

Public Service: Standing together in Waltham Forest Engagement and Research

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a challenging time, uncertain for all, traumatic for many. It has transformed work, social life, travel and so much more. It has also changed how we operate as a council and what our priorities are. We know that what we do next and how we work toward recovery will require us to work together. What we have learned from engaging and listening, and ongoing conversations, will be crucial to this.

We developed an approach to mass participation on which listening and being transparent are key. We have carried out extensive research, giving residents, businesses and our workforce the opportunity to tell us about their experiences. We have had over 11,000 responses to surveys and a variety of focus and research groups taking place during the lockdown. We have worked hard to listen and to encourage new conversations with anyone who wants to take part. From this, we have learned what has changed, what problems people are facing, and what people want for themselves, their families and for Waltham Forest in the immediate future.

When residents were invited to share their thoughts and experiences, we received over 6,100 responses in one week alone, our largest ever engagement response. For sensitive topics, we are fortunate that thousands trust us to share insight into their lives. When we asked our staff for their input, 1,200 replied, letting us know about their wellbeing, how they have coped with new ways of working, and what they think about the Council.

Residents, local business and our staff have shown they are keen to take part and to be heard, and our approach has been, and continues to be extensive, recognising the desire to listen before we lead. We are expanding approaches to resident involvement, creating new spaces and opportunities for more deliberative discussions and encourage collaborative working; such as the new Citizen's Panel of 75 representative residents, alongside our more established methods.

This paper sets out a high-level summary of the views and experiences that have been shared through the wide range of conversations and discussions we have had. The learning has been essential for inspiring and shaping the Council's Public Service Strategy.



STRENGTHS IN WALTHAM FOREST

Notwithstanding the impacts of COVID-19, ongoing uncertainties and the disruptions to daily life, our residents have spoken about their pride in living in Waltham Forest and are generally positive about the borough. Central to this for many is a sense of belonging and community, and an affinity with their neighbourhood, which many residents feel has been strengthened since the start of the pandemic. People have told us that during the lockdown, their community have come together and worked well in support of one another.

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One of the best things to come out of all this are local people coming together, neighbours, community ... I hope these are things that last and can help us make a better future.

Chingford Resident¹

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Residents are generally positive about Waltham Forest as a place to live and are proud to call Waltham Forest their home. There is a sense of togetherness in the borough, with 65% feeling they belong to their neighbourhood.

During the lockdown, residents shared that they felt supported by one another, wanted to help others and to collaborate as a community. Residents have shown a strong desire to be more involved with their communities and to take part in civic action. We saw an amazing response to our request for volunteers during lockdown, with more than 4,000 volunteers registered to help and serve others within our communities.

Many residents have told us of the significant role they consider the Council to be playing at this time, and have acknowledged the invaluable effort of local NHS and care workers. As well as public sector organisations, the considerable work of local charities and support groups during the pandemic has been noted by our residents. Significantly, people have told us of their appreciation for the work of private sector roles. Residents have drawn attention to the work of local supermarkets and local businesses, praising their efforts and the essential contributions made.

There is a sense of purpose, responsibility and recognition of the role that individuals must play in helping minimise the spread of coronavirus. Encouragingly, our residents are confident in knowing how to get a coronavirus test and are well informed of the government service. If contacted and requested to take part in NHS Test and Trace, our residents tell us that they would, and would self-isolate if required to do so.

¹ Resident survey respondent - Female, Non-White British, aged 55+, North

Understandably, there are many aspects of life that residents want to return to normal. However, residents have also taken the time to share with us some of the unexpected positive outcomes they have witnessed through the lockdown. For instance, residents have told us they are taking advantage of opportunities to spend more time locally, discovering new places within the borough, and enjoying what is available to them closer to home.

“

We go out as a family for walks and it is so much quieter, less traffic, less cars on the road, the air feels cleaner. You can hear the birds, the wildlife is flourishing, wild plants, butterflies, other animals.

Leyton Resident²

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Many residents have told us they have preferred active modes of travel, such as walking and cycling, to using private vehicles. This shift has brought a range of positive benefits that our residents have identified, including to health, reduced noise pollution and traffic, and improving air quality.

As greater numbers are working from home, there are opportunities for more spending within the borough. Over two-thirds of residents have been using local businesses more since lockdown began and 91% are in agreement agreeing that it is important to support local businesses. This was also reflected in responses to our citizen science project trial. When asked about local businesses, participants eagerly told us which local enterprises they value and enjoy, and shared their recommendations and endorsements with other residents.

“

I've learnt that I can get pretty much everything I need within a 10-15 minute walk of where I live and I've got to know and appreciate many of the local shops.

Walthamstow Resident³

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We have been told that as a consequence of lockdown, and restrictions, many of our residents have been able to enjoy an improved sense of wellbeing and are taking advantage of this time to achieve a better work-life balance. This is not the case for all. We are aware that for other residents, challenges are more serious and that managing daily life during the pandemic has been a real struggle for many in Waltham Forest. The experiences of the pandemic are diverse and vary dependent on circumstances, and that personal situations are changing, sometimes abruptly. This means that listening remains crucial.

² Resident survey respondent - Female, Non-White British, aged 55+, Central

³ Resident survey respondent- Male, White British, aged 55+, South West

WHAT CHALLENGES ARE PEOPLE IN WALTHAM FOREST FACING?

Despite the strengths, residents are still acutely aware of the challenges we all face. The wide range of conversations and discussions we have conducted has highlighted problems and concerns. We know that there are many similarities, and shared experiences, but also significant differences based on race, social economic background, age, and where people live in the borough. We will keep engaging and listening so that we can continue to understand the issues that we are facing together, those that are affecting some of us more than others, and any new problems people are confronted with.

There is a shared sense of uncertainty about the possibility of further restrictions, or a second lockdown, and an awareness and fear of a local outbreak. There are also broader concerns about the future, and struggles that people have in their day-to-day lives, difficulties they are asking to receive help and support with, from ourselves and from others. This is important and is allowing us to understand the changed role of the council, residents and other organisations in helping people. We will continue these conversations, and to listen, to improve what we know about the challenges people are facing.



INCOME AND JOBS

The pandemic has had a severe impact on jobs and economic activity



HEALTH

The pandemic has had a profound effect on factors that are essential to healthy lives



ENVIRONMENT

Residents told us that the quality of the environment was important during the pandemic.



COMMUNITY

The pandemic shone a light on the importance of community solidarity



INCOME AND JOBS

The pandemic has had a severe impact on jobs and economic activity. Unemployment has grown more than at any other time. The number of residents claiming unemployment benefits has more than doubled, with 18,570 seeking support, and nearly half of businesses recorded a near total decline in activity during the lockdown.

The pandemic and lockdown are having a big impact on finances. For many residents, good quality jobs is an area they want to see the Council focus on. Residents are sharing their worries about their own jobs, about the threat of unemployment, and concerns of economic security. Residents want jobs that pay enough so they can afford to live in Waltham Forest without struggling.

“

I like working, being independent and earning money, but I feel like the pandemic has taken that all away from me, made me reliant on handouts and taken away any control I had in life

Chingford Resident⁴

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Impacts of COVID-19 on incomes and jobs so far in numbers:

 **148%**

Increase in Universal credit claims since the pandemic began, higher than the London average (108%). Young men have been hit hardest, with claims rising by 211% for men aged 25-49 between February and June 2020.

18,570 

The number of **residents claiming unemployment benefits has more than doubled**, having risen by almost 11,000 since February (7,575).

 **4%**

Of residents are in rent arrears, which has been rising steadily from 2.94% in February 2020.

5x 

With almost 17,000 requests in April this year, there has been a **540% increase in the number of residents asking for financial support** from the Council compared to April 2019.

 **48%**

Almost half of businesses had recorded a near total **decline in activity during the lockdown**.

⁴ Resident survey respondent - Female, Non-White British, aged 35-54, North

Precarity is a pressing issue for many of our residents. During lockdown, before restrictions were lifted, 7% of respondents said they had been made redundant or lost their job, 14% left with a major decrease in household income, and one in twenty-five without means to pay bills, rent or their mortgage. Residents have fears about the end of furlough, worries about the threat of personal and mass unemployment, and uncertainty about where income and employment support might be found.

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Both my partner's and my jobs are affected, I've been furloughed and my partner's job is at risk, so we need to keep our money and savings close to us at the moment

Walthamstow Resident⁵

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There are significant variations between groups regarding the economic impacts. People under 55 told us that they are significantly more likely to experience the negative impact of the pandemic on their financial situation. People from ethnic minority backgrounds were also more likely to have felt a negative financial impact and to be more worried about employment.

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Like many young people, I'm out of work at the moment and would like support to find a job ... The best thing would be if they could link-up local people with local jobs

Leytonstone Resident⁶

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Employment prospects and precarity are not restricted to the short term, a number of residents have drawn attention to the impact of the pandemic on education and learning, and life chances. Residents have highlighted the disruption to the education of children and young people as a key challenge of the pandemic.

Residents have shared their concerns about public transport and going to work, particularly amongst vulnerable groups and shielding residents. There is widespread concern about the impact the pandemic has already had on local businesses, and about what might happen to the local economy.



⁵ Resident survey respondent - Female, White British, aged 18-34, Central

⁶ Resident survey respondent - Female, Ethnic minority group, aged 18-34, South East

HEALTH

The pandemic has had a profound effect on factors that are essential to healthy lives. It is having a detrimental effect on mental health and wellbeing, with a significant impact on under 35s in the borough, 71% of whom have told us that lockdown has had a negative impact. The 24,390 residents who are shielding to protect themselves because they are over 70 or extremely vulnerable are facing additional difficulties.

It is understandable that Waltham Forest residents have identified health and well-being as a pressing concern at this time. Overall, 4 in 10 residents have told us that they think the Council should focus on looking after people's health and wellbeing over coming months.

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There's a huge back-log with consequent health issues getting worse ... Locally I wonder if they could go a step further and invest resources, time, money to boost at a local level the health provision

Walthamstow Resident⁷

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Impacts of COVID-19 on health in numbers:

24,390 

Residents are **either over 70 or extremely vulnerable**, with a higher density of both older and residents who shielded in the north of the borough.

 178%

Rise in cycling in June at Lea Bridge Junction compared with June 2019. All sites measured in the borough recorded an increase of at least 60%

71% 

Number of under 35's in the borough have said that **lockdown has had a negative impact on their mental health**

⁷ Resident survey respondent - Female, Non-White British, aged 55+, Central

Residents have raised a number of specific concerns, including their health and that of their family, worries about catching COVID-19, and concerns regarding mental health and well-being. In our resident survey, half of respondents said that the pandemic had had a negative impact on their physical health, and many told us of the immediate impacts that the pandemic and lockdown has had on their mental health.

“

I've felt very lonely. I live on my own ... it has also been quite tough and I know my mental health has suffered

Leyton Resident⁸

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These negative consequences are felt differently by certain groups, for instance, 75% of parents juggling work and childcare shared that they had been adversely affected mentally. We also know from what residents from ethnic minority backgrounds have told us, that there is a greater risk of people from certain communities feeling a negative impact on their mental health and well-being, their physical health, and that diet has become subject of concern.

One of the feelings that many of our residents are experiencing during the pandemic is loneliness. For some residents, trying to stay safe, and having to stop many of the usual ways of seeing family, friends, or colleagues, has been isolating.

“

My life has got smaller and less active. I can't go to the gym or play team sports, and I've found myself eating more rubbish and drinking a lot more

Chingford Resident⁹

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In Waltham Forest there were 7,836 residents advised to shield, roughly 3% of the borough's population. A third of people advised to shield have told us they have struggled, some citing loneliness, others mentioning heightened anxiety and depression as significant. We were also told by 58% of people who had shielded, that the pandemic has been negative for their physical health. For many people who have shielded, there are ongoing concerns regarding everyday life as restrictions are lifted.

⁸ Resident survey respondent - Female, Non-White British, aged 18-34, South West

⁹ Resident survey respondent - Male, White British, aged 35-54, North

ENVIRONMENT

Residents told us that the quality of the environment was important during the pandemic. During the lockdown, pollution in the borough fell with a 55% reduction in the mean concentration of Nitrogen Oxides in the air. However, it is beginning to rise again. Alongside this, there has been a worrying 16% increase in residual waste tonnage, outstripping recycling rates.

Our residents have stated that the Council should focus on the environment and the climate emergency in the long term. Prior to lockdown, 71% of residents indicated they were very concerned about the Climate Emergency. However, and underlining the scale of the challenge, 71% said they thought they were doing enough already.

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This is an opportunity for us to become more green and sustainable, and go even further in reducing our carbon emissions.

Leytonstone Resident¹⁰

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Impacts of COVID-19 on the environment in numbers:

 **55%**

Reduction in the mean concentration of Nitrogen Oxides during lockdown at Crooked Billet compared to normal levels. Decreases of at least 20% were found in all parts of the borough measured.

4,603 

The number of **noise pollution complaints received by the Council** in April 2010, a 9% rise compared to last year, despite new processes expecting to reduce the number of complaints received.

 **16%**

Increase in residual waste tonnage between March and May compared with 2019. This outstrips increases in recycling rates (12%) in the same period.

¹⁰ Resident survey respondent - Male, White British, aged 18-34, South East

People are worried about the impact of air pollution, and the impact that noise pollution has on their lives.

The pandemic has drawn attention to the importance our residents place on having a liveable borough. Residents recognise the contribution outdoor activities can make to mental and physical health and were very keen for more activities to be provided in parks and open spaces.

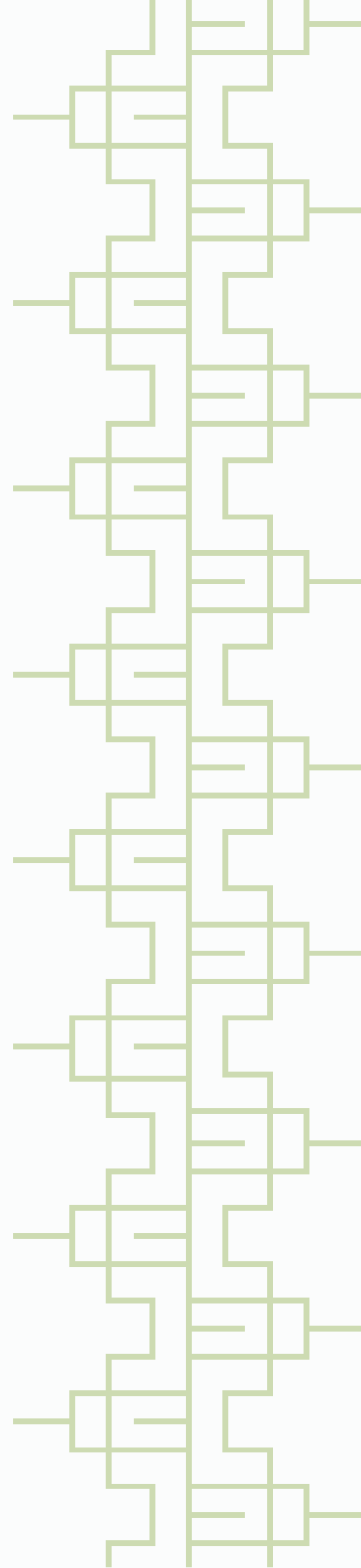
“

I think we should spend more time in the local area in general, in the parks, going for walks, there's lots to do here

Leyton Resident¹¹

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Whilst there have been increases in cycling and active travel, 44% of residents have said they want more information to be provided on walking and cycling routes to help them to navigate and explore the borough.



¹¹ Resident survey respondent - Male, White British, aged 55+, South West

COMMUNITY

The pandemic shone a light on the importance of community solidarity, and we witnessed inspiring moments. However, during the subsequent lockdown, there was an increase in crime within the borough, alongside more complaints made to the Council concerning anti-social behaviour. Circumstances and needs also meant 1,967 households required emergency food parcels from the Council's Community Help Network.

There are residents who do not feel a sense of belonging and have told us that they feel isolated. Some do not experience strong links with their communities, or consider themselves part of their neighbourhood. For certain groups, such as residents under 35, those with a limiting long-term illness and residents from ethnic minority backgrounds, they are less likely to feel a sense of connection to their local community.

“

I can honestly say this has been the worst time in my life ... my whole life has been turned upside down. I haven't seen family and friends, I haven't really felt that sense of community some people talk about.

Walthamstow Resident¹²

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Impacts of COVID-19 on community in numbers:

3x 

The amount of **anti-social behaviour complaints** the council received in lockdown more than tripled compared to 2019.

 7%

Increase in crime in the borough since lockdown began, above the London average of 5%.

1,967 

Households received emergency food parcels from the Council's Community Help Network between March and May 2020.

 4x

There was a 380% **increase in the number of volunteers** registered with the Council in April 2020, compared to 2019, with over 4,000 residents signed-up to support vulnerable people.

1,666 

Number of **families in temporary accommodation** in Waltham Forest as of 27 August 2020, down from 2,024 on 31 March 2020, but above the London average of 890

¹² Resident survey respondent- Male, White British, aged 35-54, Central

Our residents are concerned that no one should lose their home as a result of the pandemic, with many worried about rent and mortgage payments. Many of our residents have said that homelessness was a key problem. Residents do not want anyone sleeping on the streets because they do not have a home.

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The efforts to house homeless people during the pandemic have been really positive, but what happens to them now? We need more affordable housing of all types to suit people in different circumstances.

Chingford Resident¹³

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There are immediate concerns for residents navigating the borough and the challenges they now face in their day-to-day lives in and around Waltham Forest. A principle concern is with social distancing, with how to keep themselves safe, and concerns that others might not be as careful.

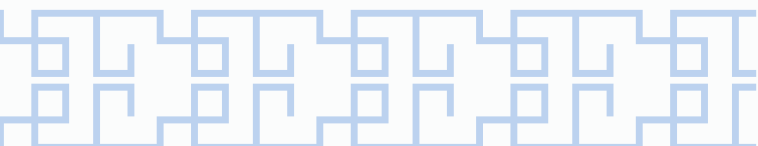
There is currently a shared sense of uncertainty amongst our residents surrounding the impact of NHS Test and Trace, how this will work and how it might affect them personally. Residents are also aware of the possibility of a local lockdown and worried about its implications and challenges.

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I'd like to see more information locally about how and where you can get tested, and communication about the importance of getting tested and isolating ... They need to enforce but also educate, encourage and help people to do the right thing.

Leyton Resident¹⁴

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¹³ Resident survey respondent- Female, Non-White British, aged 35-54, North

¹⁴ Resident survey respondent - Male, Non-White British, aged 35-54, South West

STAFF AND THE ROLE OF THE COUNCIL

Our residents recognise the Council's efforts, they have told us that we have shown leadership, communicated well and supported them and our local businesses. Residents consistently tell us that they trust the Council and have faith in the organisation.

“

I think Waltham Forest Council has stepped up to the plate and done a good job of helping local people and businesses with advice, information and financial support

Leytonstone Resident¹⁵

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A council-wide survey ran during lockdown, with an impressive response rate during a very difficult and busy time. There is a strong sense that staff take pride in working for the Council, that the Council has performed well, and that they feel they are contributing personally in making a difference.

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I feel proud to work for the council and to play my part in helping people through the pandemic. Everyone has risen to the occasion and I feel proud to have such great colleagues and to be working for an organisation that is at the heart of the local response

Economic Growth Staff Member¹⁶

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High proportions of employees agreed or strongly agreed that they have been kept up to date and felt well informed regarding the Council's response to the pandemic. A very positive finding was that staff feel supported by their manager whilst working from home.

On balance, the experience of employees working during the pandemic, including working from home, has been positive. 67% of our workforce have said working from home has had a positive impact on their health and wellbeing. Generally, our staff reported their work-life balance has changed for the better. However, many shared that they faced some challenges due to increased caring responsibilities, most prominently for children.

¹⁵ Resident survey respondent - Female, Ethnic minority group, aged 35-54, South East

¹⁶ Staff focus group respondent - Economic Growth, Office-based, Home working

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I also think this situation has brought out the best in people, they've shown initiative, innovated, adapted, been creative, developing and sharing resources, videos, how-to guides, and finding clever ways to still do their job effectively

**Corporate Development
Staff Member¹⁷**

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Staff have reported that home and remote working has been enabled by technology and systems. 94% of staff report that they have good or fairly good technology, and 48% saying the technology is very good.

In the main, employees feel well supported by the Council. However, it is important to consider unsettling impacts of recent changes on our workforce. One in five staff have reported experiencing a negative effect on their wellbeing as a consequence of working from home, 23% said general health had become worse and 16% feel isolated. There have been requests for more help around mental health, managing workloads and concerns regarding the future.

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If we continue to work from home in this way for a lot longer, we'll need emotional and practical support, to support our wellbeing and ensure we have everything we need to be productive

Economic Growth Staff Member¹⁸

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Significantly, 83% of our workforce who responded to our staff survey think the council should accept that a return to normal is not possible.

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I expect, and hope, this type of working arrangement will carry on in the future

Families Staff Member¹⁹

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Looking at the future, most of our staff would like to see more opportunities for flexibility and choice about how and where they work, they have told us that they think that there is a need to change the way we work as an organisation and how we deliver services.

¹⁷ Corporate Development, Re-deployee, Office-based, Home working

¹⁸ Staff focus group respondent - Economic Growth, Office-based, Home working

¹⁹ Staff survey respondent - Families directorate, Re-deployee, Home working