priority.

The school is being cleaned by outside contractors and all the statutory checks are being carried out.

The Head Teacher and her staff have worked tirelessly in difficult circumstances to keep the school open and safe for staff and children.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

10. Covid-19 may have three consequences for our Neighbourhood Plan. First, there will be a delay in arranging the referendum to approve the Plan owing to the suspension of democratic processes such as local elections. Second, recent central government announcements emphasising the desire to "Build, Build, Build, which identify local planning processes as the obstacle to solving the housing crisis, fundamentally threaten the notion of locally-determined neighbourhood plans. Third, as developments has slowed during the crisis, the targets to which TDC is committed for housebuilding become more difficult to realise. If TDC fails to meet its targets, then additional development sites across the District can be brought forward for development. Again, this could undermine the idea that these decisions should be led by local people. These issues need to be raised with TDC.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS PANDEMIC?

11. Reflecting on this, we suggest the following points for consideration:

a) The use of technology in the remote workplace will in future be commonplace. WPC should embrace this in future and consider more of its activities taking place on-line, if the Government extend the emergency Legislation or extend current Legislation to permit remote meetings beyond May 2021. *[At present Local Authority meetings must be held in person but the Government introduced emergency legislation in April 2020 until May 2021 due to Coronavirus to temporarily permit remote meetings]*

b) Similarly, the power of social media to have a positive influence has been demonstrated locally during this crisis. How could WPC build on the good work it has done recently and create more positive understanding of its work?

c) A number of people have commented that they hope the good things that have happened in the village recently will not be lost afterwards and we do not return to “normal.” How, then, can the positive community engagement and spirit within Winkleigh be harnessed and built upon in the future? How can the remaining funds which WPC have be used to address future consequences of Covid-19, and build resilience in the community?

d) Clearly the Covid-19 epidemic is not over: it may be that this winter Winkleigh and Torridge may be hit harder than in the first wave. The management of localised outbreaks requires local action, such as contact tracing, information sharing and localised statistics. WPC should seek from DCC and TDC assurance that this will be the future approach.

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