

Minutes of the Meeting of Scrutiny Review Panel 1 Ealing's Response to Covid-19

Date: Wednesday 27 January 2021

Time: 19:00

Venue: Virtual Meeting

Attendees:

Councillor Theresa Byrne, Councillor Deirdre Costigan (Chair), Councillor Steve Donnelly, Councillor Tariq Mahmood, Councillor Swaran Padda, Councillor Andrew Steed, Councillor Nigel Sumner

1 Apologies for Absence and Substitutions

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Carlo Lusuardi.

2 Urgent Matters

There were no urgent matters to consider.

3 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

4 Matters to be Considered in Private

Resolved: That all items be considered in public.

5 Minutes

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 4 November 2020 be approved as a correct record of the meeting.

6 Covid 19 Ealing Public Health Update

Anna Bryden, Director, Public Health, gave a presentation which outlined the latest local data on Covid 19 infections, testing, and the Council's role in supporting the vaccination programme. The following areas were highlighted:

- Ealing had the highest infection rate in London, but was seeing a weekly 20% decrease. In the last week 2,500 residents had tested positive, the weekly infection rate was 737 per 100,000 people in Ealing compared to 525 per 100,000 in London. Some of Ealing's more deprived and diverse communities were seeing a larger impact from Covid and had a higher risk. There was variation across the borough, Southall had an infection rate of 1,139 per 100,000 compared to Ealing Broadway which had an infection rate of 491 per 100,000.
- The total number of Covid-19 deaths in the borough had risen to 546. The rates were lower than in the peak in the spring but were spread out over a longer amount of time. The number of deaths was likely to continue to increase over the next week or so, and then to reduce quite slowly.
- There were three testing sites in the borough for people with symptoms and home testing kits were also available. For people without symptoms, a community testing programme had been introduced, focussed on people who needed to go out for work, higher prevalence communities, and those at higher risk. 12,000 tests had been carried out so far, with 2% of those people testing positive, which was what had been expected. The aim was to treat this as a pilot and to take forward a sustainable testing model for the rest of 2021.
- Covid-19 vaccinations were being rolled out by a national programme. Nine priority groups were set by national government, based on scientific advice. The focus was on preventing deaths and more severe illness. Before mid-February the Government intended to have offered a vaccine to all care home residents, over 70s, those who were clinically extremely vulnerable, and frontline health and social care workers. After that there would be a number of different phases, offering the vaccinations to the over 50s and adults with underlying health conditions. The priority groups for phase two were being considered by the Government. The aim was to vaccinate all adults by the autumn.
- The Council was supporting the NHS lead, particularly around identifying, setting up and managing vaccination sites. The two main sites were Ealing Town Hall and the Dominion Centre in Southall. Ealing residents were already being invited to the mass vaccination centre in Wembley and would soon be able to attend a new mass vaccination centre in central Ealing and at some community pharmacies. GPs were vaccinating housebound patients and had set up an outreach vaccination programme to care homes.
- As of 25 January 2021, 18,143 vaccination doses had been given in Ealing. Approximately 75% of care home residents and 40% of care home staff had been vaccinated, 1,200 housebound over 80s were on track to be vaccinated by 29 January, and 630 social care staff had booked a vaccination at Wembley.

- Different teams around the Council were involved in supporting vaccine take up. There was a lot of evidence from other vaccination programmes about communities where take up was lower and the range of behavioural factors underpinning that such as complacency, lack of confidence in the safety of the vaccine, or misinformation. Early data from Ealing and North West London indicated local discrepancies in uptake by deprivation and ethnicity, particularly among Black/Black British ethnic groups and East European ethnic groups.
- The NHS were leading on the communications for the roll out of the vaccine, with the Council supporting and amplifying that. The key message was that if you were eligible you would be contacted by the NHS. The Council was engaging with those communities least likely to take the vaccine, holding meetings in four areas in the borough to discuss vaccinations and barriers to take up, and using community champions to support messages. A communications and engagement plan was being developed, involving universal and targeted interventions and easy to read, multilingual and visual communications.

Following the presentation, the Panel asked the following questions:

- There were a lot of myths being spread about the vaccine, and Southall was one of the areas with the highest infection rate. Could local radio stations in that area, which broadcast in Punjabi, be used to get clear messages out there? Anna Bryden agreed that local radio stations were a good way of communicating with residents and said that the Council had already arranged for some slots on Desi Radio and that it had been used previously for other aspects of the Covid programme.
- Were the community engagement meetings online and were there dates for them? Members were informed that three of the four virtual area meetings had taken place and the one for Southall was later in the week. There had been a number of these area meetings over the last couple of months.
- Why was the infection rate so high in Ealing, particularly in Southall? Anna Bryden responded that there was a mix of risk factors for Covid, such as urban areas, crowded housing, deprived circumstances, being front line workers, and long term health conditions. The rate in Southall was of particular concern and a lot of targeted work had been undertaken to understand why the rate was so high. A lot of different risk factors coming together meant that some communities were affected more. Councillor Binda Rai, Cabinet Member for Health and Adults Services, stated that another risk factor was multi-generational households, of which in Southall there were a large number. Councillor Rai added that a lot of the Asian community could be persuaded to take the vaccine but there was a lot more hesitancy within the black community.
- Some authorities had been given funding to introduce vaccination champions, given that some areas of Ealing were facing the same issues as these authorities, why was Ealing not provided with any funding? Anna Bryden replied that she thought that the bids for this funding had been targeted at certain boroughs, but that Ealing was looking at other options for doing this work, such as linking up with groups working

across North West London and working with local representatives and volunteers.

- There was some helpful information on the council website regarding the vaccine but as most of the myths were spread via WhatsApp could the Council information be provided in a more easily shareable format, and as in other authorities, could councillors from BAME backgrounds who have had the vaccine be used to promote it? Anna Bryden said that the Communications Team were talking to community influencers who were using social media e.g. Tik Tok, Instagram and WhatsApp. They were developing key messages around vaccinations, which could be shared easily. Anna Bryden agreed to discuss working with councillors to promote vaccinations with the Communications and Democratic Services Team.
- Was there parking available at Ealing Town Hall and Dominion Centre vaccination sites? Members were informed that parking information was available on the council website and was being shared by GP practices. Ealing Community Transport were also taking those people who needed assistance, to their vaccination appointment. Residents should talk to their GP practice if they had concerns about their appointment.

The Chair thanked Anna Bryden and the public health team for the vital work they were doing.

Resolved:

1. That the presentation from Public Health on the impact of Covid-19 be noted.
2. That Public Health discuss using Councillors own experiences to promote vaccine taken up with the Communication and Democratic Services Teams.

7 Impact of Covid 19 on Ealing Council Services and Staff

Alison Reynolds, Director, Customer Services gave a presentation on the impact on the customer facing services and highlighted the following areas:

- The majority of staff were now working from home, including the contact centre staff. Initially there were technical issues, but service provision was now stable. The Perceval House face to face service was closed and all services were available by telephone or online. Customer Services staff had been redeployed into new roles to help with demand in other services.
- Housing Demand now had telephone assessment services, which were having a positive impact. There were 20 staff available to speak to customers and process cases and the service was now providing same day assessments. Year on year comparisons showed that the number of positive homeless preventions had improved.
- The Ealing Together team had evolved in its provision of advice and support and now dealt with a wide range of enquiries and issues, such as self-isolation payments, information on testing centres, and local

welfare enquiries, as well as giving support for Housing Benefits and Council Tax.

- Covid had resulted in a 30% increase in workload particularly in Housing Benefits and Council Tax support, and in local welfare payments. 3,000 applications for self-isolation payments had been received, and the service had recruited additional staff to keep up with demand. Clearer communication about entitlement for this payment was required as a significant number of applicants were rejected, slowing up payment for those who were entitled.
- Registration of births had been suspended and death registrations had moved to a telephone service only.
- Homeworking had allowed a focus on processing and improving service delivery, which had improved service performance. More automated services were being used, particularly when providing financial support.
- Customer Services recognised that not everybody had access to digital services, and were currently working with a charity called Citizens Online to help improve their knowledge of Ealing's customers and build an evidence base. This would increase access to and provide help for hard to reach customers to increase their confidence in using digital channels.

Liz Chiles, Director, Human Resources and Organisational Development, gave a presentation, which started by highlighting areas from the recent staff wellbeing survey:

- Recent sickness absence figures showed that since March, 142 staff had been confirmed in contracting Covid. This was broken down to 56 staff during the period March to December 2020, and 86 since January 2021. Overall sickness absence had been down but Covid was now accounting for most of it. Staff who were testing positive were predominantly those who were not able to work from home, and an impact had also been seen from the relaxation of rules over Christmas.
- Three staff wellbeing surveys had been carried out, with the most recent one being in November, which had received 953 responses. This survey showed that people were becoming more anxious with what concerned them most being the health and wellbeing of their loved ones.
- Regarding practices to promote better collaboration, emergent themes were for managers to increase levels of contact on an individual and team basis, to ensure that individual covid 19 risk assessments were being carried out, and to encourage conversations around wellbeing. Staff were being encouraged to look after their wellbeing and to use their annual leave.
- A working locations survey was undertaken, to get a feel from staff of what working from home was like for them and to help inform the plans for the redevelopment of the Perceval House site. 1,228 members of staff responded. 83% of staff said before Covid most of their working time was usually spent in the office, whereas after Covid only 19% of staff thought that would be the case. People were also asked what they required from an office environment. The use of a desk alongside their team and access to a printer was important, whereas meeting rooms were significantly less important.

- The benefits of working from home were lack of travel time, better work life balance, and being more productive. Some people were struggling because either their home environment was not conducive, they had some IT issues, or they were missing human contact. Two emerging themes post Covid for the delivery of services were, those services comfortable with homeworking but still needing periodic time in the office, and those services delivered on a daily basis in the field to residents/businesses where staff might need access to a touchdown space.
- A number of respondents said that the current working arrangements supported a full decant of Perceval House, rather than just moving out of 2 claws and that they did not want to come back to work on a building site.

Ed Axe, Director ICT, gave a presentation and highlighted the following areas:

- Before Covid, ICT had spent two years focussing on how to get people working from home. In March 2020, Ealing Council went from 2,000 members of staff working in the office and 100 at home to reversing those figures.
- In April ICT were asked to set up and physically enable the delivery of food parcels. When PPE became available, they organised that and were still delivering it. Perceval House was refitted to allow social distancing for those people who needed to come in, and the service also continued with delivering the usual essential projects for the Council. More recently ICT had helped set up 6 community testing centres, which had 160 people working across them.
- Another challenge for ICT was an unprecedented number of cyber-attacks, there were 1000s of attempts on the IT system every day. The Council was working closely with the Cabinet Office and the National Cyber Security Centre and had introduced further protective measures to keep systems safe, but sometimes these had an adverse effect on functionality and ease of use. Most attacks came via email and more scrutiny had been applied to the emails coming into the Council, with additional checks on senders and restricting email on personal phones. Before Covid, the Council simulated a cyber-attack which had proved to be a worthwhile process, a lot of lessons had been learned which were now enabled. There was a balance between risk and maintaining functionality, however it was difficult as ICT was dealing with a range of skill sets and a range of devices. It would be much easier if everybody used a standard device but that was probably very unlikely.
- Concluding his presentation, Ed Axe said that Covid was a huge challenge which the Council had risen to, he added that he was very proud of the flexibility of the ICT staff and what they had managed to provide.

Following the presentations, Panel Members asked the following questions:

- As staff were being encouraged to work from home, had the impact on utility bills been considered, as well as the impact on staff morale? Liz Chiles replied that working from home could be expensive, the

opportunity to claim back tax from HMRC had been promoted and a lot of staff had taken this up. It was also recognised that some staff were missing human company and the message from the Chief Executive was that if a staff member's wellbeing was suffering, they could return to the office. People were not being forced to stay at home.

- Were staff being encouraged to call in when they were sick, rather than working through it? Liz Chiles said that she thought there was a genuine reduction in sickness because staff were not travelling and therefore not interacting with people on public transport or in the office and picking up germs. Wearing face coverings and washing hands would also have made a difference. Staff were not expected to work when they were sick just because they were at home.
- How were staff who were home working being managed, is the focus on outcomes rather than the number of hours they were sitting in front of the computer? Liz Chiles replied that in terms of the management of homeworkers, a lot of resources had been put in place, but they were not totally there yet. The appraisal process had been changed to reflect that managers should be having regular conversations with staff. Most managers recognised that staff were juggling childcare and were giving flexibility, subject to service requirements, where staff had indicated that they needed it.
- Would the digital inclusion project be working directly with local people to find out what they wanted and needed, rather than telling them? Alison Reynolds replied that the partner they were working with was a charity addressing digital exclusion, it would be doing a digital exclusion assessment of Ealing and would be running workshops with voluntary organisations. Alison Reynolds added that she was confident that there would be better evidence and outcomes from this work. Councillor Costigan stated that she had attended a similar digital exclusion meeting a couple of years ago and would send through the report from the Future Ealing Panel on the lessons learned from that. Residents then said that they were being asked repeatedly by Ealing Council about their issues with digital exclusion but that the Council never came back to them with any solutions.

Concluding this item, the Chair thanked the three officers for the detailed information provided. It was clear that it had been a huge challenge for the Council and staff to move to this new way of working.

Resolved: That the presentations from Customer Services, Human Resources and ICT be noted.

8 Covid 19 Ealing Education Update

Julie Lewis, Director of School Standards and Partnerships and Tamara Quinn, Strategic Lead, Business Planning and Resources outlined the impact of the current lockdown on children and young people and schools in Ealing. The following key issues were highlighted:

- Around 9% of children were attending Ealing state funded schools on average each day, this was more than 4,000 children a day. Schools were asked to remain open for children with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), children who were deemed vulnerable and had a social worker, and children whose parents were critical workers. Broadly, the profile for the attendance of those groups as the same as it was nationally, with nearly 40% of EHCP children and children deemed vulnerable attending. There were far fewer pupils attending secondary school than primary.
- There were a lot more children in school now than compared with the first lockdown and there were notable discrepancies across providers and areas. This was for several reasons including schools' own risk assessment processes, the capacity of staff, and the models for learning that schools had developed. There was quite a range of the number of children attending in primary and secondary schools, and less of a range in special schools as they were trying to get in as many children as they could. Attendance overall was lowest in Southall primary schools and highest in Ealing primary schools, and the picture was similar in secondary schools. The attendance for children with social workers ranged from 4% - 82%. It was hard to get pupils to attend their secondary school when their peers were not there, the key concern was making sure keeping young people were safe, looking after their mental health and wellbeing and engaging them in learning.
- The Government produced a wide ranging definition of critical key worker, which meant that there had been a stampede for school places. Because there were no prioritisation criteria it had been left to headteachers to prioritise which had been extremely difficult and led to inconsistencies between schools. Numbers had spiralled to over 200 in three of the borough's schools, there were four schools with well over 100 key worker children and in addition to that schools were grappling with the demand for nursery provision, as well as rolling out high quality remote learning.
- Remote learning was the main provision for children not attending school in person. A survey a week ago, showed that after receiving their full allocation from the DfE, nearly 90% of schools would still not have sufficient devices to loan out for children who need access to remote learning. 57 schools needed approximately 4,800 further devices, and approximately 2,250 were without sufficient internet access. Greenford, Northolt, Perivale and Southall reported the highest number of children without access to devices.
- Up to one third of pupils in some secondary schools and up to 80% pupils in some primary schools had restricted access to the internet. Children had to compete with older siblings who tended to be prioritised, live streaming of lessons also took up more data, and children were reliant on the technical understanding and engagement of parents.
- DfE had become more prescriptive in their expectation of what schools would provide, talking about a blended approach and recognising that it was not healthy for pupils to be in front of a screen all day. Schools had been on a massive learning curve, carrying out really exciting dynamic implementation of all sorts of ways of connecting with children at home,

there was really strong adaptive technology for children with Special Education Needs, and schools were networking with each other to share what they were doing.

- The Government was hoping to begin a return to school around the 8th March, but that depended on hitting the vaccination targets. There was no expectation of schools remaining open over the half term break, however some schools were staying open and the Family Information Service had surveyed schools to enable the LA to support parents in identifying childcare where needed.
- With regard to free school meals, catering providers have improved the content of food parcels and many schools were moving towards the £15 per week voucher scheme.
- Challenges highlighted included further delays in returning to school being likely for secondary school pupils, additional pressure for nursery provision and funding, ongoing disruption for pupils in examination and transition years, attendance of vulnerable pupils remaining a concern and the uneven impacts of pandemic across disadvantaged, EAL and BAME pupils.

Following the presentation, Panel Members asked the following questions:

- How would the impact on the young people who were NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) be managed? Julie Lewis replied that NEET figures had not increased, which was largely due to the quality of tracking and support for those young people and the work the college was doing trying to keep as many young people in education and training.
- Why were schools still short of devices, were there none available or was the requirement that they were needed not getting through? Members heard that a survey recently carried out by the Council, showed that 90% of Ealing's schools were still short of devices. The issue was cost and not with supplies. Schools were expected to use their own resources and were exploiting every avenue possible to get devices.
- Members noted that the schools with the highest number of pupils attending were in the more affluent parts of the borough and queried why this was. Julie Lewis replied that the numbers were to do with critical worker children and that she was confident, particularly in the primary sector, that all the children that should be in school such as vulnerable children or those with Special Educational Needs (SEN) were. The concern was about the demand from parents who were eligible under the critical worker category and the pressure being put on schools who were also providing an offer for children learning remotely. It was a resources issue for a small proportion of schools but was not considered a major problem.
- Members asked what else could be done to increase IT provision and access to broadband, suggesting lobbying the Government and putting schools in touch with charities as well as the Council plugging this gap. Julie Lewis said that the survey data had been provided for London Councils who would lobby on Ealing's behalf. Tamara Quinn added that

schools held the budget for learning and resources, they were generally well funded and had surpluses, and only a small number were in severe financial difficulties. The local authority would expect that schools used their resources where there were pupils in most need. The 6,000 required devices extrapolated to 15% of pupils, however it did not mean that there was no device but that the pupil may be sharing one in the household. The London Grid for Learning had procured devices for schools and Ealing schools were able to order from them. Some charities were donating small quantities of devices, but consistency and software complications sometimes caused more problems. Paper learning packs were a sufficient alternative rather than devices which did not have the correct software. Schools were also prioritising and rotating devices to ensure that young people had access at various times.

- Was it more co-ordinated to have schools providing devices rather than the local authority? Tamara Quinn replied that the role of the local authority was to lobby Government, which was being done, the expectation was that schools would meet the gap. The local authority had said that where there were budget challenges schools should work closely with the local authority as this should not be a barrier to providing devices. School leaders were taking responsibility, but it had been challenging for them as the Government position had changed regarding the number of devices being provided. It was crucial that they got high quality devices that worked with the platforms that the schools worked with.
- If charities came forward to provide devices was the school the point of contact? Tamara Quinn informed members that some charities had approached schools directly and some the local authority, which had either helped co-ordinate the allocation or put them in touch with the relevant schools. Schools apply to John Lyons on an annual basis and had a few programmes sponsored by them, Julie Lewis said that she was not clear if it was the ethos of that charity to fund equipment but that she would look into it.

In conclusion, the Chair said that the Panel was concerned about some children not having access to devices and asked officers to do as much as they could in the three areas of lobbying nationally, working with local charities including John Lyons, and looking at whether Ealing Council needed to add funding.

Resolved: That

1. The presentation on education in Ealing be noted.
2. That Ealing Council does the maximum it can to improve the situation for children who do not currently have access to online learning.

9 Panel Work Programme

RESOLVED: That the work programme was noted.

10 Date of Next Meeting

It was noted that the next meeting would be held on 24 March 2021.

Duration of Meeting

7.00pm to 9.12pm