

Overview and Scrutiny Committee 22nd June 2020: COVID 19

Key health issues for residents:

There are a number of key health issues which I will briefly summarise, and which need to be considered if we are to learn lessons and mitigate the effects of a second wave of COVID 19.

Imperative in the fight to drive the infection and hence death rate down is the introduction of a robust, locally organised, community test, track, isolate and support programme.

Tower Hamlets is one of the most deprived boroughs in the country, though the overall deprivation score is skewed by areas of extreme poverty sitting cheek by jowl with the very wealthy areas of Canary Wharf and other developments. There is a lag on calculating rates of mortality due to time spent collecting data, but early indications are that Tower Hamlets is amongst the boroughs with the highest mortality rate from COVID 19.

<https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/london-hit-hardest-coronavirus-deprivation-ons-a4467196.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/12/poorest-areas-of-england-and-wales-hit-hardest-by-covid-19-ons>

<https://www.eastlondonlines.co.uk/2020/05/hackney-death-rate-from-covid-19-almost-double-that-of-affluent-areas-in-uk/>

The Government are keen to ease lockdown despite many scientists saying that it is too soon.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-lockdown-uk-new-zealand-jacinda-ardern-michael-baker-public-health-a9558936.html>

Nationally morbidity and mortality from COVID itself is still over a thousand new cases a day, and these figures only count the people that are being tested.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/18/coronavirus-uk-map-the-latest-deaths-and-confirmed-covid-19-cases>

There are many more who are suspected of having been infected with coronavirus, but due to the difficulty in accessing testing, infection could not be confirmed in many cases. GPs still do not have access to the antigen test and results of tests taken elsewhere do not flow back to General Practice.

The high false negative rate of the PCR swab test further adds to the underestimation of the number of cases of COVID 19.

<https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg24632823-200-how-accurate-are-the-results-from-self-testing-for-covid-19-at-home/>

The BAME population is disproportionately affected by COVID 19, in particular the Bangladeshi population who have the highest death rate.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/892085/disparities_review.pdf

Page 6 of the above report states:

“An analysis of survival among confirmed COVID-19 cases and using more detailed ethnic groups, shows that after accounting for the effect of sex, age, deprivation and region, people of Bangladeshi ethnicity had around twice the risk of death than people of White British ethnicity. People of Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, Other Asian, Caribbean and Other Black ethnicity had between 10% and 50% higher risk of death when compared to White British.”

With the high levels of deprivation and residents of BAME origin, in particular Bangladeshi, Tower Hamlets has particularly difficult challenges in protecting its population from COVID 19.

Mortality in care homes has been catastrophic, with some care homes in Tower Hamlets having nearly thirty deaths.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/coronavirus-care-homes-nhs-hospital-discharges-deaths-a9544671.html>

Lack of PPE for care home staff and for key workers in general is likely to have led to unnecessary transmission of the virus.

<https://www.bmj.com/content/368/bmj.m1280>

In addition to the effects on population health due to COVID 19 there will be the adverse effects as people delay seeking advice and treatment for non COVID conditions.

<https://www.bma.org.uk/news-and-opinion/nhs-stats-highlight-brutal-impact-of-covid-19-on-healthcare-services-and-patient-care-says-bma>

<https://www.nhsconfed.org/news/2020/06/performance-figures-reveal-unseen-impact-of-coronavirus>

The mental health effects of COVID 19 are also taking their toll. People with psychiatric and psychological conditions and substance misuse have lost access to their usual support systems. The group sessions drop ins and face to face therapy

have all been replaced by remote support. Many people are isolated and struggling to cope.

The fear of infection with COVID 19 and the isolation that some people have had to endure as they socially distance, especially those who live on their own has added to the overall general level of anxiety in some people.

https://www.bmj.com/content/369/bmj.m1515?qclid=Cj0KCQjwoaz3BRDnARIsAF1RfLewmvOpRLiAxaUoT64tAsfiCYv89B5RB_M9zmq1TRskLK8KwjrbtMaAhitEALw_wcB

Key challenges for the Council and residents moving forward.

To mitigate the effects of the likely second wave of COVID 19 we need to introduce a robust locally run community test, trace, isolate and support programme. Countries that have done this from the beginning have done well and New Zealand has managed to all but eliminate the virus.

<https://www.outbreakobservatory.org/outbreakthursday-1/6/11/2020/new-zealand-declares-itself-covid-free>

The national contact tracing system is beset with problems.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jun/04/nhs-track-and-trace-system-not-expected-to-be-operating-fully-until-september-coronavirus>

However, there are good examples of local systems in the UK which have worked to keep levels of infection down. Independent SAGE is clear that locally based community contact trace programmes are what is needed.

<https://researchprofessionalnews.com/rr-news-uk-politics-2020-6-independent-sage-blasts-government-test-and-trace-system/>

Ceredigion in Wales has kept cases to very low levels.

<https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/area-wales-missed-coronavirus-simple-18348215>

Sheffield have run a very good pilot of community contact tracing from which valuable lessons can be learned.

<https://www.communitycontacttracers.com>

Such local schemes could be replicated in Tower Hamlets and there is a proposal being discussed to do this to complement the national scheme. There are council staff who have expertise in public and environmental health and in the wider community there are people who are prepared to be involved in contact tracing. Furloughed staff and retired health workers have skills which could be employed.

The support arm of test, track, isolate and support schemes are vital if people are to be expected to go into quarantine if they are identified as a contact of an index case.

People on low pay or precarious contracts (many of whom work in the care sector) will feel compelled to work due to loss of income when they should really be isolating so potentially spreading the virus.

<https://www.ft.com/content/2b34269a-73f8-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>

Especially important in Tower Hamlets is to ensure that people involved in contact tracing are representative of our diverse population so that trust and knowledge of local nuance ensure the success of the any scheme.

In summary the main health issues and challenges for Tower Hamlets council and residents with respect to COVID 19 are:

1. Morbidity and mortality from COVID itself in the community and in care homes, with particular challenges in Tower Hamlets as the BAME population and the those living in social deprivation are disproportionately affected
2. Assessment and treatment of other conditions being put on hold.
3. Worsening of pre-existing mental health issues or suffering mental illness for the first time due to anxieties regarding COVID 19.
4. The need for a Community Contact Tracing to mitigate further waves of COVID 19