

Dear Colleague

Happy New Year! I hope you all enjoyed a well-earned break over the festive period and had the opportunity to spend quality time with family and friends – albeit not in quite the same way we would have liked.

It's fair to say that we all hope that 2021 is going to be a better year than 2020 and I would have loved to have started this New Year message with positive updates for the year ahead, but judging by the significant and fast moving events of the past 24 hours, it is clear that we are in for a bumpy ride for the next few months.

Our case numbers continue to hover around 500 cases per 100,000 population. Sometimes we can become immune to these numbers, but 500 cases per 100,000 is very high. We are watching with interest north Wales and the Swansea Bay area, where figures are increasing rapidly, which we think is due to the spread of the new variant of the virus. You will be aware, from announcements yesterday, that the whole of the UK is now at Tier 5, which means that the NHS is under extreme pressure and will not be able to meet demand within the next few weeks, without intervention.

You will be aware from my recent updates that we were planning to start a phased return of pupils over the coming weeks in line with my recent updates, but yesterday we had an announcement from Welsh Government that all schools will now offer online learning for the majority of pupils until 18th January at least. You would have also seen that schools in England will operate in this way until mid-February, so it will be interesting to see if Wales will adopt this approach too. I know that the Chief Medical officer and his team is monitoring the position very carefully and advising the Education Minister accordingly. I fully recognise the pressure this puts on parents/carers and the concerns you may have about the impact on your children's education, but I know that schools are working very hard to ensure that plans are in place to deliver effective online/blended learning throughout this period and I recognise their fantastic efforts. Like many of you, I will be juggling my day job with home schooling.

I'm sure many of you would have watched the Prime Minister's announcement last night about further restrictions in England due to the growing concerns about the threat caused by the new variant of coronavirus. This brings England in line with the restrictions that are already in place within Wales and we will continue to work closely with Welsh Government to monitor and review the situation in our communities over the coming weeks and months. The Welsh Government are due to review the restrictions tomorrow, but I am not expecting any relaxation of our Wales wide lockdown until at least the end of January.

The new variant poses a significant risk to us all and the 'work at home' requirement is now more important than ever, so I was concerned to see the high numbers of employees in Penallta House yesterday despite my clear instruction that attendance should be avoided unless absolutely necessary - ie if the work cannot be undertaken from home, as per Welsh Government guidance. Directors will be updating me on the position within their respective directorates, to ensure numbers are kept to a bare minimum. Please remember you are required to work from home wherever possible

and you must seek approval from your Head of Service/Director if you wish to attend the workplace for any reason.

I also wish to remind you that Penallta House has been identified as a new vaccination hub and colleagues from the Health board have been preparing the ground floor to start issuing the vaccines to eligible residents. I anticipate the process will begin over the coming days and I will provide an update as soon as the details are confirmed. It goes without saying that we will be unable to open the site to the public for many months whilst the vaccination programme is operational, so the key facilities such as the reception area, staff restaurant, chamber and meeting rooms remain unavailable for use for the time being.

The vaccination programme will take a number of months to roll out, so it is so important that we maintain the key requirements of keeping ourselves safe – maintaining social distance, maintaining good hygiene and wearing your mask wherever possible.

In terms of the wider impact of coronavirus on our services, I am working closely with Corporate Management Team about ongoing service pressures and we are currently reviewing critical services. It is likely that we will be making some adjustments over the next few weeks to ensure that appropriate resources are in place to ensure we have capacity to deliver key services. The redeployment of staff into these services is going to be required, and I thank you for your anticipated co-operation with this.

So, in summary, it is clear we are not out of the woods yet and our focus must remain firmly fixed on our primary purpose of “protecting our people and place” – supporting our communities during this ongoing pandemic, whilst delivering all the key services that our residents expect and require from us.

Let's keep up our amazing 'Team Caerphilly' ethos and I'm sure we will begin to see better days ahead.

Please continue to take care and stay safe

Thanks as always.

Christina