

Statement: COVID Champions

Councillor Sinead Mooney
Friday 20th November 2020

Over the last few months, we have all witnessed the outstanding work of our Public Health teams, in making sure that Surrey remains resilient and well-resourced to deal with the challenges that COVID-19 brings about. But we know there is on occasions a shifting confidence in public institutions and public service. As such, we have seen a real need in this pandemic - to empower our constituents to 'own' key public health information; verifying this in the social space, through the sharing of key advice with family and friends, in order to support wider efforts to depress incident levels. That is why, when incidences rose to worrying levels in Spelthorne back in late August 2020 - the highest in the county at that time- I worked closely with Public Health to bring this new style of thinking and working with the public to our county.

While I would have loved for Surrey to have been first in developing work in this field, I am grateful for the excellent work done by pioneering authorities - the City of Birmingham and the London Borough of Newham. Centrally, their COVID Champions scheme, which we owe much to - not only created a network of active citizens who disseminated key guidance from Public Health, but crafted a real-time sounding board - which helped shape the Public Health approach of these local authorities in keeping residents and workers safe. Through their efforts, both local authorities have provided us with a great road map and exemplary practice, which we are already emulating and reaping the great benefits from.

Already, we have seen schemes, backed by the County - emerge in Spelthorne, Elmbridge and in Reigate and Banstead. And while it would be unfair to say these schemes alone cause for lower incidences, what we do know is, when part of a wider package of Public Health interventions, COVID Champion schemes ensure messaging is trusted and therefore more likely to be followed. This serves to reassure residents and bolster confidence in our teams, who continue to work hard to make sure we come out of this pandemic better.

In a moment, I will invite colleagues from Spelthorne Borough Council, which has run the first County-council led scheme, to briefly share some of their experiences and the early successes this model is reaping there.

But before that, I wanted to take the opportunity to encourage other districts and boroughs to work with me and our Public Health team, in establishing this invaluable scheme in your local area. While we initially sought to utilise this measure to help bring cases down in Spelthorne, we need not wait until we hit peaks - before acting. As such, I hope that after listening to experiences and successes of Spelthorne, that my colleagues and friends across the county will move with pace, to ensure that we become a county of COVID Champions.

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