

## New chief for enterprise group

Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Local Enterprise Partnership has appointed a new chief executive.

Anne Boyd has joined from Manchester Growth Hub, where she worked alongside Government to deliver a range of business support programmes through the England-wide network of Growth Hubs, including EU transition and Covid response.

She has a wealth of experience in LEPs, as vice-chairman of the scrutiny board and member of the business growth committee for the Cheshire and Warrington LEP.

She started her career in the chemical industry working for a major global brand and broadened her experience with a move to the logistics sector. Her career expanded into economic development as she secured leadership roles within regeneration, skills, housing, health and business support and established her own, award-winning business.

Mrs Boyd has significant experience of working in and with Government at a national and local level.

## Volunteer call for streetwatch

Police are trialling Streetwatch – and are currently looking for volunteers.

The initiative is already highly successful in West Midlands Police and it is hoped that the same can work in Stourport before being rolled out to other areas in West Mercia.

Streetwatch provides a visible presence in the community, with volunteers being asked to report concerns and suspicious behaviour back to their police Safer Neighbourhood Team, effectively acting as the ‘eyes and ears’ of the police. Volunteers are asked to do this as part of their daily routines – such as when walking their dog, or on the school run – and this can actively deter any anti-social behaviour.

Volunteers are never asked to intervene – this is very much the role of police officers.

The Stourport trial requires 12 volunteers and anyone interested should contact [angelina.stanley@westmercia.pnn.police.uk](mailto:angelina.stanley@westmercia.pnn.police.uk) for further details.

## Leading way on remote working

Birmingham is leading the UK in offering remote working opportunities for people in technology development work.

UK businesses could face a struggle to hire tech talent over the next 12 months, as new research has revealed companies are slow to embrace remote working.

According to developer recruitment platform CodinGame, less than a quarter of developer jobs currently being advertised in the UK are remote positions. Of the 13,000 tech jobs being advertised across more than 100 major UK towns and cities, only 23 per cent are listed as remote positions.

If you also include the tech roles that are currently listed as “temporarily remote”, that percentage rises to just over a third (36 per cent).

Of the towns and cities where there are currently more than 50 available job posts for developers, Birmingham has the highest percentage of companies advertising remote positions. Almost four-in-ten (38 per cent) of the 330 developer positions being advertised in the UK’s second largest city are listed as remote.

# The heartbreak of care home life during Covid

The pandemic’s devastating impact has hit nowhere worse than care homes. Carey Bloomer tells of the horrors of the past year.

**C**arey Bloomer is straight talking. The managing director of one of the region’s many care homes has evidently not wasted money on media training. She doesn’t talk a lot but say nothing, the way so many do. Instead she’s straight to the point when she reflects on the horrors of the past 14 months.

Her experiences are not unique. From Shropshire to Mid Wales, from the Black Country to Staffordshire, scores of workers have been in a similar position as hundreds of elderly people have died. The Government’s disastrous decision to free up space on NHS wards by discharging infectious elderly patients and the devastating impact of social distancing restrictions that denied visits and also led to deaths; Carey has had a ringside seat as such issues played out.

She’s exhausted by Covid, as are her staff. Yet she’s resilient, too, still focused on the job at hand as we move from the long, three-month lockdown to a better place. The care home for which she’s managing director, the Uplands Care Home in Bicton Heath, Shrewsbury, has suffered mercifully few Covid-related deaths. Unlike others across the region, a combination of good luck and good decision-making has helped to protect the home’s 81-strong population. In many ways, it’s been more fortunate than most.

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There are numerous homes across the region that have witnessed devastating scenes as Covid has passed from resident to resident. The Uplands just got lucky, in many ways.

The home has 81 beds, 40 for patients with dementia and 20 that are used to assess residents. It works closely with hospitals to rehabilitate and re-able those who might be too well to stay in hospital but too poorly to live at home alone. This is her story.

“You could see it coming last February,” she says. “It was like waiting for a tsunami. As much as we tried to protect everybody – that’s staff, their families, the families here, the residents here – we knew what challenges we’d face. The home is a community, nursing homes are a community. There are family members who are here every day and they are almost part of the work force. They have looked after residents for 10 years and want to continue to help.

“It started to happen in hospitals. The hospitals weren’t geared up for it. This isn’t about blame. This is just a reflection of what happened. Nobody ever went to work to do a bad job. Nobody went to work not caring. The hospitals were encouraged to get people out into the community with little or no regard of what effect that would have.”

Shropshire Council was supportive of the care market. It was communicative. There was phone call after phone call of-

fering help. Even so, nothing could have prepared Carey – or workers like her across the region – for what was to come.

“When you’re leading a company it’s a lonely place and you wonder whether you’re doing the right thing,” she recalls. “It started in March last year and we had the first lockdown. Everybody wanted to keep everybody safe. Staff were going down like ninepins. We had six residents and six staff who were poorly. We’re very lucky in that we have some amazing staff. Some of our girls moved in together so that they didn’t take the illness home.”

The personal sacrifices began. “Our work force are not youngsters. They have elderly parents. They couldn’t see them because they couldn’t get home. A couple of members of staff didn’t see their own children. The dedication of the workforce has been humbling. The emotional strain has been humbling.

“The first lockdown, we rolled up our sleeves and got on with it. Summer came and things started to ease. The government was also learning on the hoof, which meant that from our point of view we were constantly changing our processes and protocols. I remember one day writing an operating procedure and looking onto my computer and realising it had been changed before I’d finished it. We were working our way through this mire of updates from the government. We were told one day something was blue, the next day it was green.

“We were sending out letters to relatives saying you can visit in our new huts. The next day, we were sending them out saying they couldn’t. Those poor families, it was like dangling something then whipping it away.”



Covid has changed the dynamic. Visits are not visits the way they used to be. People have to wear masks, visors, aprons. “When you are seeing your loved one, that’s the last thing you want to do. It’s very, very difficult for residents with dementia. We had somebody who turned their face to the wall because their relative didn’t visit and died. That person just gave up on life. They didn’t understand why their relative wasn’t coming in.”

That’s the unseen cost. While the Government was keeping many safe from infection by refusing to allow visitors, it was consigning others to depression, loneliness, anxiety and, in some cases, death. Life simply became not worth living with-out the daily interactions of family.

“From that point, we made decisions and risk assessed and we were determined things would be better. We felt we could prove it was making a difference by having people in. We had to have those

‘The dedication of the staff here is just humbling. The acceptance and the gratitude of the families is remarkable’

visits so that people could stay alive. We were being asked to keep people away to ‘protect them’ but we knew they wouldn’t be here this time next year. It was about weighing up how to protect people and keep them alive. Those with end-stage dementia needed the visits. Those visits give people a reason to live.”

Summer was better. The care home enabled regular garden visits. The sun shone and residents smiled. Autumn, however, was difficult. As staff had become reinvigorated, Covid returned. “It

that sense of normality, for people to have something to look forward to. It’s the little things that make the difference.

“We have lost people through Covid and one of the big things, especially for me, is not being able to go to funerals because of the restrictions. One of our very long-standing residents who had been with us for 13 years, we couldn’t attend his funeral. It’s dreadful. It’s like losing a member of your own family.”

After years of being a Cinderella service, after enduring brickbats from Government ministers who insensitively described staff as being non-essential, society started to wake up. We all began to realise how important the low-paid care workers were. “Our men and women take care of the most vulnerable people in society,” adds Carey. “People hand over their most treasured possession, their relative. The trust in us is beyond anything you could imagine. The heart-warming thing is the letters and the thanks and people saying mum looks great on the iPad. We’ve done everything we can to keep people in touch, it’s not the same as a visit but we’ve done what we can.”

Covid has taught Carey – and all of us – that it’s not good enough. That we must do better. That people enter homes to live, not die, and that better funding must be part of the long-term solution to care in the community. It’s not local councils who are at fault; their cupboard is dry, they have no funding. The solution has to come from central Government.

“I have sympathy for councils,” she says. “Their money is stretched and stretched. Providers have to provide good, safe care. I wouldn’t want a relative of mine somewhere where it wasn’t safe because the funding was too low. You have the competition and market authority saying private funders can’t subsidise council-funded care. There’s something fundamentally wrong with this and it would be lovely to go back to the drawing board and get it right. I am a great advocate for home care. As we are an ageing population with fewer young people, there is going to be more. We need to think about it better.”

The Government did provide some support; extending free PPE, for instance. However, the constant zig-zagging and U-turning has been exasperating. “You get the late-night changes in policy and you shake your head. You have to update everything and start again. We are expected to react like greased lightning and get it right from the next day.”

The vaccination has been a game-changer. Uplands has 99 per cent of staff and residents immunised. “It’s working. The staff were over the moon at having the vaccination. They understand it protects them, the residents and society at large. It’s not just great for them, it’s great for the world. The vaccination will become like a flu vaccine. We will be having yearly updates and boosters. Wearing masks is hopeless though. It’s so isolating for residents. When a resident is 90, masks are a disaster.”

There have been flash points. The home has only allowed in Government-recommended visitors. “I had to tell a couple

of family members they couldn’t come in. I agreed with them that it was horrible. We can’t bend the rules though; if you do, where do you stop? I agree, it’s awful. It makes you feel horrible to turn people away. I know how I would feel if it was my relative. That’s not what we’re about, keeping relatives away. I hope people understand. But I have to care about the other 80 and I have to care about my 130 staff.”

The impact on all who work in the care sector has been extraordinary. “It’s been an emotional roller coaster. We were shut down over Christmas so that was very difficult. We are susceptible to outbreaks because of the amount of people we take from hospital. They may test negative on the day but three days later it may be positive.”

The vaccine is the light on the horizon and Carey sees some logic in vaccination certificates. “A vaccination certificate would be really useful. I would like our residents to see people at will and develop those relationships. People are here for such a short time, the average stay is about 20 months. You think of lockdown and that’s pretty grim, that’s tough on everyone. This is a time when relatives should be coming in and out.”

Carey has only praise for her staff: “They are so committed. We haven’t lost anyone through Covid – people haven’t quit. There’s been lots of tears, lots of conversations, lots of people being frightened. As a company, we buy goodie bags, we buy staff doughnuts, we show people they are appreciated. We try and look after them. We provide counselling services and we do a lot of services. These are not highly paid people but we expect them to go above and beyond. Some of the girls will go and buy clothes for people and do their shopping, or get toiletries, because the residents can’t get out. They’ll do all sorts of little things, they’ll make cakes. It’s the everyday kindness. They are astounding.”

The future is uncertain. Lateral flow tests help and Carrie sees the real test coming in June, when restrictions end. “That’s the real test. That’s what we have to watch out for. The other real test is the autumn, when they are predicting the third big wave. But with the amount of people with vaccines, they are not expecting as many hospital admissions. It’s not about infections any more, it’s now about how sick people are getting. We are in the hands of the epidemiologists and the virologists.”

She has an abiding memory and it’s this: “It’s the gratitude of the families and I shall never get over how the work force has just rolled its sleeves up and got on with it.

“They have all clubbed together and looked after people so well. We’ve lost four people to Covid, which is really low. Whether we’ve been lucky or whether we’ve been diligent, I don’t know. Some homes have lost lots and lots of people.

“The dedication of the girls and the boys here is just humbling. The acceptance and the gratitude of the families is remarkable. We get on with it. We do the job.”

## Council names interim leader

A new interim chief executive has been appointed to a council.

Tony McGovern was formally appointed to the role of interim chief executive of Lichfield District Council at a meeting of full council on Tuesday.

The appointment comes after Diane Tilley announced in January that she would be stepping down from the role of chief executive.

Tony McGovern will take over as chief executive from 1 June 2021 for up to six months while a permanent replacement is found.

The role of chief executive includes being the head of paid service at the council and acting as the returning officer and electoral registration officer for Lichfield District.

Having recently stepped down as managing director for Cannock Chase District Council, Tony McGovern has experience of senior roles within Staffordshire.

Christie Tims, head of governance and performance, said: “Tony will bring key skills and experience to the council and we look forward to welcoming him.”

## 170 jobs at new Primark store

Primark is opening a new 36,400 sq ft store in Tamworth on April 29 creating 170 jobs.

It will be the fashion retailer’s 191st in the UK.

Doors will open at 10 am at the new two-floor store.

The new jobs that have been created include retail assistants, supervisors and managers.

Neil Ford, director of sales for the chain, said: “Our new store will be fully stocked with fresh new season fashion, all at Primark’s famous amazing prices. Between our great value, everyday must-haves and hot new season trend collections, we’ve got everything that customers have been waiting for in our new Tamworth store. We are asking customers for their support in adhering to social distancing and safety measures, both while queuing outside and in-store, to help maintain a safe and enjoyable shopping experience for all.”

## Children urged to have their say

Worcestershire Children First is encouraging the county’s children and young people to get involved with The Big Ask.

The Big Ask is the largest ever consultation held with children and young people and is asking them to look ahead to their future and what support they feel they may need going forward.

Tina Russell, interim director of children services at Worcestershire County Council, said: “The views and thoughts of the children and young people of Worcestershire have been and will always be a key asset to helping us develop and deliver our services that really make a difference to their lives. This is an great opportunity to influence the same at a national level so I would encourage all to take part.”

The Children’s Commissioner for England, Dame Rachel de Souza will use what children and young people tell her to show the Government what they think and what they need to live happier lives.

The Big Ask forms part of a wider once-in-a-generation review into children’s lives, being undertaken by The Children’s Commissioner.

## Home test for stomach problems is now available

A new non-invasive test for people with stomach and bowel problems can now be given in the Black Country and West Birmingham to help rule out bowel cancer and potentially avoid a trip to hospital.

From this month the test can now be given to people who visit their GP with problems that could indicate the presence of bowel cancer.

This will mean fewer people will need to undergo an endoscopy procedure in hospital as the simple test can help to rule out the presence of bowel cancer among patients with specific lower abdominal symptoms.

FIT testing (Symptomatic Faecal Immunochemical Testing) is currently available in Dudley but funding from

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the new Black Country and West Birmingham Clinical Commissioning Group (BCBW CCG) has been secured to ensure this can be rolled out for any patients who present with symptoms including stomach complaints, pain, discomfort or changes in bowel habits.

The FIT test is similar to the bowel screening programme and involves collecting a small faeces sample which the person’s GP will send to the labs for testing by Black Country Pathology Service.

Patients will be invited to take the test by their GP, and a kit will be supplied so

the test can be done at home. The test can pick up tiny amounts of blood and a positive FIT test will show that bleeding has occurred somewhere in the bowel.

This can be an early sign of bowel cancer, as well as other problems such as stomach ulcers and inflammation in the bowel.

The results of the FIT test will make sure that people who are at high risk of bowel cancer are seen quickly, and that patients with normal test results avoid unnecessary hospital investigations and appointments.

Dr Masood Ahmed, chief medical officer for BCBW CCG, said: “I’m delighted that we are now able to roll out this test across the whole Black Country and West

Birmingham. The discreet nature of this at-home test, which avoids a hospital visit for those who don’t need one, should encourage people to come forward earlier and enable us to either rule out cancer quickly and put their mind to rest or to get treatment started much sooner and improve outcomes.”

April is national Bowel Cancer Awareness Month, which aims to raise awareness of the importance of bowel cancer screening and of recognising the symptoms and seeking help early. Bowel cancer is highly treatable and nearly every-

one who is diagnosed at the earliest stage survives, however this drops significantly as the disease develops.