

UPDATE ON CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) FROM MAYOR ROKHSANA FIAZ 29th OCTOBER 2020

Hello Everyone,

I hope you and your loved ones are well as we come to the end of another week of Tier 2 Covid-19 restrictions in Newham and infection cases keep rising.

Earlier today (October 30), the latest report from the 'Real-time Assessment of Community Transmission' (REACT) programme was published, highlighting how the reproduction rate (known as the 'R' rate) of Covid-19 was increasing sharply. The REACT study is the largest research programme of its kind in the UK, led by experts from Imperial College London and Ipsos MORI, and produces weekly reports about how the virus is spreading across the country.

Based on swab tests taken from 86,000 people (including between 16th and 25th October), its interim report showed that the prevalence of infection has now doubled, with an estimated 128 people per 10,000 of England's population having COVID-19, compared to 60 per 10,000 population as of 5th October. This translates to 96,000 new infections each day. You can read more in the [REACT report here](#).

In the past week, covering the 18th to 24th October period, there have been 586 new confirmed cases of Covid-19 in Newham; alongside a slight decrease in people getting tested, but an increase in positive tests as the outcome. This means that there is active transmission in our community, so the risk of catching the virus is really increasing – which is very worrying as we currently have an infection rate of 164 infections per 100,000 population. You can read more in our [weekly Covid-19 Dashboard](#)

In addition, Public Health England (PHE) published its latest data showing that, in the last 24 hours alone, 23,065 people have tested positive with Covid-19, and tragically another 280 people have died within 28 days of a positive test. In London, there's been another 1,933 cases recorded in the last 24 hours, with a total of 93,431 people infected since the start of the pandemic. That includes 3,851 residents in Newham, of which 91 residents were confirmed positive following a lab test in the last 24 hours. So far, 320 residents have died as a result of Covid-19 in Newham and my heartfelt sorrow goes to their loved ones and everyone affected.

There is no doubt in my mind that London is at very real risk of moving into Tier 3 restrictions. If you have any symptoms, please do self-isolate and urgently seek a test so that we can help to arrest the spread of the virus in our communities.

The Government's own Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) has repeated its warning that the localised approach to restrictions doesn't go far enough. A national "circuit break" lockdown is urgently needed to halt this spread.

Here in Newham, we have consistently backed calls for a circuit break. But if greater restrictions are introduced, there must also be greater funding to support those people and sectors directly affected by lockdown. With Newham having London's highest

numbers of people placed on furlough, the government must step in to ensure support continues.

The intense row over half term school meals has turned the spotlight on how the government treats those at the sharp end of Covid-19 crisis. It took a young footballer – the inspirational Marcus Rashford – to highlight the government's failings, after his calls for an extension to free school meals during half term were blocked. Families are forced to make impossible decisions between staying warm and feeding their children, and I am in no doubt that this problem will be even greater during the Christmas holidays. The government claims it has given local authorities like Newham sufficient extra funding to meet these challenges, but it hasn't. Earlier support with free school meals was to cover the summer holidays only, and has long since been spent.

Here in Newham, we are helping pupils eligible for free school meals over the half term break, through our partnership with more than 30 voluntary and community organisations – the Newham Food Alliance initiative. Established from the start of the pandemic, we've been feeding thousands of low income families during the past several months, and have invested more money to ensure that children and families can access food during the school half term this year. The additional provision includes extended opening hours for families to access food and increasing food supplies to meet growing demand. Residents can find more information about the Newham Food Alliance and order food [here](#) or call 07790 975 086 Monday to Friday between 9am and midday to secure food parcels.

I cannot overstate the devastating impact of the pandemic on Newham's residents – it is amongst the worst in the country. More than 27,000 extra people have had to claim benefits; while almost 17,000 have been placed on furlough – which is the highest in London, and they are now seeing that safety net torn away.

In the first wave of the pandemic, we suffered the highest death rate due to Covid-19. A new report by Baroness Lawrence has found that "Black, Asian and minority ethnic people have been over-exposed, under-protected, stigmatised and overlooked during this pandemic". In a borough where 73 percent of residents are from BAME communities, Newham has again been disproportionately harmed.

This is why I have continually called on the Government to match funding to need, and have demanded a deprivation-linked Covid-19 premium to cover the costs of protecting our residents from the worst impacts of the pandemic.

As a result of this campaigning, Newham was last week given an additional £12.6m in funding. Of course we welcome this, but at a time when our funding gap is more than £60m – and we are heading into a winter where the economic recession is biting, infection rates are spiralling, and residents will require continued support to feed themselves and their families – it is not enough. Residents, local authorities, the voluntary, charity and faith sectors are doing everything in their power to support those in need and at risk. Their tremendous efforts are not being matched by this Government.

Last week, we took a giant step in our ambition to become a beacon of participatory democracy, including reviewing our system of governance. The vote at Full Council makes good on the promise I made that I would hold a referendum on Newham's

model of Governance. At the referendum on 6 May 2021, you will have a choice between two distinct options for the future of the council – the current directly elected Mayor Model and the Committee model. I encourage you all to look at both models closely, so that you can make the most informed decision that best reflects the way you want to see your borough governed in future.

This referendum is one part of our wider commitment to placing People Power at the heart of local democracy. Our plans show how we will transform the culture, structure and governance of the Council, with a bold vision for Newham to become a beacon for participatory democracy. We will build upon our existing work for citizens' engagement and co-production, and work with our amazing voluntary, community and faith organisations.

We are addressing head-on a democratic deficit created by inequality and injustice, which creates barriers to democratic participation. The disproportionate impact on some populations – in particular black and minority ethnic communities – has been acutely clear. We are determined to create an environment where people no longer feel disconnected from the decisions that affect their lives.

Participatory democracy is about the genuine involvement of all residents in the decisions that affect their lives, and ensuring all voices are heard, including young people and marginalised groups who are too often on the outside of the democratic process. We will put in place new and innovative plans, such as having a standing assembly to really build on the participatory initiatives already in place. We will create the positive means of involving people as a strong response to the minority of corrosive elements that too often toxify civic engagement, in particular through social media.

Next week, a meeting of the Cabinet will discuss our Covid Recovery Strategy – “Towards a Better Newham” – and our plans new a Social Integration Strategy that sets out the council's approach to promoting a fair and inclusive borough.

You can read more about these proposals [on our website here](#) and you can also follow the debate live on our YouTube channel on Thursday 3 November from 6pm.

I look forward to sharing further updates about these important developments next week, and in the meantime please stay safe and follow all the public health guidance so that we can slow down the spread of the virus.

Best wishes,

Rokhsana Fiaz OBE
Mayor of Newham

People at the Heart of Everything We Do