

DRAFT

Note: These Minutes will remain DRAFT until approved at the next meeting of the Committee

LOCAL OUTBREAK ENGAGEMENT BOARD (PUBLIC)

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON MONDAY, 14 FEBRUARY 2022

Present: Councillor Graham Bridgman (Chairman), Councillor Joanne Stewart (Vice-Chairman), Councillor Dominic Boeck, Tracy Daszkiewicz, Councillor Lynne Doherty, Nigel Lynn, Councillor Steve Masters, Matt Pearce, Councillor Martha Vickers and Jo Reeves (Substitute) (In place of Katie Summers)

In attendance: Martin Dunscombe (Communications Manager), Sean Murphy (Public Protection Manager), and Gordon Oliver (Principal Policy Officer)

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Andy Sharp and Katie Summers

PART I

277 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 January 2022 were approved as a true and correct record.

278 Declarations of interest

No declarations of interest were made.

279 Covid-19 situational report

The Board considered a presentation from Matt Pearce (Agenda Item 4) on the Covid-19 Situational Report. Key points from the presentation included:

- Infection rates were falling across Berkshire.
- The latest figures showed around 1,000 cases per 100,000 population in West Berkshire.
- The testing positivity rate was 16% - however this figure needed to be treated with caution, since some people may not have registered their Lateral Flow Device (LFD) test results.
- There had been a slight increase in cases amongst residents aged 60+.
- There had been 1,749 cases for the population as a whole in the last 7 days.
- The downward trend was reflected in regional and national figures.
- Cases amongst 5-9 years olds peaked around the time of the last LOEB meeting and had fallen sharply since.
- There had been some slight increases in case amongst 15-19 year olds and those aged 60+.
- It was suggested that there may be some reinfections showing in the data. However, early studies suggested that Omicron immunity was strong, with few reinfections.
- In terms of hospital admissions, those who were seriously ill with Covid were mostly unvaccinated or part-vaccinated.
- There were 77 Covid patients in Royal Berkshire Hospital (RBH) on 8 December.
- 17 Covid patients were admitted to RBH in the week ending 6 February.

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- 1 patient was on mechanical ventilation as of 8 February.
- There had been 3 Covid related deaths recorded in the last week, with 297 since the start of the pandemic.
- There had been a 16% increase in all-cause mortality compared to the 5 year average – equivalent to 368 additional deaths.
- The Government was expected to set out a long-term strategy for living safely with Covid, with remaining restrictions expected to be lifted.
- The virus would become endemic, which meant that it would continue to circulate, because it was too difficult to eradicate.
- Future surges would occur and plans were needed to deal with these.
- Precautions were still needed, including vaccination, ventilation of enclosed spaces, use of face coverings, regular hand washing and testing.
- Long Covid remained a concern.
- New variants would continue to emerge and local systems needed to be ready to step up.
- There was a need to tackle inequalities and disparities across local communities.

The Chairman indicated that this may be the last time the Board met. He advised that Matt Pearce would be leaving his post in March and wanted to take the opportunity to thank him for his leadership and work during the pandemic.

The Chairman noted that reinfections were now being included in Covid figures, which could increase numbers. However, he noted that people may not be reporting LFD test results, which would serve to suppress numbers. He asked if there was a feel for the balance of these two factors. Matt Pearce concluded that it was difficult to work out the balance. Positive tests 90+ days after the first positive test were now classified as reinfections. He did not think this change in reporting had had a significant impact on figures. However, the lack of reporting of test results would have an impact, but it was difficult to quantify this. He noted that the ONS survey was a good benchmark and this was showing a decrease in cases.

The Chairman also observed that hospitalisations due to Covid were mostly affecting unvaccinated people. He noted that not all deaths of people who had tested positive for Covid in the preceding 28 days were attributable to Covid. Matt Pearce indicated that it was difficult to be clear about the reasons for people dying. He observed that Covid could amplify the effects of some chronic conditions. He stressed that death certificates were consulted to understand the primary cause of death.

Tracy Daszkiewicz confirmed that little was known about the impact of Covid on other conditions and that further research was needed.

Matt Pearce suggested that the all-cause mortality graph was useful to understand the impacts of Covid.

Councillor Martha Vickers asked how messages would be communicated about living with Covid and whether lessons could be learned from other countries such as Japan where people had accepted that additional precautions were needed. Also, she asked if testing kits would remain free or if a charge would be introduced.

Matt Pearce indicated that a local plan would be prepared, taking account of the Government's long-term strategy. He noted that some people would be nervous about mixing with others again and they needed to be supported and reassured. He stressed the need for people to be considerate of others. With regards to testing, much was dependent on the national testing strategy. He expected testing to be stood down, but had no information as to whether it would remain free of charge.

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Councillor Vickers noted that there were mixed messages coming from the health service and the government and asked what West Berkshire Council would encourage people to do.

Matt Pearce indicated that nothing would be mandated, so it was up to individuals to decide for themselves what precautions they should take. He acknowledged the mixed messages, but felt that a 'new normal' was needed with additional precautions.

280 Vaccination programme update

The Board considered a presentation from Jo Reeves (Agenda Item 5) relating to the Vaccination Programme. Key points from the presentation were as follows:

- First, second and booster vaccinations were still available.
- The vaccine programme had been extended to clinically extremely vulnerable 5-11 year olds – they could access vaccines at some GP surgeries and Broad Street Mall. The School Immunisation Team was also planning to visit special schools. GPs or hospital specialists would notify parents if their children were eligible.
- There was a focus on improving booster take-up in groups that experienced health inequalities in addition to promotion of the primary course of vaccinations.
- Government had announced that it was not going to proceed with legislation that was due to come in from 1 April requiring vaccination as a condition of deployment, subject to parliamentary process.
- In terms of vaccine take-up, 87.2% of eligible West Berkshire residents had received a booster.
- 14,919 West Berkshire residents remained unvaccinated.
- Activities on inequalities included:
 - Using an 'every contact counts' approach to engage with people and understand themes around why people were not coming forward for vaccinations.
 - Q&A sessions for patients with serious mental illness run by Dr Heather Howells.
 - Community United would be running a live chat event promoted to ethnically diverse communities.

The Chairman noted that before the requirement for NHS staff to be vaccinated was rolled back, 96% of all staff at the Royal Berkshire Hospital had been confirmed as fully vaccinated.

Councillor Martha Vickers noted that a Q&A session was planned at a Polish church. She indicated that the priest at the church she attended was Polish and she offered to pass on information about the event. Jo Reeves confirmed that Alice Kunjappy-Clifton would be able to provide further details.

The Chairman noted that in the early stages of the pandemic, it had been difficult to engage with Eastern European communities to explain the efficacy of the vaccines, but communications had improved over time.

Jo Reeves noted that the focus had shifted towards being invited by communities to give presentations.

281 Public Protection Partnership update

The Board considered a presentation from Sean Murphy (Agenda Item 6) relating to the work of the Public Protection Partnership (PPP). Key points from the presentation were:

- Workload remained high due to the high number of Covid cases.

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- Over the last two weeks, the local contact tracing service had dealt with over 750 cases, with efforts targeting specific postcodes.
- Conversion rates remained high (circa 75% for full tracing, and 90-94% for initial contact).
- 1,435 isolation calls were made during the first 9 days of February.
- There were 53 calls to the Hub between 1 and 11 February – this figure was lower than before.
- Notifications were still being monitored from higher risk settings, including schools, private schools, early years, care settings and some workplaces.
- Many of the rules / regulations that controlled businesses were withdrawn at the same time as the Plan B restrictions.
- Activity was ongoing in relation to events, providing guidance to organisers regarding ventilation, staff testing, cleaning regimes and face coverings where appropriate.
- Event notifications were coming through for the Queen's Platinum Jubilee.
- Changes to government guidance were awaited to understand the implications of changes to the testing regime for contact tracing and advice to event organisers.

The Chairman noted that for previous jubilee events the government had announced relaxations for licensing restrictions, but if organisers needed a licence they would use a temporary event notice. He asked what engagement the PPP could have with event organisers if they were not applying for a premises licence.

Sean Murphy confirmed that the PPP was receiving licensing enquiries. He proposed putting together a pack for event organisers that covered Covid, licensing and other aspects of running an event.

The Chairman declared a personal interest by virtue of the fact that he was involved with a local community company that had a premises licence and intended to use it for the Queen's Platinum Jubilee celebrations.

282 **Communications update**

The Board considered a presentation from Martin Dunscombe (Agenda Item 7) relating to the Communications Update. Key points from the presentation were as follows:

- Activity was focused on three areas:
 - Signposting to testing and vaccinations, and forthcoming changes to national rules / guidance via the residents' newsletter, social media, media briefings, etc
 - Targeted communications to reach the digitally excluded, vaccine hesitant and those who required additional assistance – vaccine postcards had been translated into different languages
 - Looking ahead to the transition into living with Covid. The government's communications teams held weekly briefings. These sessions were also used to provide feedback to government about what was happening on the ground.
- A pack was being produced with advice on Jubilee events.
- A magazine was being produced that would go out to West Berkshire households in March, which would include a page on Covid, looking back at the response, thanking communities for everything they had done throughout the pandemic, and talking about current and planned activities.
- Work had been undertaken with town and parish councils on a 'blossom into spring' Covid memorial, with blossoming cherry trees offered to communities that

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wanted to create their own local memorial to those who had died. 30 Councils had taken up the offer and 113 trees had been planted. Cherry trees had been chosen because they flowered around the same time of year as the first lockdown.

The Chairman thanked Martin Dunscombe and the Communications Team for the work they had undertaken in getting Covid messages out to the local communities.

283 Future meetings and agenda items

The Chairman indicated that he would continue to consult with Tracy Daszkiewicz and the Public Health Team over the need for future meetings, but acknowledged that this could potentially be the final meeting of the Board. While he recognised that Covid would remain in circulation, the general impact on the community had lessened. He acknowledged that there could be further Covid waves in future and long-Covid would remain an issue. He thanked the Board members for their efforts in keeping the public informed throughout the pandemic.

284 Any other business

No other items were raised.

(The meeting commenced at 6.00 pm and closed at 6.46 pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature