

Report of the Chief Executive

Meeting of:	Date:	Ward(s):
Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee	17 September	All
Delete as appropriate	Exempt	Non-exempt

SUBJECT: Chief Executive's update on Covid-19 response: support to staff and managers

1.	Synopsis
1.1	The Committee has requested an update on the support for staff during the Covid-19 pandemic with a particular focus on performance management arrangements, support around wellbeing and managerial expectations for managing a remote workforce.
1.2	The report also provides a summary of the lessons learned exercise, carried out to ensure preparedness for the possibility of a second surge of Covid-19 in Islington.
2.	Recommendations
2.1	To consider the update from the Chief Executive and note the report.
3.	Background - Workforce overview
3.1	Workforce updates are provided weekly as part of the Covid-19 situation reporting program, so we are able to provide a very accurate picture of the percentage of staff working on site, those unable to work (due to sickness or annual leave) and those working from home.
3.2	From 2 April - 25 August, on average up to 60% staff council staff were working from home. Currently (since 1 September), 48% staff continue to work from home.

3.3	The percentage of staff reported as unable to work reached a high point of 23% on 3 April and 7 April, but decreased subsequently, reaching a low point of 11.5% on 5 May and 3 June. Over the month of August, the percentage of staff reported as unable to work has increased, likely due to annual leave schedules, reaching a high point of 18% on 25 August.
3.4	As of 8 September - the latest data available - the proportion of staff unable to work stands at 12.0%.
3.5	On average, 78% of critical services reported as 'performing as normal' April and 1 September, this has increased to 84% since 1 September.
3.6	The impact on non-critical services has remained similar throughout the period between 1 April and 1 September, with an average of 56% of services reporting performing as normal (1) and 32% of services reporting performing at a reduce service (2) between 2 April and 1 September.
3.7	For those staff whose services were not open due to government restrictions, for example, Islington Assembly Hall, the HR Deployment Team manage a pool of staff who had not been deployed within the Covid response of their own service area, and were designated available for deployment council-wide. They established an Islington model, which provided full support for redeployment, from matching a request for staff, and their onboarding, to their return to their substantive post at the end of the deployment. In total, 14 requests were received and 50+ staff redeployed.
3.8	According to the most recently reported figures on 1 September, 231 members of staff have been tested for Covid-19 over the period.
4.	Enabling a remote workforce
4.1	In mid-August, it was agreed that the working at home arrangements were to be extended until the end of December 2020. Staff who can work from home were advised to continue to do so unless an earlier return date had been agreed by the Resilience Strategic Group. This will enable buildings to operate under the government social distancing restriction guidelines with buildings needing to be at or below 45% capacity to ensure we can effectively protect each other.
4.2	The rapid move to digital and home working was facilitated by the council's Digital Services department at the beginning of the pandemic, with the organisation dramatically changing the way it delivered services with minimal disruption to residents where possible.
4.3	Digital Services (DS) have continued to focus on providing the workforce with the tools and technology to work remotely over a sustained period of time. The pre-planned migration to Office 365 was completed at the end of 2019, enabling staff to adopt more efficient and productive ways of working even before the pandemic hit.

	<p>DS are able to monitor the log-in and log-off times to the council network upon request from managers. Emails can also be monitored for the numbers received and responded to over any period of time.</p>
4.4	<p>Remote working has enabled back office services to maintain delivery standards, with, for example, Contact Islington delivering at the same level as pre-pandemic. The processing of revenue and benefits have continued to be managed remotely and all business support grants processed in a timely manner.</p> <p>The productivity of staff who work within the Customer Operations service are monitored by a Real Time Manager (RTM) that monitors staff via the council's telephony platform and Workforce Management IT system.</p> <p>The RTM observes activity all day and can allocate more staff to call types if there is a spike or fluctuation to meet demand. Managers receive regular reports throughout the day on number of staff in and then on activity outcomes.</p>
4.5	<p>The Corporate Performance Indicator set shows no evidence of loss of productivity – however, it must be noted that some key indicators have shown a decline because that particular service or function was not able to be delivered during the height of the pandemic, for example, home visits of children by social worker or choice based lettings in housing.</p> <p>These and other examples cannot be attributed to productivity loss as these staff will of either carried out the function differently or be used to support to deliver a different function.</p>
5.	Communicating with staff
5.1	<p>Video conferencing tools - such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom - have been invaluable in keeping staff and managers connected and in touch whilst not physically being based in the same location.</p>
5.2	<p>As well as the tools themselves, the council has supported staff through its communication channels, both as a means to upskill staff at pace and to ensure staff felt connected and supported while unable to be together. The council's intranet has sections dedicated to supporting staff who are working remotely and need practical support, as well as a Wellbeing Hub to support staff through this challenging period. The council's staff Yammer site saw a significant increase in use and it has been an important way for people to stay in touch and communicate in an informal way.</p>
5.3	<p>The 'How are You?' survey has been sent to all staff to temperature check on how they are coping, what might be required for additional support, resilience and managing stress. The surveys began in April and ran until July, providing an important snapshot of how staff were coping with the new ways of working. The survey was paused in August, and will resume in September with the updated findings to be presented to the Committee in October.</p>

5.4	All managers and staff continue to receive regular bulletins providing them with updates on government and public health guidance. The frequency to be upscaled should urgent information need to be cascaded to the organisation.
6.	'Be Islington'
6.1	<p>The council's new employer brand - Be Islington – which reaffirms our commitment to fairness and makes clear the behaviour we expect our staff to bring to life everyday was launched in July.</p> <p>Throughout September, we will be running a series of focus groups for staff to shape the conversation in building an organisation where employees feel valued, inspired and empowered to achieve this goal and provide the best services possible to our residents.</p>
7.	Expectation of managers'
7.1	Since the start of the pandemic, the vast majority of our staff have responded to the challenge, shown commitment and driven change at a scale that would previously have been unimaginable.
7.2	We want to harness this energy, enthusiasm and flexibility over the longer term and through 'Be Islington' are asking everyone who works for the council to work in a way that is Collaborative, Empowering, Resourceful, Ambitious and underpinned by fairness.
7.3	We are determined to embed those behaviors through everything we do, from recruitment and induction, through to appraisals and staff progression.
7.4	The shift to home working has also meant a significant change in the way managers' support and lead teams remotely. A large number of HR policies and checklists have been updated and re-framed to help managers lead and motivate staff and maintain performance during these unprecedented times.
7.5	To build on this positive work and start to bring about a long-term shift in culture, in early July the Chief Executive held a number of virtual managers conferences, setting out expectations of how managers and staff should work in a Post Covid-19 context. These were attended by over 600 managers.
7.6	Managers were asked to enable top performers to excel, to address poor performance, and to effectively support those who fall between the two. Whilst so many staff are working remotely, managers have been asked to ensure they arranged Quality Conversations regularly (every 4-6 weeks as a guide) and to check in even more frequently on their team and that objectives are set and reviewed regularly.
7.7	The Chief Executive set out the relationship between managers and direct reports around expectations and consequences related to not meeting expectations as well as ensuring that everything managers do in the day-to-day support of their teams by putting equality at the heart of everything they do.
8.	Staff Wellbeing

8.1	Through our internal communications channels and our staff intranet, we have provided (and continue to provide), comprehensive advice for staff and managers to enable them to work safely whether on site or at home – this includes everything from the use of PPE, through to social distancing in the workplace and what staff should do if they develop symptoms.
8.2	Our Wellbeing Hub was launched online in April, providing information, advice and signposting for staff. This was supported by a communications plan focusing on a different wellbeing theme for each week. We have been running a regular well-being staff surveys to hear from staff first hand and understand their concerns. This has provided some valuable insight into how staff may be feeling differently depending on their role, their current working arrangements or their protected characteristics and has enabled us to tailor and target communications where it was most needed.
8.3	In addition, managers were asked to ensure direct reports to book annual leave in order to protect and preserve the resilience of the origination and its workforce.
8.4	Staff were given an extra day of leave on their birthday as a thank you and in recognition of their support and commitment throughout the crisis.
8.5	Some services had to manage “extensive exposure” to the most severe outcomes from the pandemic, for example, the registry services team. Staff were provided with facilitated drop-ins, led by an external consultant to manage any issues encountered whilst at work enabled a regular check-in point for staff as well as an opportunity to discuss concerns individually with the facilitator. This provided an additional safety net to identify individuals requiring additional support, who were then signposted to appropriate services. The facilitated support will be provided to services again if required.
9.	Challenging inequality
9.1	The shocking deaths of George Floyd and Breanna Taylor in the US, laid bare the ongoing inequality faced by Black and minority ethnic people and brought about an enormous depth of feeling in our staff.
9.2	The newly established ‘Challenging Inequality Programme’ sets out an ambitious plan of work to improve race equality, including support for Black and minority ethnic people and other disadvantaged groups through this time.
9.3	In collaboration with staff, the council has made a number of key commitments which have been communicated to staff: This means we will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • make our recruitment and selection process more transparent, and monitor the recruitment campaigns to ensure that a fair process is followed. We’ll ensure that every recruitment panel is diverse • have an internal first approach to job vacancies to ensure that staff have more opportunities for progression • develop a leadership programme for our Black and Ethnic Minority staff

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • launch a reciprocal mentoring programme, modeled on a similar programme in the NHS • ensure every senior manager takes part in training around inclusive and 'culturally competent' leadership. • review our equalities training for staff to ensure it is fit for purpose • work with schools to ensure the school curriculum highlights issues of racism, inequality and injustice and is honest about the role of Britain in history. • ensure our Covid-19 recovery plans focus on supporting Black and ethnic minority communities and other disadvantaged groups. • continue the dialogue through our Race Equality Network internally and by establishing a Challenging Inequality coalition externally. • build on our successful Black History Month and Windrush Day events – with a rolling programme of seminars and events to celebrate our diversity and raise the profile of issues
9.4	The programme has three workstreams; Islington as an Employer which will be led by HR, Islington as Strategic Leader which will be led by the Policy and Equality team, and Islington as a Service Provider which will set out the actions each Council Directorate is taking to tackle inequality and racism. The programme will aim to tackle inequality issues related to all disadvantage groups to create a fairer Islington for all.
9.5	It is essential that services, teams and existing arrangements to support staff and the community continue to monitor and review the impact of Covid-19 and take steps to address any equality impact or known inequalities.
10.	Preparing our buildings and workspaces
10.1	We have ensured that all our sites are Covid-safe for those staff who have to work from a council building – including clear signage, screening where needed, the zoning of desks and the availability of hand sanitizer outside every door.
10.2	Individual risk assessments have been introduced in order to support staff who are returning to work which signpost them to guidance on travel options including our new cycle to work and parking options.
10.3	The longer term planning to enable more staff to return safely, albeit at a reduced capacity, are underway. To meet Covid-safe guidance, capacity in our offices will be limited to under 45% while social distancing measures remain in place. Officers are looking at ways we can make sure the capacity we do have is used in the most appropriate way, supporting more teams to work together for some of the time and there will be further engagement with management teams over the course of the next few weeks to work through how a larger scale return can be managed safely given the restrictions with office space and layouts.
11.	Preparing for a possible second surge of Covid-19
11.1	To ensure preparedness for the possibility of a second surge of COVID-19 in Islington, the council has undertaken a series of lessons-learned reflective exercises. This activity identified opportunities to improve our response and prepare our services and workforce to ensure we are able to respond as quickly and effectively as possible in response to any future surges of COVID-19.

11.2	In July, the Resilience Leads Group took time to reflect on our reactive response to Covid 19 pandemic. The group went through a timeline of activity and key decisions that were made both nationally and locally.
11.3	When the Borough Emergency Control Centre first took over management of PPE for care homes, care providers and all council services, the stock levels were sufficient to last a matter of days up to 2 or 3 weeks; as part of the contingency planning for a second surge, there are now 6 month's supply of all PPE items which will ensure a supply can be maintained throughout the remainder of 2020 including the occurrence of another surge.
11.4	Below are the key themes captured from the lessons learnt exercise to enable us to identify opportunities to do things better and to prepare the workforce and residents should a developing situation arise:
a)	<p>Keeping people safe</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early consideration of a proportionate response which is appropriately resourced and with a focus on individual groups most at risk. • Timely testing for essential workers • Prioritising safety in care homes including discharge from hospital • Supporting mobilisation of community response including mutual aid
b)	<p>Business Continuity Principles</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current Business Continuity Principals did not cover the pandemic on this scale. However, when considering the services all remained open, the group felt maintaining the service was achieved by following the BCP's and so were effective. • Reactive BCPs meant that we were able to prepare and quickly respond to setting up new essential services such as We Are Islington • Speedy mobilisation of the Public Health emergency response group • Maintaining a redeployment pool which is available to drawn on as required • Speed in which we have been able to make decisions and develop responses
c)	<p>Digital</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital / IT – rolled out quickly for staff • Digital offer for residents • But recognise that the new reliance on digital could also make us vulnerable
11.5	In addition, a number of desktop exercises have been undertaken with Resilience Strategic Group, partners and workforce. The workshops stress tested Islington's draft Outbreak Prevention and Control Plan and associated documents to identify any gaps or areas to be improved upon. The workshop was scenario based, which tested out a potential outbreak/cluster over the course of a few days in the borough and across borders. The learning from the exercise and actions to be taken forward will be included in the next version of the Outbreak Prevention and Control Plan and associated documents.

12.	Implications
12.1	Financial Implications:
	There are no financial implications relating to this report
12.2	Legal Implications:
	There are no legal implications relating to this report
12.3	Environmental Implications and contribution to achieving a net zero carbon Islington by 2030:
	There are no environmental implications relating to this report
12.4	Resident Impact Assessment:
	Following an initial assessment, a detailed Resident Impact Assessment has not been completed, as this report contains no proposals for decision making that directly impact on residents.
5.	Conclusion
5.1	Council staff have responded to the challenges of Covid-19, driving and adapting to change at an unprecedented pace whilst focusing on residents. Our back office teams have provided a robust response throughout the pandemic, enabling staff to work digitally. Productivity does not appear to have declined where services could continue to deliver albeit in an adapted way of working.
5.2	We now want to harness the enthusiasm, commitment and behaviour that came to the fore during the crisis over the longer term through the Be Islington approach. We know that middle managers are key to culture shift as we continue to focus on improving outcomes for residents.
5.3	To ensure we are prepared should we see repeat waves of Covid-19, we have been reflecting on the lessons learnt from the year so far, as well as scenario planning for the future. We are using this insight to inform and update our Outbreak Control Plan.

Signed by:

Linzi Roberts-Egan, Chief Executive

Date: 7 September 2020