

Report of the Chief Executive

Meeting of:	Date:	Ward(s):
Policy and Performance Scrutiny Committee	20 April 2021	All

Delete as appropriate	Exempt	Non-exempt
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SUBJECT:

1 Purpose:

This report provides an update on the continued approach taken to support Islington Council's staff and residents throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and the actions taken to support the borough's recovery as it gradually emerges from lockdown.

2. Recommendations:

- 2.1 To note the update from the Chief Executive on the Council's on-going response to Covid-19 pandemic as it moves from the response phase to recovery.

3. Overview:

- 3.1 The Council's command structure at both Gold and Silver levels has remained at the highest alert level to be able to respond to changes from Government, changes around national and local Public Health guidance as well as scaling up preparedness activity in line with the government roadmap out of the current lockdown restrictions. The BECC (Borough Emergency Coordination Centre) remains operational and continues to provide a 24-hour response capability. The BECC are responsible for the resource allocation of PPE stock, supporting the community test offer and are co-ordinating the set-up of PPE community pick up sites at locations across the borough which are due to go live by mid-April 2021.
- 3.2 The first step of the national roadmap was reached on 8 March, with schools and colleges fully re-opening, and from 29 March some restrictions on meeting outdoors were eased as well as for outdoor sport. The council has worked closely with schools to support safe full

re-opening, and as the information below shows, local schools, staff, pupils and families have managed the return with no significant changes in underlying infection rates.

- 3.3 The second major step will be implemented on 12 April, when there will be a significant re-opening of many parts of the economy and society. Community centres, libraries, outdoor hospitality and attractions, gyms, children's indoor activities, non-essential retail and personal care, such as hairdressers will be able to open from this date.
- 3.4 To support local business reopening, the council has revived its '**Shop local, Shop safe**' campaign. This has taken the form of:
- launching an improved online business directory to make it easy to look up local businesses
 - launching a new Covid Safety Scheme (safety verification scheme for local businesses who will be able to display a vinyl window certificate once approved)
 - providing updated 'welcome back' advice, guidance and materials to businesses on the council business webpages and business bulletin.
- 3.5 The campaign launched over social media channels, followed by LinkedIn, the corporate e-bulletin and the business bulletin. Public Protection teams will be distributing a 'Covid safe business' flyer, pavement licence flyer as well as the other welcome back materials. We intend to build on this activity over the year to embed the safety scheme and encourage more businesses to sign up to the directory attract residents back to the high street. The Communications team will be working closely with the town centre and Community Wealth Building teams to support local businesses and get the local economy moving.
- 3.6 The council will continue to promote support, and when necessary, enforce, vitally important measures that organisations and people need to follow to ensure Covid safety (including social distancing, face coverings indoors, regular handwashing) and adhere to the changed restrictions.
- 3.7 **Public Health Impacts**

Since the last report, the reduction in the weekly number of infections has slowed after many weeks of very significant falls in January and February. In our most recently available seven-day data (up to and including 2 April), Islington had 49 confirmed infections among residents, which compares with a second wave peak of around 2,000 over the New Year/early January period. The equivalent rate is 20 confirmed cases per 100,000 population currently, which is lower than the London average of 27 per 100,000 and national average of 39 per 100,000.

Over the last month, the numbers of confirmed infections have been at relatively low levels across all age groups, ethnic groups and wards within the borough, with small, non-statistically significant fluctuations week on week. There have been no significant changes in the number of school and college-aged residents with confirmed infections since schools fully re-opened in the week of 8th March.

The number of cases in the 60+ group, who are the most vulnerable age group for serious illness, has fallen significantly, and through most of March there were around 2-3 cases

each week. In the most recent seven-day period this has increased slightly to five infections, which is likely to be a short-term fluctuation around an underlying low number of infections. There have been no new infections (symptomatic or asymptomatic) in local care home residents for the last six weeks, and no Covid-related deaths since 2 February 2021.

Symptomatic (PCR) testing rose significantly in March compared with February, reaching around 7,250-7,500 tests in residents per week in the second half of March, roughly double that of February. The positivity rate among people who test has continued to fall, and in the most recent week, even with a higher number of tests being carried out, the positivity rate had fallen to 0.9%.

Non-symptomatic (lateral flow) testing has remained at high levels in the community through March, primarily linked to local schools and colleges where testing has helped to support a full and safe return since 8 March. Testing levels peaked at just over 19,000 cases in the week the schools went back.

Non-symptomatic (lateral flow) testing continues to be made available for frontline council staff based at the Waste Recycling Centre and Station Road.

In the last week, there were still over 10,000 tests carried out in community settings in the borough: numbers have reduced since more testing is now being carried out with home test kits, distributed by schools to pupils and staff, which are not included in this community data.

The positivity rate among non-symptomatic people testing in community settings has been in the range 0.1-0.3% throughout March, which is further indication of a low rate of infection in the community at the current time.

The government has now announced the roll-out of non-symptomatic home testing kits available for everyone from 9 April 2021 as a further measure to help identify infections earlier and prevent onward transmission. Kits are expected to be available from existing community testing sites provided by the council, via online orders and participating community pharmacies.

Admissions of people with Covid-19 to Whittington Health has significantly reduced as the impacts of reductions in community transmission has reduced the number of people developing serious illness and needing hospital care. In recent weeks, weekly new admissions have been in single digits, helping to ease the pressures on the local NHS.

The number of deaths has also been falling over recent weeks, with one death in the most recent week available. Cumulatively, Islington has now had 359 deaths in people with Covid-19 within 28 days of diagnosis of the infection. This second wave of infections which peaked in late December and early January, has more than doubled the cumulative number of deaths in Islington after the first major wave of infections over February – May of last year, similar to the impact nationally.

3.8 Vaccination and Testing

Increasing vaccination levels and symptomatic and non-symptomatic testing play a fundamentally important role in ensuring a safe re-opening, and will continue to be

supported by the council, working closely with our NHS and community, voluntary and faith sector partners.

At the current time, four fixed vaccination sites continue within the borough, which continue to prioritise vaccinations to the priority groups aged 50 and over, anyone aged 16 and over with a clinical vulnerability to Covid, people working in health and social care, and people who are informal carers. The sites are the Business Design Centre ('mass' vaccination site, staffed by UCLH, opened in early March), two primary care-based delivery sites (Bingfield and Hanley Road medical centres, operational since December) and the Arc Centre which is community pharmacy-led (operational since February).

There has also been outreach vaccination to people who are homeless and 'bespoke' clinics at the GP hubs for people with learning difficulties, working with the Islington Learning Disabilities Partnership. A number of satellite or temporary vaccination clinics have been delivered by the GP-led service, in a small number of GP surgeries and community 'pop up' locations to help improve geographic and community access. The first of these community pop up clinics was supported by Finsbury Park Mosque, and vaccinated around 350 people over three days. At the start of April, another community pop up was supported by the House on the Rock in Tufnell Park and vaccinated over 60 people.

Older, housebound people and residents and staff in care homes are now being offered second vaccinations, as well as residents in other accommodation-based care settings (e.g. extra care/supported living, etc.).

As outlined in previous updates the council has continued to communicate extensively with residents, businesses and staff, using a range of channels to reach target audiences. The significant programme of communications and community listening and engagement work happening in the borough continues to help support increases in uptake, complemented by other work to support access to vaccination, such as work to implement more local vaccination locations and help with booking appointments and getting to the sites.

To date, the vaccination programme has largely been vaccinating the older population of Islington, who as a group are the fourth most deprived group of older people in London and, on some measures, nationally.

Islington's vaccination uptake is currently ranking significantly better within London than might otherwise be indicated by the level of deprivation, and is close to the median London vaccination coverage in the first priority groups (Table 1). However Islington, and most of London, is significantly below the new national target of 95% uptake and ensuring a high level of vaccination is vital to protect the whole community and especially the most vulnerable.

Uptake rates of Covid vaccination in Islington across all eligible groups are now significantly higher than with the flu vaccination programme conducted last year. Indeed, Covid vaccination uptake rates among people in our most deprived groups are higher than

the highest rates of flu vaccine achieved in our more affluent groups during last year's campaign.

The uptake among social care workers is also continuing to increase and remains an on-going focus for engagement and action: as of the end of March, vaccination among care home staff was recorded as 69%, which was above the London average of 66%, although still lower than the national average of 78%.

Covid vaccination rates are continuing to increase in all groups in the borough at the current time, although from time to time the rate of increase is being affected by the general availability of national supplies of vaccine. The rate of increase in newer eligible groups and among groups with lower current vaccination rates tends to be higher than in other groups, and so the gap between highest and lowest uptake in the borough is narrowing over time by ethnicity, deprivation and geography.

Some of the gaps do remain wide, however, even though they have considerably narrowed - notably in some of our Black communities, some of the wards in the north/north east of the borough, people with serious mental illness, among others. This is a matter for continuing attention and efforts for the council, the NHS and our partners and colleagues in the community, voluntary and faith sectors to encourage and improve uptake.

Alongside and underpinned, by ongoing work to listen, engage and respond to the needs of residents regarding information and practical support to access vaccinations, current key activities and goals include:

- A strong focus on increasing vaccination levels in existing priority groups, with a particular focus on some ethnic and religious groups, areas of greatest deprivation, and other groups with lower uptake and greater vulnerability
- Working with the NHS to help encourage and approve other community pharmacy-led sites for vaccination; it is anticipated another site will open in the north of the borough once current vaccine supply pressures ease
- Identifying a long list of areas where there are lower vaccine uptake rates, to help target some outreach clinics
- Mapping of suitable venues (community centres, faith venues, etc.) to reach areas or groups with current low uptake rates, including exploring options of mobile clinics
- Producing a programme of events, with a 2-3 week lead in to each to help publicise and increase local interest, working with the NHS and local community, voluntary and faith sectors.
- Request for a number of flexibilities within the national programme to help further support the above programme of action

Table. Vaccination uptake in the first priority age groups, as of 28 March 2021.

	Number received first dose	Estimated Eligible population	% of total eligible population	Rank amongst London boroughs*
Aged 80 and older	4,345	5366	81%	22/32
75-79	3,353	4,033	83%	19/32
70-74	4,984	6,042	83%	17/32
65-69	5,685	7,254	78%	17/32

Source: NHSE.

3.9 **We are Islington**

Since its launch on in March 2020, 'We are Islington' (WAI), has played a significant role in supporting Islington residents. To date the service has received more than 18,000 requests for support and provided direct contact and assistance to Islington's shielded and clinically extremely vulnerable residents. The main reasons for assistance are as follows:

- 3.10 **Financial Support:** There here have been 1,117 requests for financial support. The exact nature of the requests varies from support to meet day to day living costs to financial assistance for those employed people impacted by the lockdown. As well as support to meet their immediate presenting needs, following strengths based conversations, residents may also be referred to other services including Income Maximisation or the Resident Support Scheme to assist with underlying needs around financial insecurity. **However, there has been a sustained reduction** in the number of residents seeking financial support, down from a peak of 377 in April 2020 to just 19 requests in March 2021. With only 4 requests having been received so far for April, the downward trend looks sets to continue.

It is likely requests may increase again once the furlough scheme starts coming to an end and as such, support will remain in place until the impact of the scheme is fully understood and more permanent support is in place for residents.

- 3.11 **Food Support:** There have 4,095 requests for support with food since the service was launched. Excluding the first few months during the initial lockdown when demand for food support peaked at almost 1,600 in April and a small spike to 135 in January 2021 as a result of the lockdown, requests for food support have been gradually falling. Demand has fallen back to 36 requests for food support in March and despite the long bank holiday, just 12 so far for April.

At the end of September 2020, a review was undertaken of all residents that had contacted We Are Islington to request food support to identify any trends that might indicate underlying issues around food insecurity and poverty or highlight unmet needs. Whilst at the time the exercise did not identify any real trends, this may have in part been due to the fact the Islington Food Bank re-opened on 22 August and residents were able to access this service. Another exercise is currently underway to re-examine this issue with the purpose of identifying residents that could benefit from additional support.

- 3.12 **Fuel Support:** In total there have been 370 fuel support requests received the majority of which came from parents of school aged children, older or vulnerable residents forced to shield and unable to top up their energy and those in employment affected by the lockdown. The Winter Grant has been used to assist affected residents and in February, the service assisted 23 residents with fuel support, down from 45 in January and 7 in March. There have been no requests for fuel support so far in April and demand is expected to continue to decrease now children are back at school and the weather warms up.
- 3.13 **Wellbeing and Welfare Concerns:** Wellbeing and welfare concerns make up another of the top categories, with 1,653 requests having been received since the service launched. The majority of these were from vulnerable residents in need of support or referrals from neighbours, friends or family. As with the other support requests, demand for this service peaked at the start of the year and We are Islington worked in partnership with colleagues in Adult Social Care and Children's services to ensure the longer term needs of residents were met and as a result, these requests have reduced month on month, with no requests at all received so far in April.
- 3.14 **Shielded/Clinically Extremely Vulnerable Residents:** In March 2020, approximately 7000 residents were identified as being clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) and advised to shield. Shielding paused in July 2020, before being resumed again in December, with this cohort prioritised for vaccination. Islington had 5,734 residents aged 19-69 in Category 1 and 2,770 over 70's added as part of Category 2. This moved residents from cohort 5 and 6 on vaccines, to cohort 4 in most circumstances. Everyone in both categories was prioritised for vaccination and advised to shield, before this was paused at the end of March.

All previous support remains in place, including the ability to help secure priority supermarket slots and affected residents have been contacted to make them aware of this offer. Despite this, demand for services from shielded/clinically extremely vulnerable residents remained low, with just 82 of the total of 798 requests received in February coming from shielders. This was also reflected in the lack of demand coming through the Government's portal set up to support shielded residents access support, with no cases at all received via this method for the past 2 months, reflecting the early efforts to assess and meet residents' longer term needs at the start of the pandemic. The support for shielded and clinically extremely vulnerable residents will however remain ready to be stood up again should there be a further wave and subsequent lockdown.

3.15 **Test and Trace:** As previously report, in November 2020 We Are Islington also launched a local test and trace service to support the national NHS Covid Test and Trace service, contacting residents they have been unable to speak to. So far the Test and Trace service has received and dealt with 1,514 Covid positive contact cases and has gone from a peak of 308 cases in week commencing 28 December 2020, to an average of 3 contacts per day. We will continue to provide this service for the foreseeable future but expect to see the cases fall as the lockdown ends and vaccination programme continues.

3.16 **Supporting the vaccination rollout:** On 22nd February We Are Islington launched a service to support the NHS vaccination programme by assisting vulnerable residents struggling to book vaccine appointments and/or travel to get their vaccination. To date WAI have had 104 contacts since the service launched, with only 2 people needing to be supported with booking an appointment and transport. The remaining calls were from residents not yet invited for their vaccination and with various vaccine enquiries.

In March 2021, We Are Islington supported the Finsbury Mosque pop up vaccination clinic by fielding enquiries and booking vaccination appointments for residents at the Mosque over 3 days. The service received 313 calls over the 3-day period and arranged 132 appointments on behalf of residents. In addition, WAI supporting the bookings and advice for another pop up site run over two days at the end of March 2021 at the House on the Rock Church in Tufnell Park.

We Are Islington will continue to support pop up vaccination clinics and are also in discussion with our NHS and GP colleagues on ways to drive up the number of residents taking up the offer of a vaccination by proactively targeting residents that the GP has either been unable to contact, with this outbound service expected to launch towards the beginning of May.

3.17 **Staffing**

The percentage of staff reported as unable to work on 6 April 2021 was approximately 20%. The percentage of staff reported as working on site was approximately 32%. The percentage of staff working from home was 48%. 81% of critical services reported performing as normal with approximately 19% reporting operating a reduced service. Non-critical services were more impacted than critical services. With approximately 66% of services reporting performing as normal and 30% of services reporting performing at a reduced service. Approximately 4% of services reported either covering urgent responses only or unable to undertake urgent/essential response.

Whilst the government advice on easing lockdown restrictions are underway, the majority of staff who are working from home will remain working from home until the end of June at least. Scoping work is underway to capitalise upon the new ways of working that will enable staff to continue to work as flexibly and productively as possible.

For staff who unable to carry out their work from home, building and individual risk assessments remain in place along with on-going management of all sites to ensure staff comply with Covid-19 safety arrangements and are able to get tested regularly. There have

not been any reported outbreaks of infection amongst council staff since the last update to the committee.

Additional guidance has been provided to managers to support staff who may be returning to work after a long period of shielding, illness, bereavement and isolation. Specific support is also available for all staff through the Coronavirus Wellbeing hub on Izzzi, which includes advice on flexible working, quality conversations and the employee assistance programme, as well as wellbeing and self-help advice. There will be further work undertaken in line with the Council's recovery strategy which will focus on support to staff for general wellbeing and particularly around mental health.

3.18 Support for mental health and wellbeing during Covid-19

As the situation stabilises it has been reported nationally there are higher numbers of people experiencing anxiety and depression than before the pandemic. A local survey and engagement suggests a similar pattern in Islington, with a disproportionate impact on those experiencing wider disadvantage.

Modelling predicts a rise in new cases of mental ill-health in both adults and children in the next 2-3 years. Local support for these wider determinants of poor mental health is vital as well as community connectedness, and better awareness self-help, peer support and talking therapies.

3.19 Our offer to residents and staff includes:

- On-going development of the Social Connectedness Network
- A related directory of services, and sharing of resources and good practice
- Support for the Time to Change initiative, tackling mental health stigma
- Our employer's pledge and championing peer support
- Suite of mental health training courses for staff, other Islington workers, volunteers and residents, including suicide prevention and bereavement awareness training
- Increased communication to residents and staff to raise the profile of mental health messaging and awareness of support (It's OK to not feel OK),
- Dedicated children and families Council Covid webpages
- A recovery curriculum for schools focussing on wellbeing as well as curated resources to schools to support staff, pupils and families
- Promotion of self-referral talking therapies (iCope) including a specific offer for Covid related distress and well-being phone calls
- Other support and counselling for specific groups such as the bereaved, women and inter-cultural therapy
- A range of NHS-run clinical mental health services and a NCL Support after Suicide service launched during the pandemic to support anyone affected by suicide.

4. Implications

4.1 Financial Implications:

Based on the latest (Month 10) budget monitoring forecast for 2020/21 the council is currently facing total COVID-19 related budget pressures of approximately £55 million (£17 million additional costs and £38 million income losses). The council has £26m of COVID-19 general government grant funding to set against these pressures and is currently assuming compensation of £18.6m from the government's sales, fees and charges loss scheme and £2.4m from the tax guarantee scheme for Collection Fund losses. This leaves a net COVID-19 related funding gap of approximately £8m in the current financial year.

This includes a potential in-year General Fund budget shortfall of £39.7 million in 2020/21, £4.7 million Council tax and business rates income losses that would impact the 2021/22 budget and £2.8 million HRA budget pressures.

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.

Rather than a one-off event that the council's budget is recovering from, it is expected that COVID-19 will continue to have a significant, currently unquantifiable, impact on the council's medium-term budget over and above the amount covered by the government's COVID support package announced to date. For example, the COVID support package provides no funding for business rates income losses in 2021/22 and only provides support for sales, fees and charges income losses up until June 2021. Therefore, it is essential that the council has sufficient annual contingency budget and reserves to boost financial resilience and protect residents, as reflected in the council's 2021/22 budget report.

The 2020/21 financial outturn will be reported to Executive on 1 July 2021 and PPS thereafter.

4.2 Legal Implications:

The Council's response to Covid-19 is in accordance with its statutory functions, including Best Value under the Local Government Act 1999 and the General Power of Competence under the Localism Act 2011, and the modification of its public health and health and safety duties and powers by the Coronavirus Act 2020.

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

The Environmental Implications has been reviewed and there has not been any substantial change since the committee meeting held in March. There have been no new People Friendly Streets, Low Traffic Neighbourhoods or school streets implemented since the last report on the 1st of March 2021. We are carrying out a number of tasks as part of the People Friendly Streets consolidation period, this includes consideration of any potential exemptions for certain groups from the traffic restrictions for example for blue badge holders. It also includes proposal on how to move forward on future People Friendly Streets scheme in particular in relation to community engagement.

The next People Friendly Streets schemes are likely to be programme for delivery in the summer.

4.4 **Resident Impact Assessment:**

There have been no substantial changes in terms of equality impact on residents since the last committee meeting. The impact of COVID-19 on disadvantaged groups is clear and all council services continue to monitor and respond to equality impacts identified taking action to address inequality. 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).

All services will continue to monitor impact of COVID-19 on our residents and ensure where any new impacts come to light that these are addressed appropriately providing support to those who need it.

5. **Conclusion**

- 5.1 The Council continues to provide a robust response to the pandemic and recovery. However, we know that the impacts of the pandemic have not been felt evenly with data showing clear inequality around mental health, economic and social inequality. The council will continue to address these as it moves forwards and will continue to support residents and staff accordingly as the borough moves out of lockdown.

Appendices: None

Background papers: None

Signed by:

Date

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