

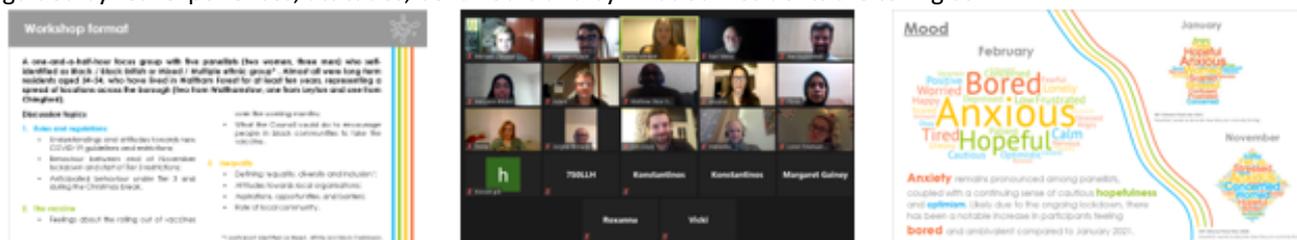
Community Power and the Waltham Forest COVID-19 Recovery Citizen's Panel

THE CHALLENGE: We want to develop new ways to embrace community power, to involve our residents in decision making and ensure there are different opportunities for people to collaborate with the council to make a difference in Waltham Forest. We want to go beyond asking what people think and explore their emotions and experiences. This has never been more important than during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the pandemic evolved it became clear that government guidelines and regulations would continue to change rapidly and with this so would the attitudes, experiences and needs of our diverse communities. The negative impact of the pandemic on our residents and the different and disproportionate impact on certain communities required a research and engagement approach that quickly responded to changing needs and reflected the diversity of the borough.

THE SOLUTION: Our Outbreak Control Plan placed engagement at its heart and we gained vital insight from surveys but needed something that could deliver insights quickly and was reflective of the diversity of the borough and sensitive to the challenges that emerge at smaller, sometimes neighbourhood, level. We set up our Recovery Citizen's Panel, recruiting 75 participants, demographically representative of Waltham Forest in terms of ethnicity, gender, age, disability and socio-economic status. We have also tried to represent different locations across the borough, based on where people say they live.

Panel members regularly participate in a range of qualitative and quantitative activities such as surveys, focus groups, interviews, and panel-wide discussions and surveys. The Panel ensures our strategic decision-making and planning is guided by real experiences, attitudes, behaviours and by what our residents are telling us.



The Panel is representative across different demographics, ensuring we are aware of diverse views, experiences and needs. We undertake specific work with priority groups, where we know there are disparities in the risk and outcomes from COVID-19, to understand and tackle local COVID-19 health inequalities. For example, we have worked with panellists from black backgrounds to understand their experiences and attitudes on issues such as COVID-19 guidelines and restrictions, feelings about the vaccination programme, and quickly build a clearer picture of local disparities and how these are experienced, as well as the possible determinants.

The Panel is all about participation and community power and developing new and innovative ways to involve the public organically in decision making. All participants are actively and enthusiastically involved in monthly surveys and have been invited to take part in different one-off activities such as focus groups or one to one interviews. We emphasise how critical the panel has been in shaping our public health approach, providing concrete examples of how different pieces of research have had a positive outcome. Sharing back what we have learned and actions the council is taking helps to keep participants connected to the purpose of the project, creates a sense of democratic ownership and ensures they understand the difference they are making in the collective pandemic effort.

We have been able to use this pool of engaged residents to contribute to other projects which were not foreseen at the outset of the project.

THE IMPACT: The Panel has created an even stronger evidence base from which key decision are taken, ensuring these are closely connected with the mood and experiences of our residents. For example, when we received intelligence from the Public Health team that transmission rates were high among the South Asian community, we quickly set up a focus group with panel members who have South Asian heritage to understand the impact the pandemic was having on them and acted on this crucial insight.

One of the key measures of success has been the continuing engagement rates of panel members. Participants have been very conscientious, passionate, community-driven and thoughtful with their input.