

# **Report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**Date of meeting: 12 October 2021**

**Portfolio: Community and Regulatory Portfolio – Cllr A Patel**

**Subject: Covid-19 Update**

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## **Recommendations/Decisions Required:**

**To consider this update report and make comments to the Portfolio Holder for Community and Regulatory Services.**

## **Report:**

### **1. Executive Summary**

- 1.1. It has now been 17 months since the first Covid lockdown. During that time there has been various phases in which different restrictions have been applied, both across the country and by Epping Forest District Council.
- 1.2. The Council spent much of the last year in a response phase but now, largely as the result of a successful nationwide vaccination programme, the rate of infection and hospital admissions is well below the highs of last winter. So, for the last few months, the Country has experienced a state of 'near normal' with most restrictions having been lifted.
- 1.3. Covid cases are under control at the moment. The Essex case rate (268.7 per 100,000) is below average for East of England (294.9 per 100,000); and Epping District is 239.1 per 100,000 which is the second lowest in Essex at the time of writing.
- 1.4. However, as the country moves into autumn and winter, and with schools now returning, there is a fear that Covid rates will once again increase, placing unmanageable pressure on the NHS.
- 1.5. In response the Government has recently announced its winter response plans to manage the Covid pandemic, should the situation once again look as if it might get out of control. The government has termed these as Plan A and Plan B.
- 1.6. This report sets out the current position, the Council's current response actions and the actions it might take in response to a significant worsening of the local or national position.

### **2. Detailed Report**

#### **National Position**

- 2.1. The majority of final Covid restrictions were lifted at the start of summer, and with the compulsory wearing of mask no longer a requirement and many summer events having taken place, the situation feels more like normal than it has at any point since the first lockdown began.

- 2.2. The economic, financial and human impact on the Country has been enormous and the vast majority of the population would not wish to see a return to the restrictions imposed last winter. This will undoubtedly influence Government thinking, but there remains a general recognition that much will depend on the evolving nature of the virus and its spread, including whether any new variants emerge, potentially making new restrictions more likely.
- 2.3. The Council has consistently followed the Government guidance and has applied this to its day to day operation. It has also provided advice, assistance and support to the community in line with Government's wishes and its community leader role.
- 2.4. A summary of the current rules applying in England are;
- 1m-plus social distancing guidance remains in some places, such as hospitals and passport control
  - Face coverings no longer required by law, but the Government still "expects and recommends" them in crowded/enclosed spaces
  - Some shops and transport operators still require masks
  - Anyone with Covid symptoms must self-isolate for 10 days (or until a negative PCR result)
  - Businesses such as nightclubs are encouraged to use the NHS Covid Pass to check people are fully vaccinated.
  - People who have been working from home are being encouraged to return to the workplace gradually.

### **The Council's current operational position**

- 2.5. The Civic offices are now fully open post the refurbishment project and colleagues have been encouraged during August and September to explore how the building works for them and to discover what makes them the most productive.
- 2.6. With a hiatus over the summer period, as colleagues took holidays, no obvious pattern has emerged as to the way that staff will regularly use the building, although it does appear that home working will remain popular.
- 2.7. The public spaces are open, and the community hub is also now operational.
- 2.8. Generally, Covid precautions are less rigid in the offices than were applied during the periods of restriction, with mask wearing now being at the discretion of each individual. However, mindful that the virus is still in circulation, an enhanced cleaning regime still operates within the offices, together with hand sanitiser being widely available and colleagues being encouraged to ensure that buildings are well ventilated.
- 2.9. The Council has continued to operate an all-staff reporting system for those who test positive, or who have been required to self-isolate, although numbers now required to self-isolate are greatly reduced in accordance with the national guidance.
- 2.10. Numbers testing positive are relatively low and the apparent staff preference for home working, along with the success of the vaccination programme, has greatly helped in reducing virus spread amongst colleagues. As a consequence, sickness has not really had any significant impact on service delivery to date.
- 2.11. The Council has prioritised the District's recovery through town centre support initiatives, independently of any government directions, and has reported on progress during the past months.
- 2.12. Covid cases are under control at the moment (although there is the suggestion that matters may get worse again this autumn, hence the Government's Plan B). Essex case rate (268.7/ 100,000) is below average for East of England (294.9/100,000); and Epping District is 239.1/100,000 which is the second lowest in Essex this week.

- 2.13. The main issue is with the numbers that are being vaccinated and the focus of the Council's energy, (as directed by the Health Protection Board), is around testing and vaccination.
- 2.14. Epping District has particular pockets that have low vaccination rates and the district is the main concern in Essex after Harlow. The main areas of concern are Grange Hill, Loughton, Waltham Abbey.
- 2.15. The work being carried out to address the ongoing problems are:
- The Council marshals continue to chase up and visit households that have been identified as positive cases and have not responded to NHS contact and trace teams to confirm self-isolation. These are relatively low numbers currently but do fluctuate. The advantage of having the marshals is that they can be deployed in a flexible way to target particular tasks or particular geographic areas as they arise. They are also great at giving the teams direct information of situations 'on the ground' and have allowed the Environmental Health Team to do other environmental health type work.
  - The Council has established regular pop-ups across the district where the marshals (Ex-Jobs) distribute LFT kits to the public. We link in with them closely and target particular areas of concern and where the uptake is popular. This includes Waltham Abbey market, the tube stations including Grange Hill, Debden and Loughton and the marshals will walk the streets generally, giving out kits, and give advice and information. The initial limit from Essex County Council was 15 boxes a week. The teams constantly exceed this and have 25 boxes a week – always completely distributed out. We have asked for more but apparently stocks are limited now and so there is a cap. We generally distribute more than other LAs and will take any of their spares. We also have a stock of LFT kits at all our offices and a constant supply at Norway House.
  - The marshals have engaged directly with all local shops and businesses on the high street to explain the importance of staff testing and informing them where they can collect more.
  - At the same time, the marshals will 'call-out' businesses on any unsafe practices, encourage hygiene practices and improved ventilation where appropriate, etc., but this is comparatively low key now as it is guidance only and most businesses and public are generally respectful and cautious around Covid.
  - Our marshals will also distribute any leaflets to businesses or specific local residents as requested by our own Communication Team, Economic Development Team or Essex County Council. This may be Covid related (testing and vaccination info), or information around high street recovery and financial support.
  - We are proposing, with Essex County Council, to engage with local businesses to inform / persuade them about the benefits of having their staff vaccinated and allowing time off work to allow this to happen, (this is identified as a reason why working adults don't get vaccinated – too much effort and not prepared to take time off work). We have said we will support this initiative by engaging the marshals to talk directly with businesses and give out leaflets, etc. as required.
  - Essex County Council are looking at increasing the number of pop-up vaccination centres; some areas have been tried but haven't been popular, so the challenge is in finding places where people are prepared to go and targeting the right demographic.
  - Our Communications Team have / will be using social media for positive messaging around vaccination and dispelling some myths. We have also funded, through the

Covid budget, Digital D6 motion screens outside Tesco in Waltham Abbey, Sainsburys in Loughton and along Loughton High Road and the Broadway.

- The Health Protection Board meets every other week now, but will escalate if the situation warrants.
- 2.16. In respect of Leisure centres, Places Leisure are now operating without any Covid restrictions and visitor numbers are better than anticipated, particularly with regards to swimming. August was their first full month of operating without any Covid restrictions.
- 2.17. The Waste teams are still seeing higher volumes of waste which relates to the increased numbers of people still working from home. Aside from this, there are no adverse Covid related impacts on the Waste service at present.
- 2.18. Car parking income from the EFDC off-street car parks has been trending for the last 3 months at 75% of the pre-pandemic income levels.
- 2.19. The Covid19 PAG has not needed to meet since early in the year as most continuing actions have become part of normal business and day to day routine.

### **Looking Ahead to the Autumn and Winter**

- 2.20. The Government recently stated it has a Plan A and Plan B for its Covid-19 Response: Autumn and Winter.

#### **What is England's Plan A?**

- 2.21. Covid booster jabs will be offered to around 30 million people, including the over-50s, younger adults with health conditions and frontline health and social care workers.
- 2.22. The Health Secretary has said Plan A would also include offering vaccines to youngsters aged 12-15 and continuing to encourage unvaccinated people to get jabbed.
- 2.23. Plan A also includes:
- continuing the work of NHS Test and Trace and with free PCR tests
  - encouraging free flu vaccine take-up (extended to over-50s and secondary school pupils)
  - reminding people to let in fresh air if meeting indoors and to wear face coverings in crowded settings

#### **What is England's Plan B?**

- 2.24. If Plan A is not sufficient to prevent "unsustainable pressure" on the NHS, the government says Plan B will be required "as a last resort" - including:
- compulsory [face coverings in some settings](#)
  - asking people to work from home
  - introducing vaccine passports
- 2.25. The Plan B could be brought in at short notice as a response to "concerning" data. Government scientific advisers haven't said exactly what this data would be, but say it's likely to include:
- the number of hospitalisations
  - rapid rates of change in figures
  - the overall state of the NHS

- 2.26. It seems there is considerable reluctance to return to any lockdown or partial lockdown scenario, but realistically any decision on this will be strongly influenced by the infection and hospitalisation data.
- 2.27. Given the existing hybrid working arrangements being applied to the Council's workforce, there are little practical implications arising for the operation of Council services under Plan A or Plan B, in that existing arrangements already (with the exception of compulsory mask wearing) largely comply with Plan B.
- 2.28. However, should the imposition of restrictions tighten still further then the Council will respond by following the advice as closely as possible and by providing direction and advice to the community where appropriate.
- 2.29. Although, legislation has been passed in Northern Ireland to once again permit virtual meetings, there has been no progress on this issue by the UK Government and so we anticipate continuing to undertake all decision making meetings physically over the Autumn and Winter, unless rules change or circumstances make some adjustment necessary.
- 2.30. This will be kept under review, depending upon the situation, but might include seeking voluntary agreement to limit the numbers of members in the Chamber.

**3. Reason for decision:**

- 3.1. The Committee is asked to consider these actions and make any suggestions to the Portfolio Holder on how these plans may be amended or improved.

**4. Consultation undertaken:**

- 4.1. None

**5. Resource implications:**

- 5.1. The Government's financial support in 2021/22 is at a much lower level but did include an Income Loss Compensation payment of more than £700,000.
- 5.2. The Council is still distributing some business support payments from funding held over from last year in accordance with agreed criteria.
- 5.3. The Pandemic continues to cause pressure in many budgetary areas, including on commercial rents, business rates and council tax collection. These will be explored in more detail as part of budget monitoring for 2021/22 and budget setting for 2022/23.

**6. Legal and Governance Implications:**

- 6.1. None

**7. Safer, Cleaner, Greener Implications:**

- 7.1. None

**Background Papers:**

None