**Community Conversation Notes – 2/3/22**

**Public Health Covid-19 Update**

* The data for the last few months shows a drop in infections after the change in testing policy where people were no longer required to get a confirmatory PCR – not an actual drop in cases.
* Hospitalisation rates are much better now, around 100 people in North Central London are in hospital with Covid and only around 20 on ventilation.
* There are currently 0-2 deaths every week in Islington. Still a lot of infections but due to vaccines, natural immunity and Covid treatments we are seeing much less of an impact on the NHS.
* There is now a range of anti-viral medications for vulnerable people which are very effective at keeping people out of hospital.
* There are still lots of eligible people who haven’t had their booster, this is mostly younger people. We know that the vaccine reduces the risk of long Covid, and you will have it for less time than unvaccinated people – it’s particularly important to spread this message with young people.
* Even though Covid has mutated 4 times, a previous infection does give you some protection against new variants. We do not know how long this immunity will last for but it has been effective so far.
* The government’s ‘Living with Covid’ plan:
  + National contract tracing has now completely stopped as of the 24th Feb. Legal requirements have been replaced by guidance and advice which are not very different from the old rules, but the onus is now on individuals.
  + Payments for people on low incomes self-isolating also ended on the 24th Feb.
  + The next round of changes is on testing. Free access for most groups ends on the 31st March and symptomatic testing sites will be closing. Free access looks to be continued for people aged 80+ and the most clinically vulnerable, including people with Down’s syndrome. Testing is continuing in 4 settings: healthcare, residential care, special schools and prisons.
  + Clinically vulnerable people can still have PCR tests at home and can be sent anti-viral medication to their homes.
  + National surveillance studies will continue to monitor Covid, and there will be international testing around new variants. There is nothing in the guidance about new surges and responses yet. The government will set a very high bar on risk before thinking about introducing future measures.
* Vaccinations: spring boosters from April for everyone aged 75+ and 12+ who are clinically vulnerable.
* 5-11 year olds have been offered the vaccine, this is non urgent so has not been heavily promoted. It’s estimated that 85% of primary school children have already had Covid - mostly omicron.
* The council will be convening the Outbreak Control Board soon so there is an updated plan for new outbreaks.

**Covid-19 Discussion**

* It was noted that charities will find it difficult when free testing ends and will have to rely on preventative measures instead of testing.
* Colleagues stated that some people who should have been offered anti-virals haven’t been.
* Attendees were worried about residents who are classed as clinically vulnerable. With the loss of all these various defences (above), this leaves people having to stay at home. The other group to think about is people who are anxious. We need to find ways in which people can we brought back into our communities. We need to consider them when organising activities and events - e.g. holding activities partly outside as the weather gets better.
* We have lost over 400 Islington residents to Covid over 2 years and we need to think about ways that we can commemorate this and remember them. 23rd March is the Day of Reflection, **if you have any suggestions for how we do this please email Cllr Sue Lukes**.

**Advice Partners Update**

Colleagues from advice organisations attended the Community Conversation to share details of their services.

* [**Islington People’s Rights**](https://www.ipradvice.org.uk/)provide specialist welfare benefits and debt advice. Their core clients are residents with disabilities, mental health needs or are vulnerable. IPR has specific referral routes from mental health services and Help On Your Doorstep. They also work with various community centres.
* [**Islington Law Centre**](http://www.islingtonlaw.org.uk/)provide specialist legal adviceregarding debt, housing,education, immigrationand benefits.They are currently running a hybrid service; lots of clients have preferred online appointments. Benefits, debt and housing are currently very busy and they are seeing a high level of rent arrears. ILC support clients facing housing possessions and noted that court proceedings are currently backed up due to the amount of rent arrears.
* [**Citizen’s Advice Bureau Islington**](https://islingtoncab.org/) offer advice on any subject, including welfare benefits, debt, housing and employment. The people they work with includes those with complex needs and people who are digitally excluded. They run a ‘help to claim’ service for benefits, a specialist employment service and have a housing solicitor in the team. They are currently seeing a lot of employment issues with shift workers and EU pre-settlement enquiries. Debt advice is the only area they have capacity and they are working with Debt Free London on the [Debt Bus-ter](https://debtfree.london/bus#locations). They receive referrals from the council. Looking forward, the fuel crisis plus rising rent arrears will create the perfect storm for debt issues. CAB will be making a fact sheet for the fuel crisis and will circulate this.
* [**LBI iMax Team**](https://directory.islington.gov.uk/kb5/islington/directory/service.page?id=EPD3_Uk6EXM)is a council service with 9 full time staff members – iMax stands for Income Maximisation.You need to be an Islington resident or someone with a direct link (e.g. Islington care leaver) to access the service.Their advice line runs daily between 9.30am-4.30pm. iMax are seeing a huge increase in clients, UC in particular is difficult to navigate. Looking forward, our worries are the Discretionary Housing Payment cut to local authorities, Covid support being withdrawn and increased cost of living.
* [**Community Language Support Services**](https://www.communitylss.com/)provide advice for residents indifferent languages, in areas such as immigration, housing and legal advice. At the moment they are working with a lot of digitally excluded clients and people with job loss/ debt related depression. As well as advice, they are running Whatsapp groups, women’s groups and befriending to help with social isolation.

Other advice partners that were unable to attend the meeting, but offer services to Islington residents, are:

* [**Arachne Greek Cypriot Women’s Group**](http://arachne-group.org/?page_id=5)– advice on welfare rights, housing, education, family problems and health for all women but particularly Greek/ Greek Cypriot women.
* [London Irish Centre](https://londonirishcentre.org/our-services/advice-information/) – advice on welfare benefits, housing, pensions, finance, returning to Ireland and obtaining Irish birth certificates or passports.
* [Evelyn Oldfield Unit](http://evelynoldfield.co.uk/projects/iag-pro-bono/) – provides immigration advice.
* [Kurdish and Middle Eastern Women’s Organisation](https://www.kmewo.com/general-advice-signposting/) – provides specialist advice regarding Domestic Violence and Violence Against Women and Girls, as well as general advice.
* Islington BAMER Advice Alliance - a network of Islington based information, advice, support and guidance providers who deliver support to BAMER residents.