

Below are my views on the response to the Covid19 crisis by the Department of Community and Children's Services of the City of London Corporation. I am giving these views in my capacities as a member of the Corporation, representing the ward of Cripplegate which encompasses Golden Lane Estate (GLE), as a resident of GLE and as a local volunteer.

### **Information from the Department**

Information has been sent out by the Department in @home, a digital magazine, with information about what to expect from the estate team and where to get help, but it has been only sent to those residents who have given their email addresses.

The Department's weekly Facebook page is posted as a pdf on the GLE website with information, but nothing was provided during the lockdown in printed format, e.g. door leafleting by staff or information in the post. This is a major failing. The residents most in need often do not have internet access. To fill the gap left by the Department, GLE Covid Hub, established by volunteers, produced and distributed door to door leaflets, with information about the GLE Covid Hub, and regular updates of contact details for help and local information.

As a member I was not informed for weeks after lockdown began that the Corporation's post room had been closed and that nothing was being posted.

### **Communication with the Department**

The requirement that members only use the dedicated Covid19 email address during lockdown resulted in emails being triaged, often not understood and leading to a long dialogue to get an answer to the question.

As an example, I sent an email to this Covid19 email address asking that volunteers on GLE be provided with name card lanyards, so that when they went around the estate providing assistance they could be readily identified as volunteers doing essential work and not seen as residents flouting lockdown. The Guildhall had a large stock of these lanyards lying unused because it was closed. After a delay, I received an irrelevant response to my email about the view of the City Police, and no offer to provide the lanyards. Eventually a fellow member went in person to the Guildhall to collect a batch of them from the security guard, who using common sense willingly handed them over. This caused an issue at a higher level in the Corporation about procedures not being followed, but eventually it was recognised that the lanyards should be provided for the volunteers, and an officer came to the estate to give me a further batch. It took a lot of time and effort on the part of two members in the face of what appeared to be sustained resistance from the Corporation to get this little help that it could and should have so easily given.

I found that calling the Department to get help for GLE residents often resulted in calls being passed from one person to another, sometimes returning to original recipient of the call without resolution.

### **Referral and GDPR**

A small number of referrals were made from the Department's hotline to myself about residents seeking help, but most came directly to the GLE Covid Hub hotline or by word of mouth.

I asked if information about GLE residents who were vulnerable or shielding could be made available to me, understanding the limitations imposed by GDPR. I understood that these residents were being called by officers, so they could simply have been asked if they were happy for their information (name/ address/ contact details) to be given to me or to the GLE Covid Hub. It might not have been a full list, but it would have been easier and quicker if something as simple as this had been done at the outset. It was not, and to this day I am unaware of the full number of vulnerable tenants and leaseholders.

I am also unclear as to how regularly the vulnerable residents were phoned and what happened as a result of these calls. I know that residents say that they are OK, and may be that week, but not the next. I know of at least one case where it became obvious to volunteers that the resident needed help, and they persuaded the resident to call social services, as there had been no follow up calls from the Department to check their situation.

### **Community engagement**

Despite the Department having a community engagement team, I am unaware of any attempt by it to engage with the community until recently in relation to an art project. In the past few months, many people have visited the GLE Community Centre to find out about courses, youth club and social events. These inquiries have had to be dealt with by Square Mile Food Bank volunteers, as no information has been provided by the community engagement team. Some people were turning up to pay fees for lessons because the automatic email response said that the centre would be taking fees between certain hours. Eventually the email response was amended, and a poster appeared on the door, but only providing the address of the YMCA for the youth club.

Although the Community Centre has been taken over by the Square Mile Food Bank as its base for doing essential work on GLE and other parts of the City, the Sir Ralph Perring Centre on GLE has been

unoccupied and provides a large room which would be perfectly suitable for socially distanced meetings. There appears to have been no thought given to opening up this space as soon as the easing of restrictions allowed. I asked in the meeting of the Community and Children's Services Committee in July about resuming events for small groups of elderly single residents, who were obviously suffering from social isolation. Three months later, the bingo group has still not been able to meet in the Sir Ralph Perring Centre. St Luke's Community Centre opened its doors on 6<sup>th</sup> July and held social events, provided lunches and other helpful sessions, but nothing was put in place for our residents, and still is not as we go back into partial lockdown.

The community has itself organised a plant giveaway day, an art competition, an internet access survey, an Easter egg giveaway (with the Square Mile Food Bank), monthly play pack deliveries to children (with Culture Mile), the resident's association AGM and continues to support those we know who still need help.

### **Support for elderly residents**

There is a large elderly population on GLE who have been seriously let down. Age UK City of London and the Memory Club provided weekly activities for older residents pre Covid. Age UK City of London tried to hold an outdoor concert on the estate, but the request was turned down by the Department. It was held in Tudor Rose Court, but as it was in an internal courtyard, only Tudor Rose residents could attend. I have already mentioned the elderly residents who play bingo. Resident volunteers were happy to open up, prepare and clean the centre after they left, but there seems to be no trust in our volunteers, and the proposal was turned down with the suggestion that the time be changed to suit estate staff who would then monitor the session.

### **Lack of trust in volunteers**

This lack of trust also means that since the Square Mile Food Bank opened in the Community Centre, I have physically locked and unlocked the building every day. Before the Food Bank used the building, when the Community Centre was fully functioning, the physical lock was unused, and the electronic lock was the only security measure, but the volunteers running the Food Bank were not trusted to be given the code, or the keys.

### **COLPAI construction works**

Whilst understanding that there are commercial contracts in place, there appeared to be little or no consideration by the Department of the effect of continuing work on residents under lockdown conditions, and no meaningful communications from the Department on why work was continuing. The closure of the site was brought about by residents, implying that there was no oversight of site conditions and that commercial decisions were more important than the duty of care. Once work restarted, still under severe lockdown conditions, no provision was put in place for respite for families under particular stress, or even advice on how to reduce sound transmission. Unless a resident had signed up for the email COLPAI newsletter, there was no information.

### **Internet access / digital exclusion**

Throughout the Covid crisis the Department, and Corporation as a whole, has ignored the fact that it is likely that the most needy and vulnerable are digitally excluded because of age, infirmity or poverty. This continues today with information distributed to our estate residents via the Department's Facebook page.

The residents' internet access survey found that 10% of our homes did not have internet access despite there being free wifi in most of the business City, a project that cost £5m but excluded our residential areas. Following pressure by members, limited short term access was provided to a limited group of residents, but many are still without access as they did not fit the category specified.

### **Conclusion**

#### ***Coverage***

While a system of providing support for those in need was established by the Department, its coverage was limited, and relied heavily on volunteers to fill the gap without giving them the help required to ensure all in need were covered. Digital exclusion does not appear to have been taken into account, and is still largely ignored, despite these being the people who are often most vulnerable and in need.

#### ***Speed of response***

Response was laboured and slow, often needing multiple inputs and with unclear paths ...some things like opening up community facilities have just not happened.

#### ***Creative thinking***

There was little creative thinking or work arounds, but a lot of reasons why something could not be done.