

# MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BUSINESS PANEL

Tuesday, 15 December 2020 at 7.05 pm

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

ALSO PRESENT:

Director of Public Service, Director of Public Health, Director of Planning, Head of Business and Committee, and Head of Scrutiny.

Clerk:

Senior Committee Manager

There was no apology for absence.

## 1. Minutes

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the last meeting held on 24 November 2020 be confirmed and agreed as an accurate record.

## 2. Declarations of Interests

The meeting noted personal interest in relation to Item 3 “Scrutiny of the Council’s Covid-19 Response – Update Report” as follows:

- Cllr Joan Millbank – declared that she is a member of the Lewisham Local Collaborative.

## 3. Scrutiny of the Council's Covid-19 Response - Update Report

The Director of Public Services (Director of PS) introduced the report, advising updates relating to the Council’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic since the last meeting of the Panel. Key highlights noted by the Panel included information that Lewisham now had the 12th highest deaths in London, and the 8th lowest in care homes when compared with other London boroughs. It was reported that the National Health Service (NHS) had expressed a concern about potential increase in hospital admissions due to a recent rise in local infection rates, and that Lewisham would be moving from Tier-2 restrictions to Tier-3 in the next few days. Notwithstanding that, local schools were operating well, although 5 had to close down in the week because infected teachers were isolating. The Director of PS confirmed that the Council would continue to respond to the message by the Government to roll out the test pilot scheme in local schools for a safe return after the Christmas break.

The Director of PS also gave information about the overall response activities to the Panel. It was stated that the Council now have a total of 136 community champions to help spread messages it was conveying about service provision

during the pandemic. The Panel was further advised that although the number of staff in the COVID-19 Response Team was over 80 in number at the present time, the figure would likely increase nearer to 160 by early January 2021. Also, the Council aimed to expand its capacity, including setting up the Civic Suite as an additional venue for the testing service. It was confirmed that work undertaken by 40 of those staff assigned from the COVID-19 Response Team since 18 November 2020 to the local test and trace service to deliver a 7-day operation was ongoing, and that there had been improved rating of over 90%, taking Lewisham into the top quartile in London for contact-tracing operational work.

In concluding his introduction, the Director of PS confirmed to the Panel that in addition to contributions by local community champions and the COVID-19 Response Team, the Council was providing critical services in other areas, including the delivering of specialist services to supply Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and the offer of bookings for tests. It was further confirmed that when Lewisham moved into Teir-3 High Alert, support to extremely clinical vulnerable residents which was paused after the first lockdown phase would be resumed.

The Panel also noted responses to questions by the Director of PS and the Director of Public Health (Director of PH) as follows:

1. **Vulnerable residents**

In light of a concern about how to keep in touch with vulnerable residents when Lewisham moved to Teir-3 High Alert, the Director of PS advised the Panel that 25 staff would use data acquired during the shielding programme to convey information on how to access Council services, including those of partnering agencies.

2. **Staff welfare**

The Panel received an assurance from the Director of PS that safety measures implemented in Council premises were continuing. It was confirmed that the Council was taking care to keep office areas COVID-19 secured. In addition, between 85% to 90% of the workforce had been working remotely since March 2020, in order to minimise personal contacts in the office environment. Notwithstanding that, there had been a rise in the staff absence rate on COVID-19 related matters, but not to the extent where it had had an adverse impact on service delivery. It was stated that in the majority of cases, absences were related to staff taking time off to care for relatives, or where it was necessary for them to self-isolate. However, if the rise in infections continues across London, staff absences could increase further.

3. **Enforcement**

The Director of PS informed the Panel that Lewisham, Greenwich and Bexley boroughs were operating under the same police command unit, and meetings were held twice a week between representatives from the three boroughs. It was stated that as part of the publicity campaign, the police

were concerned about the lack of face coverings in public places, and the creation of hotspot avenues because the challenges were evident in all three boroughs. Thus, the police were considering a move from the 'educate' approach to 'enforcement' in regard to the use of face coverings, and to prevent unlicensed social music events and gatherings.

Specific to Lewisham, the Panel heard that there had been an improvement following a letter from the Mayor to encourage local supermarket chains to sign-post the wearing of face coverings on their premises. It was stated that staff in the Council's licencing and enforcement teams were also working closely with the police during the day and evenings to visit business premises, with a view to encourage them to comply, and to deter unlicensed events in the borough.

The Chair's view was that residents should be encouraged to comply to the COVID-19 guidelines.

#### **4. Test & Trace**

In light of a concern, the Director of PS informed the Panel that the Council aimed to provide opportunities for residents to get tested. It was stated that the Government's Chief Medical Officer and other experts had informed that lateral flow tools were 70% reliable if done properly. The polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test takes longer and requires more resources than the lateral flow test. Thus, in addition to other existing asymptomatic programmes, the lateral flow scheme was enabling residents to use home testing kits for COVID-19.

It was confirmed to the Panel that the Sedgehill trial was the use of lateral flow devices to test staff and pupils at regular intervals to identify symptomatic cases, and get them to isolate. The Director of PS stated that the Sedgehill trial was one of four trials taking place across the country. The results had not yet been published. However, the Department for Education announced in the morning of 15 December 2020 that from January 2021, the approach to testing would be rolled out in schools across London.

#### **5. Infections rate and the new strain of COVID-19**

The Panel also noted clarification from the Director of PH that during the first wave of the lockdown, residents in the 18 to 64 age group had the highest number of cases for Covid-19 infection. The main change between the first and second waves was that there was a lower number of infected cases in Lewisham for over the 65s and the under 18s. Thus, the Council would continue to sign-post lateral flow testing, and use information from the NHS to contact and encourage residents to self-isolate when necessary to do so.

The Director of PH responded to a concern that there was no reported definitive evidence to date about what was driving up infection rates. However, the significant increase in infections in London occurred toward

the end of the national restrictions. Thus, exposure to additional social contacts could be the reason why.

#### **6. Advice during Christmas break**

The Director of PH advised the Panel the national guidance was available on the Government's website, but in the main, citizens were being encouraged to form Christmas bubbles, with a view to limit social contact in the period.

On behalf of the Panel, the Chair thanked officers for the presentation and responses to questions raised.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

#### **4. Key Decision Plan**

The report was introduced to the Panel by the Head of Business and Committees. He requested that Members note and comment on upcoming key decisions.

In response questions regarding the Place Ladywell site item, the Cabinet Member for Housing and Planning informed the Panel that a lot of efforts had gone into formulating options for the future, with a view to determine those with the least impact to the net present value of the housing revenue account so that the maximum numbers of homes could be delivered for residents. Thus, the proposals would include specifications as to what the Council could afford to do within a specific timeframe. The proposals would also build on the work that had already been undertaken with the local community in terms engagement. The Cabinet Member confirmed that ward councillors would receive briefings on the proposals prior to the decision.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

#### **5. Decisions Made by Mayor on 9 December 2020 - open session**

Councillor Bill Brown, Chair of the Panel, advised the meeting that Councillor Luke Sorba had requested further consideration of the decision taken by the Mayor and Cabinet in relation to the "Local Development Scheme Update".

Councillor Sorba, Chair of the Children and Young People Select Committee addressed the meeting on the decision taken by the Mayor and Cabinet on 9 December 2020.

In response to questions raised, the Director of Planning gave a background to the proposals upon which the decision was based. It was stated that the emergency measures introduced in September 2020 were focused on how planning applications would be managed due to a backlog of applications as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of the wider remit of the local plan, the Council consulted on permanent changes on the non-development management part of the Statement of Community Involvement (SCI), and responses were outlined in the report that was considered by the Mayor and Cabinet on 9 November 2020. It

was stated that the responses were low in number because residents were often interested in the management of planning applications, as opposed to amendments to changes relating to the non-development management part of the SCI. Furthermore, residents responded in this instance as individuals, and not via local amenity societies. However, when officers present the local plan to full Council on the coming weeks, the consultation would ensure connections with community representatives.

In terms of the consultation around plan-making, the Panel was advised that the Council recognised that some people would prefer to participate in meetings via other channels. Thus, various meetings approaches would be considered, not just relying on virtual meetings. It was stated that the local plan to be submitted for consideration by full Council would contain consultation plans aimed at connecting with local community representatives that had identified themselves as such. Usually, people tend not to participate in plan-making, when compared with planning applications that impact on their locality. Thus, it was challenging to get people to engage.

The Director of Planning further advised the Panel that the Planning department had been using income from planning applications to invest in additional staff as required. Thus, while the department would be able to do more with additional staff, it was important that it balanced its budget to sustain its operations.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

**6. Scrutiny Update Report**

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

**7. Exclusion of the press and public**

RESOLVED that members of the public and press be excluded from the consideration of the remaining items on the agenda.

**8. Decisions Made by Mayor on 9 December 2020 - closed session**

RESOLVED that decisions taken by the Mayor and Cabinet in closed session, be noted.

The meeting closed at 9.05pm

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Chair