

Report of: Chief Executive

Meeting of:	Date:	Ward(s):
Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee	2 July 2020	All

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SUBJECT: Chief Executive COVID-19 report briefing

1. Purpose

- 1.1 This report outlines the approach undertaken to support Islington Council's staff and residents throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, an unprecedented challenge to the organisation and community. It also outlines some of the key impacts, as well as our on-going mitigations.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 To consider the update from the Chief Executive on the Council's response to Covid-19.

Overview

3.

- 3.1 The Council started to prepare its response to the emerging Covid-19 pandemic and the international public health emergency in January 2020.

3.2

All business continuity plans were reviewed to identify critical front-line and statutory services that would need to be kept running. We also identified those non-essential services which could be scaled back or stopped in order to focus resource on services that needed to run – prioritising those who are most vulnerable and most at risk. Regular briefings were provided by the Corporate Director of Public Health to the Senior Leadership Team and Executive members as government advice was issued to local

authorities to prepare for the significant challenges ahead. Public Health and Emergency Planning staff, began reviewing the borough pandemic plans at the start of February and had meetings with key partners from across the borough to refine and review contingency plans in line with national and local developments.

- 3.3 In early March, the Council's emergency contingency plans were stepped-up and the Council's command structure was activated at both Gold and Silver levels to manage the boroughs emergency response and be able to respond immediately to government announcements as they happened.
- 3.4 The Borough Emergency Control Centre (BECC) was opened on 16 March, providing tactical and operational support to the GOLD group. The BECC was one of the first to be opened in London and managed the early decisions around PPE distribution to front line staff and care homes, the management of public spaces, shopping areas, advice to schools and the closure of Council buildings.
- 3.5 The Gold command model identified the following key work streams to meet the needs of the residents, community and staff and were shared with elected members:
- Supporting health and social care
 - Schools & early years
 - Child protection
 - Supporting the community and coordinating the community response
 - Homelessness
 - Supporting our staff / employee wellbeing: around safety, mental health and wellbeing, working from home, etc.
 - Supporting local business / keeping the economy moving
 - Excess deaths management
 - Reducing/stopping non-essential services
 - Data & intelligence
 - Planning for the long term / recovery
- 3.6 On 20 March, 'The We are Islington' helpline was launched in partnership with local charities, community organisations and mutual aid groups to provide support to the most vulnerable by providing food parcels, medicine drop-offs and other practical support. The helpline arranged support for the lonely and isolated through regular phone calls. To date the helpline has supported 10,000 families and individuals.
- 3.7 Following the Prime Minister's announcement on 23 March, that all staff except those in essential services were to work from home, Digital Services were mobilised quickly to ensure remote access capacity and IT functionality was deployed to enable office based staff to work at home. Additional software, such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom was rolled out so services could continue to be provided remotely.
- 3.8 The Council regularly communicated across all internal and external channels to ensure that staff, residents and business had access to the information they needed as the situation evolved. As well as dedicated Covid pages on the council's website, we used our social media platforms to communicate important messages, with high engagement rates. We issued on average 2-3 eBulletins a week to residents and businesses as well as 3

leaflet door drops to every household, one of which was an 8-page IslingtonLife lite. To provide additional community reassurance, the Leader of the Council recorded several videos with messaging specific to Islington and has hosted several Leaders Question Times on Facebook Live. Members, staff and managers received regular daily updates by email and through manager bulletins.

- 3.9 Weekly meetings were convened with the Islington Partnership Board, a group made up of representatives from the Whittington Hospital, CCG, GP federation, Police and Fire and Cllr Richard Watts, Leader of the Council along with the Chief Executive. Weekly meetings were also convened with Union representatives to provide an update on staffing impacts and keeping the workforce, especially those on the frontline, protected.

Health Impact

- 3.10 In Islington the number of new cases per day has followed an overall declining trend since mid-April. There were 3 new cases reported between the 11th and 17th June, and the average number of new cases per day in June has been between 0-1 cases per day. This is in line with regional and national trends.
- 3.11 The number of deaths in Islington peaked during the week of the 4th - 10th April at 42 deaths and has fallen steadily since. Locally and regionally deaths from Covid-19 are at very low levels and non-Covid-19 deaths are now what would be expected for this time of the year. Given the significant cumulative number of Covid-19 cases (an estimated 17% of Londoners may have had Covid-19 to date) and deaths to date in London.
- 3.12 All estimates for the current R (reproduction rate) in London are below 1, however the highest estimate is 0.95, which suggests we are still close to the range (>1) at which you would start to see an exponential increase in number of infections.

Suppression of the virus

- 3.13 In order to continue to contain the suppression of the virus, effective and system wide arrangements still need to be adopted. This will require implementation of the full range of preventative and social distancing measures in our services, those of our partners, businesses, organisations and communities and adoption of and adherence to the necessary behaviours across all these settings. This continues to be a council wide focus both internally and externally.
- 3.14 As the pandemic moves into this next phase, and especially as we move into winter, different challenges in relation to social distancing behaviour and existing health risks will arise. This includes the impact of the usual seasonal flu, the shift in behaviour to more time being spent inside, and an increased risk of social isolation.

Entering new phases of lockdown

- 3.15 As lockdown measures continue to reduce, risk of infection will increase and therefore successful easing will be dependent on robust arrangements being put in place to monitor and understand cases and outbreaks in Islington's population, as well as the more general progression of the epidemic in subsequent phases. This will be important to monitor and understand both on a local and regional level. Local access to data is expected to improve, but at the current time remains limited.

Outbreak control

- 3.16 The rapid identification, response to and management of local outbreaks is crucial to the control and suppression of COVID-19 during this next phase, whilst enabling life to return to a more normal footing. Islington Council, along with all upper tier Local Authorities, is developing an Outbreak Control Plan, which will set out our local role and arrangements for the prevention, identification and management of local outbreaks, which will work in close conjunction with Public Health England's London Coronavirus Response Centre, as well as with the national NHS Test and Trace programme.
- 3.17 Engaging our communities in this endeavour, and tailoring our local arrangements, communication and support to respond to the needs of our local population will be essential to the effectiveness of local Outbreak Control.

Preventing and mitigating disproportionate impacts

- 3.18 The evidence is clear that the impact of Covid-19, and the negative health, financial and social impacts are not felt equally across Islington or nationally. Preventing and reducing further disproportionate impacts, ensuring we protect the health of our BAME residents and staff, and preventing further exacerbation of existing health, social and economic inequalities, will require a clear and consistent focus on the equity impacts of the interventions and measures we take in this next phase, as well as requiring targeted action and work to support and protect the most impacted groups. This is being supported through the new operating model, for the "new normal" and in particular our work on community wealth building.

4. Financial implications

- 4.1 Based on initial estimates in May, the Council is currently facing total COVID-19 related budget pressures of around £74 million (£24 million additional costs and £50 million income losses). We have received total grants of £15.6 million from Government, which leaves a gap of around £58m.
- 4.2 This includes a potential in-year General Fund budget shortfall of £36 million in 2020/21, £10 million Council tax and business rates income losses that would impact the 2021/22 budget and £12 million HRA budget pressures.
- 4.3 Any shortfall not funded by central government would weaken the Council's balance sheet and reserves, which would need to be replenished in future financial years.
- 4.4 The estimated in-year shortfall remains very uncertain, as the situation is continually changing based on Government guidance and emerging actual cost data. There will be an early budget monitoring report to the Executive on 9 July 2020 to update these estimates and consider the 2020/21 budget position in more detail.
- 4.5 Beyond the current financial year, officers are currently estimating a net budget gap of £58 million over the three-year financial planning cycle 2021/22 to 2023/24. This is in addition to existing planned savings. The medium-term financial outlook is arguably the most uncertain it has ever been due to the unknown longer-term impact of COVID-19 and available Government funding over this period.

5. Workforce impact

5.1 To monitor the impact of COVID on our workforce, Public Health analysts were requested to report on staff working from home, working on site or unable to from 16 March.

5.2 Following the change in work from home guidance , a reporting system was developed that could be easily used by all services in the Council and fed into a dashboard that would highlight key messages for BECC and GOLD as well as meet our London-wide reporting responsibilities.

5.3 This system, went live on Thursday 2 April and from that point, critical services were asked to submit reports daily, Monday to Friday. All services identified as non-critical were asked to submit a report once a week.

5.4 Workforce Overview

- The percent of staff reported as unable to work reached a high point of 23% on 3 April and 7 April, but has been decreasing subsequently, reaching a low point of 11.5% on 5 May and 3 June.
- The percent of staff reported as working on site was around a quarter (25%) of staff in early April but has subsequently increased to just over a third of staff working on site in June.
- The percent of staff reported as working from home has been between 50% and 60% of staff between 2 April and 19 June.
- On average, 78% of critical services reported performing as normal (1) between 2 April and 19 June.
- One critical service reported being unable to take urgent/essential response (4) on 5 May, and one critical service reported covering urgent responses only (3) on each day between 7-14 May.
- Non-critical services were more impacted than critical services, with an average of 57% of services reporting performing as normal (1) and 34% of services reporting performing at a reduce service (2) between 2 April and 19 June.
- According to the most recently reported figures on 1 June, 99 members of staff have been tested for Covid-19.

6. Welfare response: Universal Credit

6.1 Islington has been a full-service Universal Credit site since June 2018, since this time all new claims and some change of circumstances mean you claim universal credit rather than the legacy benefits universal credit is replacing.

6.2 The table below shows the universal credit claimant count across Islington's two jobcentres. In the pre-COVID-19 period the claimant count had been slowly increasing, reaching 13,356 on 11 March 2020. From the 11 March 2020 to the 12 June 2020 there

has been a 110% increase in the universal credit claimant count, seeing the overall number of claims reach over 28,000.

Jobcentre	11-Mar-2020	01-Apr-2020	10-Apr-2020	17 April 2020	23 April 2020	04-May-2020
Barnsbury	7,947	11,092	12,134	11,694	13,113	12,724
Finsbury Park	5,409	8,108	8,821	9,180	9,625	9,973
Total	13,356	19,200	20,955	20,894	22,501	22,697
Jobcentre	11-May-2020	18-May-2020	25-May-2020	01-Jun-2020	08-Jun-2020	12-Jun-2020
Barnsbury	13,646	14,015	14,284	14,282	15,430	16,956
Finsbury Park	10,203	10,560	10,729	10,911	10,041	11,156
Total	23,849	24,575	25,013	25,193	25,471	28,112

6.3 Universal credit caseloads in Islington continue to rise, in line with the national figures. New national figures show that whilst new claims to universal credit have slowed down in some parts of the country, 4 districts in London are in the top 6 districts nationally for new claims received in w/c 8 June. North London was the 2nd highest nationally, after West London.

6.4 In mid-February 2020 there were 2.6m households on universal credit nationally. However, in the period 1 March to 2 June 2020 a further 3.1m individuals in 2.5m households have made a claim for universal credit (though not all will be eligible).

6.5 Pre-COVID-19 one of the impacts for the Council of residents moving on to universal credit has been increased rent arrears. The rent arrears for universal credit claimants has been on average four times higher than those not claiming universal credit. This trend has continued with the increase in numbers claiming universal credit during COVID-19.

6.6 Universal credit rent accounts

- At 31 May 2020 total rent arrears across UC tenants was £4.61m
- 68% (3,459) of UC tenants are in arrears, with average arrears of £1,356

6.7 Non-UC rent accounts

- For non-UC accounts, total rent arrears is £1.075m
- 39% (3,784) of all non-UC accounts are in arrears
- Average arrears for those in arrears is £348

Additional support for residents

6.8 The Council has taken action to help households impacted by COVID-19. The Residents Support Scheme eligibility has been extended to meet increased demand from the large numbers of residents facing financial crisis as a result of COVID-19. The value of food and energy vouchers has been doubled to reflect that many applicants will be in severe financial crisis due to loss of income/earnings.

- 6.9 During the COVID-19 period of 23 March 2020 to 16 June 2020, crisis awards totaling £139k have been awarded to residents facing financial hardship. By comparison the average annual crisis awards for previous financial years has ranged between £12k to £14k.
- 6.10 As part of its response to COVID-19, the Government announced in the Budget on 11 March that it would provide local authorities in England with £500m of new grant funding to support economically vulnerable people and households in their local area. The expectation is that the majority of the hardship fund will be used to provide Council tax relief, alongside existing local Council tax support schemes. Islington received an allocation of £3,879,455, this has been used to provide Council tax relief of up to £150, for all working age recipients of Council tax support. Circa £2.2m of Council tax relief has been allocated thus far to 2020/21 Council tax bills. The expectation is that the remainder of the grant will be used to fund the Council tax relief for all new claimants of Council tax support during 2020/21.
- 6.11 The increase in universal credit claimants during COVID-19 has resulted in increased workloads for Council staff in a number of area with an increase in notifications received from the Department for Works & Pension to the Council's Processing Services area (housing benefit & Council tax support).
- 6.12 Pre-pandemic the numbers received were a little higher in 2020 compared to 2019 due to the slow gradual increase in universal credit numbers. Since COVID-19 there has been three times increase in April 2020 compared to April 2019 and over double in May 2020 compared to May 2019.
- 6.13 Department for Work & Pensions staff are now publicising the Islington Working employment support offer to new universal credit claimants. A message summarising the offer and providing contact details has been posted on new claimant's personal online journals. The iWork service has seen a 35% increase in referrals as a result of this intervention.

7. Employment support

- 7.1 iWork adult employment has continued to be delivered remotely, by phone, email and Skype. As DWP is currently focused on dealing with benefits claims, iWork established a referral process. A message summarising the employment support offer has been posted on new claimant's personal online journals. The service has seen a 35% increase in enquiries due to this intervention. The service is now circulating the offer in a similar way to Council housing tenants.
- 7.2 Most of the residents supported directly by iWork are long-term unemployed and many are focusing on immediate priorities such as childcare and ensuring that they are able to maximise their entitlements to any benefits at this time. We anticipate the group most likely to be looking for work in the short term to be those who have recently become unemployed.
- 7.3 iWork will prepare for an increase in demand for adult employment support focused on those who are actively seeking work in key groups including parents, BAME, and those with disabilities and health conditions who are able to work. Working with BAME community leaders the service has developed a BAME employment forum that will meet 3-

4 times per year. The first meeting was attended by twelve groups including the Network of Eritrean Women and Alfah Somali Community. Islington refugee forum fed back that they found the meeting helpful to establish links with employment services in the borough.

- 7.4 Employment coaches have been active during the lockdown period and “surge” in supporting recruitment into the Health and Adult Social care sector, working with Council contractors and the Proud to Care recruitment campaign. 25 residents have been made job offers by our local contractors and GPs. All of these jobs, and any others that we or our partners have been aware of, have been posted on the Islington Working bulletin, which goes out to over 80 local groups supporting Islington residents.
- 7.5 The Inclusive Economy team has continued to plan for job opportunities with Affordable workspace providers, and to make sure that local entrepreneurs are better linked with local communities, for example negotiating Level 1 and 2 qualifications in sewing from Fashion Enter, who have been active in producing protective clothing during the outbreak.
- 7.6 The service is also providing ongoing support to residents who have been placed in apprenticeships. The team has stayed in touch with all the training providers and apprentices throughout the lockdown. Young people are among those most affected by the economic downturn, and more likely to be in insecure work. With less experience than older residents, they may find it harder to enter a more competitive jobs market.
- 7.7 Many external youth partners have reduced their service or furloughed staff; at least one key partner was already experience financial difficulties, and there is a risk that smaller organisations may have to close. The recently launched youth skills and employability programme is vital to meet increased demand. Work has also commenced on new cross-cutting action plan across Children’s services to improve EET outcomes of vulnerable young people.
- 7.8 Prior to lockdown 250 young people in Year 11 were identified as at risk by schools of becoming NEET. Furthermore, issues including an initial lack of clarity around GCSE, vocational assessments, post-16 application and enrolment arrangement create greater risk for all young people in Year 11 and sixth form, particularly, for those who are already disadvantaged.
- 7.9 The Progress team is working closely with schools and colleges to ensure transition support is in place for those leaving education, and that this is sustained throughout the summer period and into the new academic year. Transition guidance has been issued to schools to outline key responsibilities.

8. Implications

8.1 Financial Implications:

Financial implications are detailed in the body of the report.

8.2 Legal Implications:

The Council is under a duty to comply with the lockdown laws generally and in particular the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020 (as amended), and to have due regard to relevant Government guidance.

8.3 Environmental Implications and contribution to achieving a net zero carbon Islington by 2030:

The aim is to reduce the Islington's carbon emissions to net zero by 2030 meaning that a net zero carbon strategy is the single most important one in terms of environmental implications. During the lockdown period we have seen some positive impacts with respect to net zero carbon:

Specifically the Council has developed a major new programme which builds on the circumstances associated with the with the Covid-19 lockdown arrangements. This has resulted in a significant amount of car and vehicle use alongside more walking and cycling.

People Friendly Streets will:

- make it easier, safer and more pleasant to walk and cycle on Islington's streets as part of everyday life;
- ensure that the borough's streets are healthier and greener for all; and
- make it easier to practice social distancing now and in the future.

Improvements to the borough's streets will ensure that they are friendly to all users especially children, young people, older people, people with impaired mobility, and people with disabilities and in poor health.

The council is therefore committed to developing a borough wide programme of People Friendly Streets. This programme will include:

- a) Low Traffic Neighbourhoods;
- b) the acceleration of the School Streets Programme; and
- c) the introduction of a lorry control scheme in all residential areas across the Borough.

As part of the Council's response to Covid-19 it became a priority to support social distancing by introducing a programme of temporary footway widening within the town centres and secondary shopping areas as well as schools. Working with TfL, additional schemes were introduced on major roads including Seven Sisters Road, and various part of the A1 which also support access to and safe queuing at for major railway and Underground stations.

In addition, the Council is working with TfL and partner boroughs to identify temporary and new cycle routes.

8.4 Resident Impact Assessment:

The Council must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation, and to advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations, between those who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it (section 149 Equality Act 2010). The Council has a duty to have due regard to the need to remove or minimise disadvantages, take steps to meet needs, in particular steps to take account of disabled persons' disabilities, and encourage people to

participate in public life. The Council must have due regard to the need to tackle prejudice and promote understanding

The new Policy and Equality Team within the Chief Executive's Department has undertaken research into the impacts of Covid-19 on protected characteristics, looking at both national data, reports and studies and feedback from local communities and organisations. Our research into the equalities impacts of COVID-19 has identified:

- Higher rates of diagnosis and death from COVID-19
 - Older People
 - BAME
 - Men
 - Deprivation

- Those groups most affected by wider socio-economic impacts:
 - Women
 - Pupils (particularly SEND, FSM) and young people
 - Disabled people
 - BAME
 - Faith communities

A Covid-19 Equalities Action Plan has been drawn up to address the impacts on our communities. This sets out a series of programmes focusing upon the emerging themes:

- Public health campaigns to tackle the underlying health conditions that increase the risk of COVID-19
- Developing and promoting activities and support to tackle social isolation
- Campaigns to promote cohesion and diversity and to tackle hate crime
- Targeted work with children and young people whose educational outcomes and opportunities have been impacted by COVID-19
- A programme of public commemoration events and opportunities to enable people to remember those who have died during the outbreak
- Tackling digital exclusion
- Tackling domestic violence and promoting safe spaces
- Targeting skills development and employment support at those groups who have been most impacted by lockdown and redundancies – BAME, women, young people, and older workers
- Running an income maximisation campaign to ensure residents who are struggling financially as a result of COVID-19 are accessing all the benefits and grants to which they are entitled
- Reviewing use of emergency powers in Islington e.g. stop and search, detention and removal, to ensure that they have not been used disproportionately on BAME communities or those with mental health issues or learning disabilities.

5. Conclusion

5.1 The Council has responded swiftly and effectively to the scale and speed of the crisis and this is in part due to the strong relationships with partners across the borough and local communities, and the flexibility and hard work of our staff, which has enabled us to develop a responsive and agile approach to meet the needs of residents.

Going forward, these strong relationships with partners, communities and staff - will be essential as we start rebuild a Fairer Islington. All efforts will have to be delivered within the budget constraints set out in this report and the Council will need to be ready to step-up to any future outbreaks of the virus if they occur.

In all that we do the approach will ensure a strong focus upon tackling the structural inequalities that have been highlighted by the crisis and working with communities to bring about real and lasting change.

Background papers: None

Appendices: None

Signed by:

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