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LOCAL OUTBREAK ENGAGEMENT BOARD (PUBLIC)

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON MONDAY, 18 OCTOBER 2021

Present: Councillor Graham Bridgman (Chairman), Councillor Lynne Doherty, Nigel Lynn, Councillor Steve Masters, Meradin Peachey, Matthew Pearce, Andy Sharp, Councillor Joanne Stewart (Vice-Chairman) and Councillor Martha Vickers

Also Present: Martin Dunscombe (Communications Manager) and Sean Murphy (Public Protection Manager), Jack Karimi (Clerk)

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Councillor Dominic Boeck

PART I

224 Declarations of interest

No declarations of interest were made.

225 Testing Discrepancies

Matthew Pearce presented the report, concerning Covid-19 testing discrepancies. Key points include:

- UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) update stated that following reports of negative PCR tests after positive Lateral Flow Tests, an investigation was undertaken and testing was suspended at Immensa Health Clinic Ltd., Wolverhampton.
- An estimated 43,000 people had been affected by testing discrepancies.
- There was no evidence of any faults with LFD or PCR test kits themselves, and the public should continue using them, and UKHSA have ruled out a new variant accounting for such discrepancies.
- This was not an issue with the testing facility at Newbury Showground, but with the laboratory it was sent to. People were still encouraged to book a PCR test if they have Covid-19 symptoms.
- NHS Test and Trace was contacting people that could still be infectious to advise them to receive another test.
- West Berkshire Council encouraged anybody who had a negative PCR result to have another test.
- Initial concerns and reports were reported through to DHSC/UKHSA and were escalated by the Council. Data analysis was conducted by Berkshire West Public Health Team and shared with DHSC.

Councillor Lynne Doherty then spoke on the communications role as fulfilled by Meradin Peachey and Martin Dunscombe.

The Chairman noted that Councillor Doherty had led on the public response and that all media enquires had gone through her, and that he was disappointed with an article in Newbury Today that featured criticisms from the Opposition, but did not allow them to reply. In fact, the Chairman noted that all information had been directed as soon as the Council had it, and West Berkshire's actions flagged the issue with UKHSA.

Councillor Steve Masters asked if the testing lab could have been suspended earlier. Matthew Pearce responded that the lab closed on 12 October, and that he was unsure whether it was possible to have closed it earlier. Meradin Peachey noted that the UKHSA took some time to pinpoint which lab was responsible for the discrepancies, but acted quickly once it was clear which lab it was. She commended Dr Jenny Harries, Chief Executive of UKHSA, for noting that it came about as a result of reports from local government.

Councillor Steve Masters asked what the best approach was to restore confidence in Covid-19 testing. Matthew Pearce noted that the challenge was tougher in winter, where more people were socialising indoors, and that communication will be key. Meradin Peachey noted that death rates were not increasing, so the biggest impact had been disruption to schools. Katie Summers noted that communicating to schools was key.

Councillor Martha Vickers asked whether information about the testing discrepancies had been shared with the Leader of the Opposition. Councillor Lynne Doherty noted that Opposition members had been informed and that a briefing had been sent to all members.

Councillor Martha Vickers asked whether there were lessons to be learned from the situation that may be applied to other labs. The Chairman responded that the lab should have noted issues with the test results and raised it themselves. Matthew Pearce agreed, and that additional responsibility was with the commissioner of the lab.

226 Surveillance Update

Matthew Pearce presented the report, which showed the current situation on Covid-19 in West Berkshire. Key points included:

- There had been a 157% increase in cases in the previous two weeks, which was higher than the regional and national average.
- Rates remained highest around the youngest age groups, with 1,649 per 100,000 cases in the 10-14 age group.
- There were 9 new Covid-19 hospital admissions, with 2 on mechanical ventilation. 27 patients were currently in hospital. 1 death had been reported in the last week.

Sean Murphy updated on the work of the Public Protection Partnership. The vast majority of Covid-19 reports were coming in from schools, with some from high-risk businesses. A significant number of local contact tracing cases had come through since 14 October, with more people going in for additional re-testing. 710 Covid-19 isolation calls had come through in the last week, with the hub remaining open over the weekend.

Councillor Lynne Doherty thanked Sean Murphy for keeping the hub open over the weekend. She asked Katie Summers about the increase in cases in schools, and its knock-on effects on teachers, and asked where the vaccine programme was in that area. Katie Summers noted that there would be additional concern, and that additional support would be given to people accessing vaccines, including the flu vaccine. Councillor Doherty asked if any additional support could be provided. Katie Summers noted that communication needed to be done jointly, and aimed at parents, with particular attention paid to booster vaccines.

Councillor Steve Masters asked what the next steps were for precautions in schools to protect children from Covid-19. Katie Summers responded that 25% of the lowest age group had been vaccinated, and that there were improvements in take-up. Katie Summers noted that take-up of the vaccine amongst 12-15 year olds was as low as 4% in some areas, but more work could be done to improve this. Matthew Pearce noted that secondary schools could require masks in some contexts, and that options such as

deploying a mobile testing unit or rolling out more regular asymptomatic testing were being considered.

Councillor Martha Vickers asked what could be done locally to encourage the wearing of masks, noting that mask wearing was the law in Scotland. Katie Summers noted that schools had sent out updates stipulating masks for parents and teachers, and noted it was worth asking all schools to do the same. Matthew Pearce noted conversations were ongoing with schools. Councillor Vickers asked what could be done about children. Matthew Pearce responded that it could be encouraged, but legislation did not support any further approach. Meradin Peachey noted that the lab failure could be used as part of the communications strategy on this issue, but businesses would need to sign up to any further approach.

227 Future meetings and agenda items

The Chairman noted that it was up to Matthew Pearce and / or Meradin Peachey to determine if further meetings of the Local Outbreak Engagement Board were required. In the event that further meetings were proposed, Members were advised to contact Democratic Services with details of any items they wished to see added to the agenda.

228 Any other business

Councillor Steve Masters asked Martin Dunscombe if individual members could be tagged in social media posts mentioning them, so they could get the issue out to their community. Councillor Lynne Doherty noted that members could set their own alerts.

(The meeting commenced at 5.00 pm and closed at 6.06 pm)

CHAIRMAN …….

Date of Signature …….

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