

MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BUSINESS PANEL
Tuesday 16 March 2021 at 7.14pm

PRESENT: Councillors Bill Brown, Juliet Campbell, Peter Bernards, Patrick Codd, Joan Millbank, John Muldoon, Kim Powell and Luke Sorba.

IN ATTENDANCE Councillors Barnham, Bell, Kelleher, and Jacq Paschoud.
APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE were received from Councillor Curran.

Presenting Officers:

Director of Public Services, Director of Public Health, Head of Business & Committees, Service Group Manager,

The meeting commenced at 7.14pm and adjourned at 7.14pm in order to consider business of the Overview and Scrutiny Education Business Panel.
The meeting resumed at 8.04pm.

1. Minutes

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the last meeting held on 16 February 2021 be confirmed as an accurate record

2. Declarations of Interest

None was declared.

3. Scrutiny of the Council's COVID-19 Response Update report

- 3.1 The Chair thanked staff and volunteers for all the hard work undertaken with regard to the pandemic. This item was presented by the Director of Public Health and the Director of Public Services.
- 3.2 The Director of Public Services said that since the last meeting of this panel, infection rates had continued to fall as a result of the lock down. He said that the government had issued a four step road map which was outlined in the report. He said that the first step, return to school, had gone well. There had been a lot of testing for corona virus and this would continue to ensure that any outbreak was contained. Officers were developing a plan to work alongside that government road map to help the community and local economy to exit safely from lockdown. Some services, like testing, would increase. Shielding services will cease at the end of the month. Staffing levels for the changing services were being considered because if a variant of concern was identified in the borough, surge testing would be required and 50 members of staff would need to be recruited very quickly to deliver the service.
- 3.3 The Director of Public Services said that critical services and response services continue to be delivered. 129 staff had been deployed to the covid action team. A further 21 agency staff had been added to that team.

Shielding

A further 12,000 people had been received onto the shielding list; the total of those shielding was 21,000 in the borough.

Community Testing

There had been 16,000 tests in community centres. Positive rates were .89%. Last week, a successful exercise on testing was undertaken in case a variant of concern was identified in the borough. This would ensure that Lewisham would be able to respond quickly and contain an outbreak.

Enforcement Works

13,000 checks on businesses had been undertaken and just over 1100 visits since starting a new approach this year. As we emerge out of lock down, this approach would have to change. Officers expected rules to change and Lewisham would need to help businesses to adapt to the new rules safely.

Infection rates

The 7 day infection rate on 26 January 2021 was 538 per 100,000. 18th out of the 33 London boroughs. On 16 March 2021, the infection rate had dropped to 24.5 31st out of the 33 London boroughs. One of the lowest in London and a significant drop.

On 26 January 2021 the infection rates for those residents 60+ years was 644 per 100,000 and was one of the highest rates in London. It had reduced to 14.5 29th out of the 33 London boroughs.

- 3.4 In conclusion, the Director of Public Services said that lockdown had been successful in reducing infection rates, and the pressure on hospitals as a result. The number of covid related deaths continued to fall; last week there were three. He said that the safe exit from lockdown must be managed carefully and response services needed to be maintained or reduced as necessary.
- 3.5 The Chair asked how realistic the possibility of a 3rd wave and subsequent lockdown was and he asked for a response on the concerns surrounding the Oxford vaccine. The Director of Public Health said with there had not been any firm indication that there would be a third wave but Chris Whitty, the Chief Medical Officer, had advised that local authorities should be prepared in the event of a third wave. Lewisham was making sure that the take up of the vaccine was as high as possible, that testing reaches all parts of the community in Lewisham, and there was good support for shielding. This would ensure that Lewisham copes well should there be a third wave in Autumn/Winter 2021.

- 3.6 In regard to the AstraZeneca vaccine, there had been recent media coverage regarding its potential link to blood clot formations. The World Health Organisation (WHO) and the European Medicines Agency (EMA) agree that risks of the vaccine are far outweighed by the benefits and that vaccination should continue alongside other vaccines. The numbers of people with blood clots following vaccination seem comparable with numbers expected in the background rate of the population. There was no evidence that there is a causative link between the vaccine and blood clot formation. The situation would continue to be monitored. Local authorities would be notified if any issues were identified following further monitoring by the WHO and EMA.
- 3.7 Councillor Kelleher asked what information members could share with residents to dispel the myths that are spreading about the vaccine, to ensure that they are confident about being vaccinated. The Director for Public Health said that a lot of information had been produced. A series of webinars had been held with residents to answer questions, there was signposting to information on the web, and officers were working with covid 19 champions. She said that she would welcome any further suggestions about how to reach communities to dispel misinformation.
- 3.8 Councillor Millbank asked for more financial information about the cost to this Council in recent months, particularly as Lewisham exits from the second wave. The Director of Public Services said that Lewisham was claiming every entitlement from the government in terms of costs. It was a work in progress to ensure that there was a claim for everything possible and that nothing was returned if not used. This was audited and takes time to manage. Grants had also been received and were passed on to businesses in the local economy. £13.75m was given to 6,600 businesses in the borough. As applications were processed, more grants would be given to businesses. At the end of the pandemic, officers would ensure that all claims had been made and that this Council had been fully recompensed.
- 3.9 The Executive Director Corporate Services said that in recent months the government had started to recognise some cash flow pressures in local authorities and had made some funding announcements. In the last week there had been two further announcements. One was support for clinically extremely vulnerable; approximately £200,000. A further announcement had been made for the Contained Outbreak Management Fund; and more than £3m had already been allocated for that. However the government were not giving any long term certainty going into the new financial year apart from an indication of £10m to cover all covid related expenditure. She said that Lewisham had not been funded and recognised for the longer term and wider implications that covid would have on this Council's finances.
- 3.10 In response to questions from Councillor Codd, the Director of Public Services said that:
- All critical services throughout the first and second wave had been maintained. In the second wave the refuse collection service had been

disrupted when there was snow. It was a day or two before normal service resumed because there was a shortage of staff. There had been a focus on critical services and this had been successful. Although not a critical services, street sweeping had continued through the main thoroughfares. Some of staff members of street sweeping had supported the waste collection service.

- With regard to enforcement around businesses, the action taken was educate first. Very little action had been taken because once businesses understood the rules there had been general compliance. Where a visit had been made, advice had been given regarding grants that were available. Applying for grants was complicated, but officers would offer support if required.

3.11 The Director of Public Health said that from this week, Lewisham had started to take cases straight from NHS to follow up from day zero. Lewisham still rely on NHS for the test and trace contact follow up; those who had been in close contact with confirmed cases. This does not attract any additional funding. She said that the benefit of taking on cases at an early stage, was that there would be a local call handler, contacting a local resident, which meant that they would be much more likely to engage and provide the information required. Another benefit was that it was quicker to link people into support for self-isolation from the point of first contact. She said that local contact tracing was important to ensure that Lewisham were prepared for and successfully manage, a potential third wave.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

4. Key Decision Plan

Councillor Codd asked why the report on the Thames Water rebate was not one of the agenda items for Mayor and Cabinet on 24 March. The Head of Business and Committee said that he understood there were still substantial financial and legal issues that needed to be addressed and had been advised that it was not scheduled to be considered by Mayor and Cabinet until June. Councillor Bell said that Thames Water ended their agreement with local authorities including Lewisham. A legal case was taken by a London borough on behalf of other London boroughs. He expected refunds to tenants as a first priority. However, because of legal and financial complications, a report would be submitted to Mayor and Cabinet in June.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

5. Decisions made by the Mayor on 10 March 2021

Statement of Community Involvement [ceasing temporary Covid changes to the scheme of delegation

- 5.1 The Service Group Manager presented the report. He said that the limited temporary amendments to the current Statement of Community Involvement proposed for retention were with regard to practical arrangements for holding committee and local meetings and not the changes to the scheme of delegation which had been agreed previously by Mayor and Cabinet on a temporary basis.
- 5.2 Councillor Sorba thanked all the officers in the planning department for maintaining the planning service during the pandemic. He had asked for the item to be called in because he wanted to amend a sub paragraph in paragraph 2.1 of the recommendations:
Make it explicit that people wishing to speak at planning committee meetings will need to register to speak in advance of the meeting and will need to submit written copies of their speeches in advance of the meeting
- 5.3 Councillor Sorba recommended that 'will need' should be replaced with 'are encouraged'. If the amendment was not made, he considered that it would raise the barrier against participation by the public in the Council's decision making. He said that one of the objectives in the Corporate Strategy was to increase the public's involvement in decision making. He considered that this recommendation, if agreed, would decrease public participation.
- 5.4 Councillor Sorba said that the recommendation would disadvantage some members of the community with lower levels of literacy, for those for whom English is not their first language, with physical difficulties, for those whose neurodivergence makes reading and writing more challenging than speaking and for those who lack digital resources.
- 5.5 Councillor Sorba said that the cumulative effect of these disadvantages would mean that participation would be predominantly from those on high income and from professional classes and not those harder to reach groups. He recommended that the current practice of allowing residents to present orally should continue and it should not be mandatory to have written participation.
- 5.6 There was then discussion on this issue and it was noted that the reason for a requesting written speeches in advance of a planning meeting, was so that it could be read out by the clerk in the event of a resident losing connection at the meeting. The Service Group Manager, said that requesting a written speech was not intended to be a barrier to participation. He said that planning officers would be willing to act as scribes for any resident who had difficulty in writing as described by Councillor Sorba. He did not expect to receive a request for this service very often and did not anticipate it would result in any significant increase in officer workload.
- 5.7 Councillor Bell said that Councillor Sorba's comments had been outlined at this meeting. He said that he would work with officers to ensure that it was made very clear that residents who had difficulties in written communication could ask officers to act as scribes for their presentations. With this undertaking, Councillor Sorba agreed that there was no need for a call in or a referral for this item.
- RESOLVED that the report be noted.

6. Decisions made by the Executive Director of Community Services

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

7. Decisions made by the Executive Director of Housing, Regeneration and Public Realm

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

8. Scrutiny Update

Councillor Muldoon said that on 12 March 2021 the London Scrutiny Body discussed the NHS white paper which would have major implications for health provision if it became enacted.

Councillor Muldoon said that unless Lewisham received further guidance from the government by 7 May 2021, this Council would have to return to physical meetings.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

9. Exclusion of the Press and Public.

The resolution was not moved as the meeting did not go into closed session.

10. Decisions made by Mayor on 10 March 2021

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

11. Decisions by the Executive Director of Community Services - closed Session

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

The meeting closed at 9.25pm.

Chair