

Minutes of the meeting of the Scrutiny Review Panel 2

Date: Wednesday, 08 July 2020

Time: 18:30

Venue: Virtual Meeting

Attendees:

Councillor Praveen Anand, Councillor Sitarah Anjum, Councillor Jaskiran Chohan, Councillor Karanvir Dhadwal, Councillor Mrs Seema Kumar, Councillor Tariq Mahmood, Councillor Gary Malcolm, Councillor Swaran Padda

1 Apologies for Absence and Substitutions

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Chris Summers.

2 Urgent Matters

There were none.

3 Declarations of Interest

There were none.

4 Matters to be Considered in Private

There were none.

5 Minutes

Resolved: That the Minutes of the meeting held on 28 April 2020 be approved as the correct record of the meeting.

SRP2-Panel's Terms of Reference

Harjeet Bains, Scrutiny Review Officer, informed the Committee that the usual Scrutiny conference would not be held this year. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC) had agreed the Terms of Reference for each Scrutiny Review Panel meeting scheduled to take

place in July. Each Panel would focus on a different element of the Council's response to the Coronavirus Pandemic and the OSC would subsequently put together an overall final report on it. Consequently, this Panel had been asked to consider the Council's approach regarding the community response in the borough to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Resolved: That the Panel's terms of reference be accepted.

7 Covid 19 - Community Response

Councillor Peter Mason (Portfolio Holder for Housing, Planning and Transformation) who was accompanied by Kieran Read (Director of Strategy and Engagement), Mark Wiltshire (Director of Community Development), Adam Whalley (Assistant Director Capital Investment Programme) and David Murray (Assistant Director Communities) thanked the Panel for holding the Council's response to scrutiny and stated that scrutiny was seen as a critical ally.

On presenting how the Council had worked with the community during the Covid-19 pandemic and in the transition to recovery, the Portfolio Holder and service officers highlighted that:

- The scale of the challenges faced by the pandemic was unprecedented. The response put together by the Council's officers and staff was considered as professional. For example, people put together major programmes and set up new initiatives, setting up of a food distribution centre, call centre staff calling 10,000 residents ensuring people had the support networks in place and the expansion of the community voluntary sectors in response to the pandemic in a short period of time.
- The Information Technology (IT) staff ran the Ealing Greenford Depot and electoral staff operated a major logistical operation. The Council's principles for the IT initiative underpinned moving away from a paternalistic model and have a transactional commissioning relationship with residents, while building relationships during the pandemic and beyond.
- The legacy from the COVID -19 Pandemic would be taken forward. For example, the Council would carry out recognition work and build on the commandery spirit demonstrated by officers and staff and take this forward collectively.
- The pandemic had a considerable diverse impact on the community and the Council's response was aimed at facilitating a community response to the pandemic, which had been largely successful. The Council had implemented some major programmes at short notice. These included, creating food distributions centres and hubs and customer service staff calling tens of thousands of vulnerable

residents to ensure their needs were being met.

- The pressures and strains on existing Council staff were considerable during this period due to taking on new and additional duties. For instance, IT staff were rediverted to run the Greenford Depot, electoral staff worked on a major logistical operation at the depot distributing food supplies to residents, while the capacity for community led support was rapidly expanding. The Council held weekly engagement sessions with voluntary organisations and mutual aid groups. Similarly, they worked with faith groups as well as bereavement and debt care management organisations. All staff and agencies worked collaboratively and demonstrated a spirit of camaraderie. The Council had pledged that lessons learnt would be built into future major programmes.
- The Ealing Together initiative was not a Council initiative but rather a community response to the pandemic that addressed the specific needs of the community. It was noted that a broad range of Council staff made considerable contributions to this initiative. The initiative gave an awareness that early in the pandemic the Council needed to support the community around their response to the pandemic, while working in cohesion with the residents. Collaborative working involved working with the voluntary sectors, a presence of social media and publishing the initiative via email communication in the borough. Further, the Council understood it needed to work in partnership with a broad range of charities, religious groups and agencies to understand Ealing's diverse community.
- The Ealing Together initiative was described as a portal and a gateway with a dedicated phone line service for residents to access support services. The scheme was launched on 24 March 2020, for referrals, the day after the Prime Minister ordered the national lockdown.
- The Council was aware that voluntary sector groups were overwhelmed with the number of volunteers that registered to help during the pandemic. The Council was ready to support this sector since officers and Members had already built good working relationship with the local voluntary sector. The Council played a co-ordinating role and provided the basic infrastructure for the voluntary sector to provide direct support to residents. Once a referral was made, residents were triaged. Further, residents were provided with a variety of different types of support including assistance in collecting food, direct food support, social contact for residents who were shielding, financial and benefit advice and signposting around prescriptions was provided.
- The Council's inbound call centre received around 9,000 calls a day that translated into 2,700 direct service referrals. Residents were able to make several referrals. The key reasons residents accessed Ealing Together was COVID-19 specific. People that called the centre

were mainly older groups that had underlying health conditions, or people that were shielding. Further, support at the start of the pandemic consisted of the Council providing around 1,000 people with food parcels. However, this figure had dropped to 600 people a week.

- The Council made referrals to other voluntary sector organisations, once a referral had been made to the Council. However, the Council also worked with other voluntary organisations to support them in managing their caseloads. For example, they provided grants and supported organisations with implementing best practice. An example of this was where the Council provided advice to organisations on how to carry out Disclosure and Barring Service checks on staff that worked with vulnerable residents.
- In response to the pandemic, the Greenford Hall was transformed into the Council's food distribution hub as the Council worked collaboratively with the voluntary sector to manage food distribution. For example, the Council received food from foodbanks, which had shut down during the pandemic. This service was incorporated into Ealing's major food distribution operation. Further, The Acton Gold Project worked with 78 voluntary sector groups as part of the Council's food distribution programme to meet the needs of the residents. Over 1,000 people registered for the Ealing Together volunteer scheme and the Council planned to sustain volunteers' enthusiasm for expressing an interest in wanting to volunteer for the voluntary sector.

The Council's work around shielding residents:

- The government advised 2.5 million people in England to shield, however, guidance had since changed. The government, the National Health Service (NHS) and other organisations ensured the appropriate level of support was available for people that were shielding. It was recorded that 22,000 residents in Ealing were shielding. Ealing and Brent were the two London boroughs with the highest portion of shielding residents.
- At the initial stage, the NHS provided the Council with data of people shielding. The Council responded by following a triage process to identify those with the greatest need. The scheme ensured that food was allocated to people most in need. However, the scheme was a supplement to central government's own food scheme. The government's food scheme was deemed sub-standard as it failed to consider the dietary or cultural needs of the community. The Council met residents' food dietary needs and provided non-standard dietary food packages.
- The Council's work around its approach to shielding residents was described as customer service driven and had representation from a diverse range of skill sets. The shielding initiative required considerable thought to ensure the Council understood the

safeguarding needs of residents.

- The Council had received a large volume of data from the data team relating to residents that were shielding, which was cleansed and collated then transferred to the contact centre. At this stage, inbound call handlers were able to identify two thirds of residents that needed shielding. The Council identified a further 90% of people who did not have a support need and their cases were closed. However, the Council was presented with challenges when presented with residents that did not answer their telephones. There were also risks around phone scams in the area. The Council reiterated it was a challenge to build trust with residents at this time.
- The Council initially identified 6,000 shielding residents. This figure increased to 22,000 in mid-May. At this stage, Ealing Community Transport was instrumental in providing home welfare checks for uncontactable residents. 21,500 residents were contacted and the Council was unable to engage with a further 16,000 people that were contacted. However, this was a live scheme and the Council would continue to try to contact the uncontactable residents.
- In response to questions from the Committee, the shielding demographics across the borough were provided. The Committee heard that Perivale (12.18%) had the highest proportion of shielding residents, followed by Southall (8.04%).

Members asked the following questions:

- How many direct Disclosure Baring Service referrals were made and how did voluntary groups act without fear of being challenged?
- What would the Council offer to the 1,100 volunteers who had contacted the Council for volunteering opportunities, as only ten per cent of the volunteers were deployed? What was the Council's communication plan for these potential volunteers going forward?
- How many other organisations in London received data late from Central Government?
- What were the challenges and mistakes that the Council had experienced and what lessons had been learned should there be a second wave of the epidemic?
- What were the challenges that the Council experienced relating to data protection?
- How would the Council ensure the needs of shielded groups would be met beyond the pandemic and when the distribution of food packages stopped?

- The Call Centre line was an automated service. How did residents know with confidence whether the Council would address their inquiry?
- What advice could the Council give to people who were still shielding and in need of food parcels?
- Did the Council have a plan in place should another pandemic occur?
- Would the Council reconsider its disposal of assets?
- Had the Council gained any new insight in having green spaces in the community that could inform the Council's long-term Assets Strategy?
- Requested bullet points from officers on what the Council would do differently if there were another outbreak of the pandemic.
- What lessons had the Council learnt from people who called the Call Centre and were not able to speak to a call handler?

In response to the questions asked, the presenting officers confirmed that:

- The Disclosure Barring System was not seen as a barrier to people accessing services as the service offered guidance and best practices for organisations. Checks were only carried out for volunteers that were providing services for vulnerable people. There were 350 social contact referrals made.
- The Council would maintain regular communications with volunteers and showcase studies and provide a signposting service. However, lessons had been learnt around the number of residents that had been utilised. The Council's aim was to seize the opportunity of the pandemic to increase the number of volunteers in the Borough.
- The lessons learnt pertaining to data, officers used the Council's Master Data Management Tool to triage and prioritise how shielding residents were contacted by the Council.
- The Council learnt how to build and manage large data sets, at the appropriate time this data would be dismantled.
- There were no data protection issues when sharing data as there was an open and transparent relationship with partners, including the NHS and other local agencies.

- However, the Council faced challenges using the data disclosed by central government. The Council could not share confidential medical information, not even the Council's NHS medical partners could have access to this data if disclosed by central government.
- The government had contacted all Ealing residents and provided an update on the scheme. Similarly, the Council was planning to contact residents that had received food support to explain the changes in service provision.
- The Council was aware that transitioning back to normality for some shielding residents might be difficult.
- The Council was considering referral pathways to address varying health and social needs of residents as a result of the lockdown and shielding advice through offering a signposting service.
- The word 'other', as used in the referral form, was a broad description and a free text opportunity for people to indicate financial concerns or used when someone was making a referral for another person. For example, referrals that were made by people that lived outside of the borough on behalf of an Ealing resident.
- The Council was conducting a formal exercise on what lessons had been learnt.
- The Council had a framework and structures in place that allowed the Council to be agile should another pandemic occur.
- As from 8 July 2020, advice to people shielding that they could meet with groups of up to six people outside of their household but should not enter shops or busy areas. This should mean that those shielding would have a greater level of support available.
- Food deliveries would continue for people who had registered for the government food scheme.
- From 1 August 2020, people would be advised that they would no longer need to shield. If people required priority access to supermarkets then they could register by 17 July 2020 for this service.
- The Ealing Together line would remain open to provide advice and support to residents who required it.
- The Council was cognisant that where it had assets in the borough, these would be factored into the wider Asset Strategy Policy.
- The Council had several decommissioned properties in Ealing.
- The Council's Asset Strategy needed to balance and be aligned

with the Council's affordability programme.

- For residents in emergency situations, the Council would ensure that sites and distribution hubs were versatile in responding to the community.
- The service officers would provide a list to the Members of what the Council would have done differently if there were another outbreak of the pandemic.
- All caller inquiries were dealt with promptly once these got through and the Council offered a call back service. The Council acknowledged all lessons learnt would be embedded in any future work.

The Panel concluded that the scale of the work carried out by the Local Authority was unprecedented, the staff had worked collaboratively with residents, charities, organisations and the voluntary sector in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Council acknowledged that lessons could be learnt around how the Council managed the high volume of calls received to the Call Centre. However, the Council recognised that it was high on the national league tables for three weeks on contacting residents via the Council's Contact Centre. Further, a Councillor had contacted the Centre and described the service as efficient and helpful. He had also received good feedback from his constituents.

The Council had faced extraordinary challenges. However, it had moved quickly into becoming a direct food supplier after a short period of time. Going forward, the Council would consider outsourcing this service to obtain the best value for money. The Council was trialling an outsourced food scheme should a second wave of COVID-19 occur.

In the community's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Council had designed a wraparound service. Furthermore, people shielding were happier with the food parcels received from the Council rather than the Central Government as the Council provided a more culturally diverse food package.

The Council was pleased that more residents had registered for library services in the last three months compared to eighteen months ago.

The Council had pledged that any learning from the Council's community response to Covid-19 would be embedded in future work that the Council undertook.

Resolved: That:

1. Recommendations arising from this meeting be sent by email to

Harjeet Bains, Scrutiny Review Officer, by 15 July 2020.

2. Delegated authority be given to the Scrutiny Review Officer, in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair of the Panel, to agree the Panel's recommendations.

3. The finalised recommendations be reported back to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to be included in the final review report.

8 Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting was scheduled for 23 September 2020.

Duration of Meeting

6.30pm to 8.25pm.