

Report to COUNCIL

Oldham's COVID-19 Response - Update

Portfolio Holder:

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Reason for Decision

This report provides an update on how the Council and its partners continue to monitor and manage the impact of COVID-19 in Oldham.

Executive Summary

COVID-19 is still circulating across the UK and we continue to see new cases in Oldham every day, though rates are now significantly lower than at the start of the year. This report summarises our activity, demonstrating how we will collectively manage and prevent the spread of COVID-19 across our communities.

Recommendations

To note the content of the report.

1 **Background and national context**

1.1 From 24 February all remaining COVID-19 legal restrictions in England have been removed, while still trying to protect the most vulnerable and maintain resilience across public services. This government's "Living with Covid" plan sets out the change in rules, which includes:

- people with Covid are no longer legally required to self-isolate
- however, guidance recommends that those who test positive stay at home and avoid contact with others for at least five full days
- self-isolation support payments of £500 for those on low incomes have stopped
- routine contact tracing has ended - people in contact with someone with Covid will no longer be directly advised to self-isolate or take daily tests
- workers are not required to tell their employer if they need to self-isolate
- masks are no longer legally required in most public spaces - although they are still recommended in some situations
- face coverings are not mandatory on Transport for London's tubes, trains or buses, but they are still "strongly encouraged"

From 1 April:

- PCR and lateral flow Covid tests will no longer be free for most people
- Covid passports will no longer be recommended, except for international travel
- employers will no longer have to consider Covid as a separate risk when working out how to keep employees safe

1.2 Over-75s and people with a weakened immune system are also being offered an extra Covid booster jab this spring, six months after their previous dose.

1.3 Although most of the free testing system is being dismantled in England, the government insists that the UK will continue to do detailed checks and surveillance to look for resurgences of Covid and any concerning new variants which might emerge.

1.4 Across the UK more than 52 million people have had a first vaccine dose - some 92% of over-12s. Almost 49 million - 85% of over-12s - have had both doses. While uptake of first and second doses dropped off late last year, there was a steep rise in people having boosters. However, booster numbers dipped over the Christmas holiday period and remain low, with around 38 million booster doses administered across the UK so far.

1.5 Cases, hospitalisations and deaths have fallen since the vaccination programme started. Between 24th February and 2nd March 2022, 236,334 people have tested positive for

COVID-19 in England, showing a **decrease** of 18.4% compared to the previous 7 days. Between 20th February and 26th February 2022, 7,799 people were admitted to hospital with coronavirus, showing a decrease of 6.4% compared to the previous 7 days. Between 24th February and 2nd March 2022, there were 651 deaths within 28 days of a positive coronavirus test, showing a decrease of 30.8% compared to the previous 7 days.

2 **COVID-19 in Oldham**

2.1 Most remaining Covid restrictions were lifted on the 24th February. Although we welcome the sense of 'getting back to normal', Coronavirus is still with us, and still circulating in our community and workplaces. Given Oldham's experience of COVID-19 to date our response is well established and wide in scope and as such we are well placed to be able to adapt as needed.

2.2 As of 3rd March 2022 there have been 73,654 cases of COVID-19 identified in Oldham; the weekly infection rates are currently running at around 136 cases per 100,000 people. This is currently the lowest rate in England. However, changes in testing policy mean that recorded case rates are likely to under report the true level of infection. In understanding case rates we should also note that testing rates in Oldham are lower than the national average.

2.3 In the seven days ending 3rd March White/White British was the ethnicity with the highest case rate. Over the same period Saddleworth South was the ward with the highest case rate (339.2 per 100,000 population) and Coldhurst had the lowest (44.8 per 100,000).

2.4 There have been 900 Covid-19 related deaths in Oldham (up to 3rd March 2022). The number of deaths from Covid-19 has slowed significantly since the start of the vaccination programme, with 1 Covid-19 death in the last seven days (up to 3rd March 2022).

3 **Vaccination Programme Update**

3.1 Increasing vaccination uptake remains the primary focus of our local response. Over 168,000 Oldham residents have received their first doses (77.2% of Oldham's eligible population) and over 156,000 have received second doses (71.7% of Oldham's eligible population), with an additional 110,370 booster shots or third doses delivered (54.4% of Oldham's eligible population).

3.2 As the vaccination programme has evolved in Oldham the number and range of settings where vaccination clinics are provided has widened substantially, informed by feedback from residents. Vaccinations have been delivered in GP surgeries, pharmacies, the hospital and community venues. In addition, vaccinations for 12-17 year-olds have been offered in education settings.

3.3 Children aged 5-11 are also now being offered vaccination. It will be possible for this age group to book appointments for vaccination from the end of this month.

3.4 The vaccination programme has been supported by local communications and engagement plans, including the Community Champions Programme and Equality Advisory Group, in order to encourage uptake and dispel vaccination myths.

4 Testing Update

- 4.1 Oldham has had a wide-ranging testing offer, including lateral flow testing for people who do not have symptoms, and PCR tests for people with symptoms and those who have been close contacts of a confirmed case.
- 4.2 Lateral flow testing kits have been available from nationally commissioned testing routes such as home delivery and pharmacy collect, and these routes have been supplemented through a local offer which includes libraries and leisure centres. PCR and LFT testing continue to be freely available until the end of March which enables residents to undertake regular asymptomatic testing, or symptomatic testing, to understand if they have COVID and act to reduce transmission. From 1st April, Government policy is that tests for the majority of the population will only be available through commercial routes.
- 4.3 There are four PCR local testing sites (LTS) within the borough, with the aim of ensuring good access and minimising travel time. In addition to the static sites, mobile testing units (MTUs) are routinely used around the borough to ensure that wards with greatest travel distance or barriers in accessing an LTS have access to the MTU. These testing sites will all be stood down at the end of March.
- 4.4 Oldham continues to advocate, individually and alongside other GM areas, for an approach to testing to be maintained which reduces inequalities, provides access for the most vulnerable and supports early identification of cases in high risk settings. We are awaiting further detail from Government of the testing offer for vulnerable settings and social care staff.

5 Communications & engagement

- 5.1 A multi-channel communications and engagement plan is in place to support the COVID-19 response, including social and digital media, print and out of home advertising, video and direct mail/newsletters to specific groups.
- 5.2 The current focus of communications activity is on increasing vaccination uptake and reminding residents that “Covid is still here”, meaning that standard infection, prevention and control measures are still important.
- 5.3 Communications activity ranges from boroughwide communications, such as high-profile videos, billboards and media activity, through to targeted communications with key audiences in hotspot areas, communities and age groups.
- 5.4 The Door to door engagement team have been supporting communities in Oldham in dealing with the impacts of COVID, and providing advice and information, since the early months of the pandemic. This team continues to support residents on COVID, and a wider range of health, wellbeing and welfare issues.
- 5.5 Alongside this a community engagement network has been developed through Community Champions with VCFSE organisations delivering Covid19 engagement work within communities most impacted. The community champions programme has provided support and training to community groups and individuals to be able to have conversations and support communications about COVID within their networks.

6 Maintaining resilience

- 6.1 There is much uncertainty about the future direction of the pandemic. There are likely to be further waves of infection, due to waning immunity and/or new variants emerging. A future Variant of Concern could be more or less transmissible, and more or less dangerous than

those experienced to date. These waves of new variants are likely to continue until a very much higher percentage of the world's population has been vaccinated.

- 6.2 In Oldham, we are taking steps to ensure that key elements of our COVID response can be re-mobilised and scaled back up when needed. This includes maintaining capacity in the public health team to respond to outbreaks, and continuing our focus on engagement and working with residents to respond to COVID, reduce inequalities and improve overall health and wellbeing.

7 **Consultation**

- 7.1 N/A

8 **Financial Implications**

- 8.1 The primary funding stream supporting the local COVID-19 response is the Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF). Total COMF funding available to the borough in 2021/22 is c£8.33m; a combination of funding carried forward from 2020/21 and a new allocation for 2021/22. The Government has advised that any unspent grant at the end of 2021/22 may be carried forward into 2022/23, although it is expected that most will have been committed by the end of this financial year.

- 8.2 The short-term nature of this funding presents a risk in being able to maintain all elements of the current COVID response into 2022. Alongside other areas Oldham has been making the case to central government for additional funding to support COVID response beyond the end of March 2022. (Anne Ryans)

9 **Legal Services Comments**

- 9.1 There are no direct legal issues arising from the report, however, Central Government has issued emergency legislation and guidance in relation to many functions affected by the pandemic and it is important that such functions comply with or have regard to such provisions or guidance to ensure that the Council is acting lawfully. Further, the Council is required to maintain its decision-making processes, ensure good governance and that appropriate health and safety risk assessments are in place and operational to avoid legal challenge. (Colin Brittain)

10 **Co-operative Agenda**

- 10.1 As a Co-operative Council, Oldham is committed to tackling the impact of COVID-19, protecting our most vulnerable residents and communities. We are putting the voice of the resident at the heart of our response, ensuring the voice of lived experience and the people impacted by COVID-19 shapes our approach to mitigation and recover. (Jonathan Downs – Corporate Policy Lead)

11 **Human Resources Comments**

- 11.1 N/A

12 **Risk Assessments**

- 12.1 N/A

13 **IT Implications**

- 13.1 N/A

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- 14 **Property Implications**
- 14.1 N/A
- 15 **Procurement Implications**
- 15.1 N/A
- 16 **Environmental and Health & Safety Implications**
- 16.1 N/A
- 17 **Equality, community cohesion and crime implications**
- 17.1 The response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, and the emergency legislation powers introduced to tackle it, has had a significant impact on Oldham’s communities.
- 17.2 In Oldham we are committed to minimising the impact of COVID-19 across our communities. The steps we are taking to tackle the pandemic and the subsequent recovery planning, aim to support people, especially those groups with protected characteristics who are often most impacted.
- 17.3 To support this approach we have established an Advisory Group, made up of council, community and partnership representatives, to support Oldham Council and the wider partnership with its commitment to integrate Equality and Diversity throughout its Covid-19 response and subsequent recovery planning. (Jonathan Downs – Corporate Policy Lead).
- 18 **Equality Impact Assessment Completed?**
- 18.1 Yes
- 19 **Key Decision**
- 19.1 No
- 20 **Key Decision Reference**
- 20.1 N/A
- 21 **Background Papers**
- 21.1 Council Report – COVID-19 Response – June 2020
- 21.2 Council Report – COVID-19 Response – July 2020
- 21.3 Council Report – COVID-19 Response Update – November 2020
- 21.4 Council Report – Covid-19 Response Update – December 2020
- 21.5 Council Report – Covid-19 Response Update – March 2021
- 21.6 Council Report – Covid-19 Response Update – November 2021
- 21.7 Council Report – Covid-19 Response Update – December 2021
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22 **Appendices**

22.1 N/A

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Signed _____ Cabinet Member (specify whom)	Dated _____
Signed _____ Strategic Director/Deputy Chief Executive	Dated _____