

Rt Hon. Boris Johnson MP

Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
LONDON SW1A 2AA

7 May 2020

ONS Deprivation data and impact COVID-19 in the London Borough of Newham

Dear Prime Minister

Firstly, my congratulations to you and your fiancée for the birth of your son; and your return to work after your experience with the virus.

Last Friday's publication of data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) examining the impact of deprivation on Covid-19 mortality rates between 1st March and 17th April 2020, revealed that the London Borough of Newham is the worst affected borough in England and Wales.

With a mortality rate of 144.3 deaths per 100,000 population, followed closely by Brent and Hackney, the data has brought into sharp focus what we have known for a long time: the consequences of poverty and inequality has a severe and deadly impact on life expectancy, and even more so with Covid-19. Today's report from the ONS on Coronavirus related deaths by ethnic group, England and Wales, between 2 March and 10 April provides further alarming evidence of a 'significantly higher' risk of death among some ethnic groups. Black people were found just over four times more likely to be at risk and people of Bangladeshi and Pakistani, Indian, and mixed ethnicities also significantly more likely to die from coronavirus than their white counterparts, according to the study.

The ONS data presents alarming implications for Newham,

where Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities (BAME) make up 73 per cent of our local population. Recent concerns about the disproportionate number of ethnic minorities being infected or dying because of Covid-19 are rightly being investigated by Public Health England, and I welcome its intervention in this vital area of inquiry.

Moreover, I am writing to draw your attention to the complexity of factors which particularly expose my residents in Newham to the risks of Covid-19; and in advance of your announcement on Sunday about plans to ease the current lockdown restrictions in place, I am writing to enlist your help.

As the ninth largest local authority in the country, we are a richly diverse borough and our residents have connections to many parts of the world. However, we are also amongst the most deprived local authorities, where some 48 percent of our residents are living in poverty when you take into account rents and housing costs. We are facing an acute housing crisis with some 27,000 people languishing on our housing waiting list and over 5,500 families with children living in temporary accommodation - which is more than the entire North of England combined.

In Newham, a disproportionate number of households are multi-generational, and health inequality is pronounced with levels of cardiovascular disease, diabetes and asthma caused by toxic air quality. We have a local workforce occupying predominately low paid and insecure jobs, and annual household income is below the London average leading to exploitation and features of modern day slavery that are an affront to our national values.

The complexity of these factors requires a long-term response to reverse embedded economic, social and health inequalities and since my election two-years ago as the Directly Elected Mayor of Newham we are actively addressing these. However, the Covid-19 epidemic requires more.

I noted the comments by the Communities Secretary at yesterday's Downing Street briefing, stating that 'coronavirus won't hold back the government's commitment to levelling up'. That is why I am asking that you and your government help local authorities like Newham to address the disproportionate impact that Covid-19 has in deprived communities.

Going beyond the £3.2 billion financial allocation already provided to local government, I am asking that an additional 'Covid-19 deprivation' premium is provided. This premium will reflect the additional risks that deprivation is having on Covid-19 infection and death rates, as exposed by the ONS analysis. Furthermore substantial upfront needs-based funding must be made available, in particular public health funding must be restored to at least 2015/16 levels. In sum, the resources and costs required to preserve lives in Newham and elsewhere must continue to be the primary imperative.

Moreover, as you prepare to set out the next phase of the government's response to Covid-19, including plans for easing lock down measures, I ask that you to take into account the different impacts such plans may have in boroughs such as Newham. We need to protect the lives of people who are at most risk because of deprivation from any renewed surge in cases and protect them from the devastating impact of the virus.

That's why I am urging you and your government to implement the following:

Community testing must be a priority in high risk areas.

Analysis shows that a high proportion of BAME residents is the strongest predictor of a high Covid-19 death rate. We cannot contemplate a safe easing of lockdown without a significant increase in community testing in those areas, such as Newham, with the highest risk to life. It is vital that the delivery of government's national testing strategy draws on the expertise and understanding of local areas and our local Public Health teams.

Government must extend protections and support for those most in need. We have made a huge effort to move families in temporary accommodation into self-catered accommodation, and to move homeless and rough-sleepers off the streets - 211 rough sleepers are now safe in accommodation. Whilst a public health emergency has driven this, we must now have a more permanent public health response to avoid people being forced to return to the streets or to inadequate housing. Again, it is crucial we have the resources necessary to achieve this. Newham is making huge efforts to reverse the decline in affordable social rent homes, but we cannot address this important issue without the necessary government interventions. In the immediate period, we also must protect people by extending the protection, financial support and advice for renters, particularly in the insecure private sector, to avoid them being evicted or forced into debt.

Further support is needed to protect jobs and local economies. Whilst I welcome the initial financial support that the government has provided to business to avoid some job losses, more help is urgently needed. Many businesses were not eligible for the business rates relief provided, and 78 percent of eligible local businesses responding to our business survey have not so far taken up the government support that is available.

In addition, the temporary closure of Excel Exhibition Centre and City Airport, two of our major local employers, to make way for NHS Nightingale is adding a significant shock to local businesses with over 2,300 jobs at risk. In a borough where up to 36,000 people are not being paid the legally required national minimum wage, this risks pushing more people into poverty. Government should lift the business rates cap so that more businesses are eligible for support, and provide support for local authorities to provide further local responses that meet the needs of their local economy.

That's why I urge you to look at ideas such as those

advanced by the TUC for a Job Guarantee Scheme, as part of a national recovery plan. This could provide for additional jobs which Boroughs such as Newham urgently need, on secure contracts, paying at least the living wage to help fuel the economic recovery coming out of the crisis.

Addressing the housing crisis as part of the recovery.

Newham has one of the most severe affordable housing shortages in the country, which is why we are one of the largest builders of council homes in London. We strongly believe that housing delivery by the public sector must be the cornerstone of delivering solutions to affordability and quality. This must be supported by government with further flexibility on the use of Right to Buy receipts and investment for local infrastructure to accelerate delivery. It will be vital that the affordability and quality in private sector schemes are not compromised through planning viability negotiations and this must be embedded in national planning policy. We want to ensure the quality and affordability of new housing delivery as part of the steps towards recovery and once builders are able to safely get back on site - delivering truly affordable, quality homes for our keyworkers and those in housing need. As a member of the GLA Housing Delivery Taskforce, I will be working with partners and the private sector to recommend how we can improve affordable housing delivery.

Putting the health and environment at the heart of

Government's response. The stark improvements in air quality that the whole country has noticed in recent weeks must not disappear once the crisis eases and we begin to move around our streets once more. The connection between poor air quality and the impact of the disease has been made by recent studies, and for Newham, where we have among the worst air quality in London, it is imperative that government's plans to ease lockdown include funding and measures to support local authorities to encourage a modal shift to walking and cycling. In Newham we have been taking steps to address this, but we need resources to help radically recast our public realm and ensure we prevent a

drastic re-escalation in emissions. If we are to keep social distancing measures in place for a significant time, we will need to make changes, such as widening pavements, looking at how we can reduce traffic by changing road systems radically to make our busy streets safe. We need to relieve pressures on the public transport system, especially here in London.

Impact on children and young people. Newham has amongst the highest population of young people in the country, many of whom are living in some of the most deprived and challenging environments. The impact of poverty on children's physical and mental health, and learning at school, is therefore even more acute when issues of inequality are taken into account which also impact on the healthy life expectancy of our children in Newham. Issues of the digital divide impeding learning are additional factors. Children and young people make up a significant proportion of our overall population and the impacts of Covid-19 will be both immediate and long term. It is important that local authorities have local flexibility in the timing of re-opening schools in their area. It is crucial that the learning of children from vulnerable and disadvantaged families is not disproportionately affected by the crisis, so further government support to ensure they have access to wifi and IT equipment is essential. Investing in preventative elements of services will be as important as the immediate response.

In Newham we are not asking for the government to step in to solve all our problems, because we are an ambitious community, but I do want your support to level up so that our people can flourish. Since stepping into office two years ago, I've instituted a Community Wealth Building agenda to create an inclusive economy locally to improve the life chances and well-being of our residents. So we are already working to do the maximum we can, with the resources we have, to improve life-outcomes.

We have a significant role in London's future growth, with one of the largest social housing building programmes in the

capital, an Enterprise Zone in the Royal Docks, and the Queen Elizabeth Park with its associated developments including Eastbank, the new creative and cultural district for London. But all of this is at risk because of the Covid-19 crisis and its economic impact.

Like many local authorities our staff, together with our residents, local voluntary sector, community and faith groups, trade unions, business and many others have worked tirelessly to do all we can to support the national effort. This has included the rapid establishment of eight distribution hubs to help the vulnerable for food, medicine and supplies. Our extraordinary need has been met by a huge and diverse response, reflected in some 40 different faith and voluntary sector groups mobilising to support our food distribution. So far, in three weeks alone we've distributed over 30 tons of food, some 3,500 prescriptions and have called some 20,000 residents to date, involving multi-lingual team of volunteers. This is the best of Britain in action.

We are doing all that we can to deal with the impact of the virus now and as part of our recovery, but to level up we need more resources through a 'Covid-19 deprivation' premium. We cannot accept that the people of Newham remain disproportionately disadvantaged, as our country moves forward.

I look forward to your response.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rokhsana Fiaz', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Rokhsana Fiaz
Mayor of Newham

**People at the Heart
of Everything We Do**