

1. Background

I am sure you will agree it has been another challenging year. Certainly, plans for the Public Health team to return to 'business as usual' were often thwarted by another lockdown or resurgence of COVID-19; and yet, there is much to celebrate and to be thankful for.

2. Introduction

Once again, I must commend the efforts of the whole Council, and its partners, as we endured this relentless test of strength and ability to carry on. Not least the services of the Communications team in ensuring the delivery of messages containing the latest COVID-19 advice, guidance and support for its residents, schools and businesses.

It is two years since the first domestic case of COVID-19 was reported in the UK. Directors of Public Health, along with their teams and the wider council, have spearheaded the local response to the pandemic, each developing Local Outbreak Management Plans to outline all aspects of the approach taken including community testing, local contact tracing, supporting self-isolation, controlling local outbreaks, ongoing surveillance and communication and engagement. This report highlights a range of achievements to show that, through innovation and resourcefulness, vital support and services have continued to reach those most in need.

So, I have to start with a huge thank you to Stephen Gunther and the PH team. They have worked throughout the lockdown, not least as a result of investment in new technology. Public Health have provided a 7-day a week helpline supporting residents, schools and businesses. Consequently, the majority of services have continued to be delivered during the pandemic – even a fire at the Beacon centre didn't stop the drug and alcohol service delivering their service.

In addition to the continuity of many services they commission to ensure accessibility for the vulnerable and isolated, Public Health have planned, prepared and are implementing a return to normal duties. They have faced another year of incredible pressure, both physically and mentally and I would like to express my gratitude for their commitment.

Whilst my colleague, Councillor Perry, will have much to say on the amazing work of the Resilient Communities team, I cannot let this opportunity pass me by to say that they have proved to be Walsall's jewel in the crown: supporting vulnerable and shielding residents during the lockdown; providing food parcels, prescriptions and shopping for many residents who couldn't leave home. Helping to fight the isolation felt by many with befriending calls which have continued after many of the other services have been scaled back.

My thanks too, to NHS/ CCG / Walsall Together who were almost overwhelmed in the first and second wave. It was only the close relationships created by Walsall Together and the partners that enabled the system to cope. Together they organised PPE, assisted patients returning home and moved the stroke unit to Hollybank house. A process that could have taken years in normal times was achieved in a few weeks thanks to all the partners taking a pragmatic approach to problem solving. Additionally, a big thank you to Walsall Housing Group for the painting, decorating and general building work that was necessary.

As the NHS changes its formal structures over the coming year, we'll continue to work with them to improve health and wellbeing outcomes for our residents.

Priorities for 2021 included a review of the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) to inform the Joint Health and Wellbeing strategy, (JHWBBS) improving mental wellbeing with the development and launch of a Mental Health and Wellbeing strategy and the development of a Health Protection strategy, together with the continued support for children and the safeguarding of vulnerable people.

The Health and Wellbeing Board has remained a-political, focusing on the role and the needs of the residents. Alongside the Health and Wellbeing Board, we created a Local Engagement Board to inform, develop and review the pandemic and changes in legislation.

Additionally, the Public Health team commenced a review of their services, priorities and overall structure with a management of change consultation taking place in the Autumn. This is a move towards the Council's vision of being a Wellbeing Council running alongside the PROUD programme of improvement to the delivery of its services to the residents of Walsall. The new structure will be in place from 1 March 2022.

3. Priorities 2021

COVID-19 Response

Over the past year, the Walsall Public Health team has continued to provide dedicated COVID-19 support to residents, education settings, workplaces and communities. They have:

- Received over 5,500 queries
- Processed over 10,000 contacts
- Created a bespoke software solution to record and report data
- Provided comprehensive support for all education settings
- Built a strong partnership with Children's Services / Headteachers to identify, inform and take necessary action to minimise disruption to children's education
- Promoted the vaccination programme
- Continued to work with organisations and Council teams to protect vulnerable groups
- Provided guidance on managing infection control /safe use of PPE equipment /catheter care in care homes
- Continued care home audits
- Developed a contact tracing team that provides local expertise and knowledge to identify and support Walsall residents who have tested positive or been in contact with positive cases providing guidance, support and assistance in accessing foods and medicines delivery or financial support
- Engaged with national and local teams to establish, manage and deliver symptom-free testing options across the borough
- Opened thirteen supervised testing locations
- Facilitated delivery of testing kits to 4,000 families
- Supplied 25,000 tests to education setting and a further 30,000 to health and social care settings
- 40,000 lateral flow tests have been conducted

The on-call service has been managed flexibly to deflect pressures, adjusting hours of service, shift patterns and staffing numbers in response to increasing case rates, changes of guidance, surge testing and new variants.

We have strengthened our Health Protection Team over the last year and working with partners in the UK Health security agency and NHS to further enhance our ability to respond to all hazards that emerge.

Communications

Effective communications and engagement have been key to ensuring guidance, advice and support messages are straightforward, targeted, personal and respectful, which enhances the Council's reputation as a trusted voice to our communities and businesses. This includes;

- Engagement with residents and encouraging conversations
- Use public health data and insight to shape and evaluate campaigns
- Work with partners across the health and social care, sharing and amplifying information and guidance
- Working collaboratively to open up opportunities to reach audiences that no single organisation could reach on their own
- Engaging effectively with local and regional media to run vaccine campaigns in trains, on buses and local radio

COVID-19 Community Champions

Walsall Council was awarded £432,000 under the government's Community Champions scheme to boost vaccination uptake in under-represented communities disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

The existing community networks were utilised across the borough. In total, 22 community and voluntary sector organisations were offered small grants to undertake dedicated activities and recruit Community Champions to disseminate culturally appropriate and accessible materials, support vaccination clinics and organise tailored awareness sessions, assisting in supporting the health and wellbeing needs of residents.

Covid champions have worked over the pandemic to inform and encourage take up of the vaccine. We could not have achieved such high rates of vaccine uptake without them. They were subjected to some very unpleasant incidents with anti-vaxxers and I'm most grateful for their work in sometimes difficult circumstances.

I have personally attended a number of online forums with the community and faith groups to promote the uptake of the vaccine.

Joint Strategic Needs and Assets Assessment /Health and Wellbeing Strategy

I am pleased to report that the publication of both the JSNA and health and wellbeing strategy are on target. In December Sir Michael Marmot was the guest speaker at a development session with HWB Board members to discuss the Marmot principles of health inequalities. Emphasis was on the importance of providing a best start in life, education and

breaking the link between deprivation and development which has helped shape our emerging health and wellbeing strategy which is coming to the Board in April.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Mental wellbeing has been an increasing topic of conversation throughout the last year with the impact and effects of the pandemic having far-reaching consequences for large numbers of people, whether it be through loss, unemployment, food/fuel poverty or isolation.

I cannot be more proud of the work undertaken by the Public Health Team in working with partners and colleagues to for their contribution to addressing this issue. £1m budget plan has been signed off by Cabinet and has been used to:

- Develop a Wellbeing plan to help people plan their own self-care
- Tender for Counselling and Talking therapy services
- Commission Bereavement Support services
- Commission and mobilise a Wellbeing Mobile Unit
- Offer Mental Wellbeing Training to communities and businesses supporting managers and leaders to recognise and understand mental health conditions how to promote and embed good mental health and wellbeing throughout the workplace
- Award community grants to voluntary groups and centres across the borough to improve mental wellbeing
- Run a mental wellbeing arts competition with young people from Walsall College
- Commission the No Wrong door project, that seeks to help anyone suffering from mental health to access help as soon as possible and avoid being passed from one organisation to another.

Supporting Walsall's Mental Wellbeing

Promoting and supporting mental wellbeing in Walsall has become a key issue for the Health and Wellbeing Board (HWBB) in the development of the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, and as a key theme in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It has never been more important than now to consider the impact of the past two years on our mental wellbeing and there has been a multi-agency approach to the development and delivery of the Mental Health & Wellbeing strategy. The strategy aims to provide:

- A universal approach to promote good mental health and emotional resilience and prevent mental ill health for all age groups and populations
- A proportionately targeted approach to reduce mental wellbeing and health inequalities, to consider the clear mental health inequalities, both in terms of who experiences the greatest risk of poor mental health and in terms of unequal access to treatment

It is a known fact that I have suffered mental health issues in the past and I am proud to have been able to participate in the production of this long-awaited document.

It is therefore right that the Director of Public Health's annual report for 2021: Improving Mental Health in Walsall, focuses on the importance of good mental wellbeing and its key

message is “Together We Can” starting with Walsall’s Director of Public Health making recommendations on how to look after our own mental wellbeing:

1. Make a commitment to putting yourself first, even just for a while
2. Find out where you can get support if you need it
3. Make a (realistic) positive routine

It also has recommendations for improvements in Walsall. The report can be found [here](#).

The Health Protection Strategy

The importance of health protection resources within the Council has never been more needed or appreciated as it has over the past two years. I am immensely proud of the support from our Health Protection team, in particular concerning infection prevention and control and offering advice to care homes /domiciliary care /schools /organisations and individuals. They have continued to visit homes to carry out essential audits and to offer support throughout for a second year running and I would like to express a huge thank you on behalf of everyone for their invaluable contribution.

The profile of health protection has increased significantly in recent years with issues such as immunisation, food-borne infections, pandemics, healthcare associated infection and communicable diseases regularly being in the public eye. Health protection issues include the prevention and control of infectious diseases and environmental threats to the health of the population.

It is therefore timely that a review of the service and a multi-agency approach to the development of a Health Protection strategy has been one of our priorities over the past year.

Recommendations and actions arising from this report directly supports safeguarding and will benefit the most vulnerable sectors in the community. The strategy includes an action plan, the aims being to:

- Protect the population of Walsall from threats and hazards to human health
- Reduce inequalities in the burden of communicable disease
- Ensure the highest possible quality and uptake of immunisation and screening

4. The Team’s Core Work over the Year

Children and Young People

Food for Life, the school’s healthy eating programme, now reaches around 16,000 children in Walsall with a total of 28 early years and schools settings achieving an award and a further 85 working towards an achievement. Excitingly, this has been extended to include an oral health resource to support settings and engage with parents to improve the oral health of our children.

ONS data for Teenage Pregnancy in Walsall has shown a 63.2% reduction in teen conceptions between 2019 and 2020. The team has provided support to teenage parents but also to vulnerable young people

A Testament to the hard work of the teams is the fact that the 0-19 Healthy Child programme we commissioned was shortlisted for two awards – school nurses for ‘Unsung Heroes’ and Health Visitors for Team of the Year.

Healthy Lifestyles

A ‘Dance to Health’ programme for those aged 50 and over not only tackles the issue of isolation in older groups but also addresses their physical strength and balance, lowering the risk of falls.

Tier 2 Weight Management Services

The addition of a grant to target Tier 2 weight management has seen the commissioning of the following services with over 700 people signing up:

Intervention 1: OneYouWalsall commission to engage and work with two target groups to improve activity /healthy lifestyles – those with existing co-morbidities and those living in deprived areas.

Intervention 2: The Council’s Healthy Spaces team are now registered as a T2WMS provider and are facilitating the tracking of progress under the grant conditions. Programmes of work include:

- Couch to 5k programme
- Nordic walking
- Walsall Football Club Fit Fans programme
- Active Living Centres Gym Programmes

Intervention 3: A service for adults aged 18 years of over, with a BMI of >25, adjusted for people of Black African, African-Caribbean and Asian origin. It will:

- Target residents with poor mental health /at increased risk of weight gain
- Utilise voluntary and community sectors to add value to outcomes
- Be flexible enough to be delivered face to face in person or remotely

Social Inclusion

Drug & Alcohol Services

Over the past year the CGL/Beacon drug and alcohol treatment service continued to deliver a service to users via virtual appointments and users were moved from pharmacy supervised consumption and daily collection of medication to fortnightly unsupervised collection. The Glebe Centre offered services to the homeless such as delivering meals, showers and advice, whilst we worked closely with the Council’s housing team to support rough sleepers into finding accommodation.

With additional grant funding investment has been made to support test out screening for those with ADHD and be supported with assessment and treatment service in partnership with mental health services. This is gaining national interest.

Sexual Health

Walsall's Integrated Sexual Health service (WISH) moved many of their services on-line during the pandemic, taking advantage of the digital offering. This has resulted in high levels of satisfaction being reported by the service users. We'll plan to review these services in the coming year, learning from how we have had to adapt during the pandemic to ensure the services are accessible, relevant and trustworthy to those that need them.

5. Some Challenges Ahead

The unknown risk of new variants, mental wellbeing issues and the wider impacts of the pandemic remain a possibility and we must ensure that the strategies, policies, processes and lessons learned over the last 2 years are such that we are able to continue to rise to the challenge and support the people of Walsall.

How can we Help?

Our COVID Champions as well as our testing sites are an examples of if we work together we can have a much greater impact with our communities, helping to reach the more vulnerable and isolated groups /individuals through their community networks.

Strengthening partnership working will help us to focus, and overcome, the challenges ahead and together we can support each other through what I think will continue to be some challenging times.

6. What I am Proud of:

It is clear that a lot has happened over the past year so what messages can we take from this that make us Proud?

- Proud of our community, our partners and our businesses – we have shown that if we come together, we can respond more effectively and more efficiently and continue to build on this.
- The continued support of the team for the Covid-19 response and the resourcefulness displayed by them during an ever-changing landscape
- Their ability to ensure delivery of high quality services, working closely with partners and providers
- Their innovative ideas and ways of working during challenging times, obtaining and managing additional grant funding for services such as lifestyles, mental health and youth services
- The continuity of core services to support safeguarding of vulnerable adults and children across Walsall
- The continued dedication of support staff, public health specialists and junior doctors without who we could not have achieved any of the above.
- The residents of Walsall who have proved their strength and determination, battling through the pandemic at all cost and also to pay tribute to their 1000+ friends and relatives that have died in Walsall. In their honour, a Covid garden has been agreed as a permanent memorial to those they have lost. This will be supplemented by ward tributes across the borough.

7. Conclusion

This report is a snapshot of our achievements and future vision during another difficult and challenging year.

With the suspension /adaptation of many services during the pandemic, there will continue to be disruption as we get back to normal. Some services will be under immense pressure due to a backlog (eg routine immunisations and screening programmes). Also the increasing impact on the economy and cost of living will affect many in terms of their wellbeing, deprivation, job losses and our ability to adapt and reach all vulnerable and isolated groups will be paramount to ensuring accessibility to the right services at the right time.

How can Public Health help?

The pandemic is not over! We are living with Covid and, whilst for anyone who is vaccinated the effect is likely to be the symptoms of a heavy cold, this varies from hardly any symptoms to respiratory failure needing hospital treatment. New variants will occur. Be vigilant. Get your first, second and booster jab – it's not too late to get them.

We have been thankful for the Government grants that we have been able to use to fight this pandemic, enabling us to source and resource services and goods to assist us in reaching our residents, businesses and schools, however ongoing response needs ongoing investment.

Whilst there is still much to do, the Public Health team has continued to build on partnerships, working at a national, regional and local level. They continue to seek alternative ways in which they can help communities, other Council teams and external partners to continue the work across the health and social care economy to improve the health of our residents.

I am immensely proud of these successes and, in particular, of the resourcefulness shown by the members of the Public Health Team and our partners. 'Walsall Together' is the most effective way of ensuring we recognise, understand and attempt to meet the needs of the residents of Walsall.

We are already planning our priorities for the coming year which include further development of our physical activity framework to get more people more active more often, development (with partners) a wellbeing service for Walsall and refresh our drugs and alcohol approach with partners in the Safer Walsall Partnership to reduce the number of people who are dependent as well as the impacts of their dependency.

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