

Dear Colleague,

This week has certainly been interesting and challenging for so many of us. Keeping our focus and maintaining energy levels is challenging at the moment and it is so important that we continue to concentrate upon our own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others. Like so many of you, I am juggling the demands of family life, elderly relatives, young children, as well as a busy work diary. It's certainly not easy, and finding time for yourself in the middle of it all is often the last thing we do, but we must remember, that in order to help everyone else, we must help ourselves first. Maintaining a healthy mind and body is an essential not a luxury, so I do hope you are taking some time out to look after yourself.

The Education Minister has today announced that our primary schools will reopen their doors to the foundation phase children in a phased transition period starting on Monday 22nd February. Speaking at today's coronavirus briefing, the Minister confirmed that the decision has been made possible following positive discussions between Welsh Government, Schools, LEAs and trade unions. The Leader and I, have spent a large part of our week engaged in detailed discussion with Trade unions, WG, the WLGA positioning these plans for the return to school. These discussions are rarely straightforward and as ever, a compromise always needs to be reached. There are so many factors to consider, but the education and safety of our children and safety of our teaching staff, remains at the forefront of our minds and overall approach. We also heard during the briefing that there is a commitment to introducing twice weekly testing for staff members as well as increased financial support, to the value of £5m across Wales, to invest further in ensuring premises are safe. These additional measures are welcome and will certainly assist us to introduce the phased return.

Our schools now have a short period of time to get everything in place to welcome children back into the classroom and Keri Cole and the team will be supporting our school staff to ensure this is undertaken in the safest way possible.

As ever, our teaching community will make this happen in the seamless way we have become so accustomed to, but I don't underestimate how much work takes place behind the scenes to make this happen and I continue to appreciate the efforts of everyone involved.

In terms of the wider Covid picture, I'm pleased to report that it is one of steady improvement. As of today, our rate of infection is 142.5 cases per 100,000 population. Since the beginning of the pandemic, across the county borough, we have had 12,487 confirmed cases of the virus, with 258 of those cases over the last week, and 27 of them yesterday. The all Wales position is 130 cases per 100,000 which has greatly improved since before Christmas, where we were about 460 cases per 100,000 - so the lockdown is doing its job. Over 500,000 vaccinations have been delivered across Wales so far; the NHS is stabilising but intensive care is still over capacity and the death rates remain high. The next 3 week review, which will take place two weeks today, hopefully, (if the improving position continues) will offer us the beginnings of an incremental and cautious relaxation of the lock down restrictions. But I am well aware, that the position can change very quickly, and the behaviour of the new variants is being closely monitored and controlled.

We continue to work closely with our colleagues in Aneurin Bevan University Health Board to support the roll-out of the vaccination programme and it is going really well at the Mass Vaccination Centre in Newbridge Leisure Centre. You will recall that the facility was transferred from Penallta House last weekend, providing increased space and capacity for the vaccination programme to proceed at a greater pace. We want to see as many local people as possible pass through the doors to get their vaccinations over the coming weeks and months and I am proud that we are an integral player in making this happen.

Turning to the council's budget, the next few weeks will see our draft budget proposals being considered by Cabinet and then full Council for formal approval. You will know from previous updates that our financial position is looking positive for 2021/22 and there are no significant cuts proposed, unlike recent years. The draft budget includes a 3.9% council tax increase, which remains one of the lowest increases in Wales. I'm sure residents will welcome our proposals and I hope that the budget is approved at full Council over the next few weeks, although the budget normally attracts significant political debate, particularly around Council tax levels, but I know Steve Harris and his finance team will be prepared for any questions that are thrown at them.

You will recall that the First Minister recently announced a further £200m funding support to the business community across Wales. We are still awaiting clarification from WG about the additional funding that is being made available. We are armed and ready to distribute the funding as soon as we receive the necessary details. As you are aware, we have an excellent track record of distributing these funds and we will ensure this continues into the future.

Although we continue to operate within our coronavirus 'response mode,' it is important that we continue to progress our journey of transformation and improvement. A key element of this process is the development of a major regeneration and investment programme - our 'Place Shaping' framework. It offers a significant investment programme across our communities which have suffered so much throughout this pandemic. You will hear much more about this over the coming weeks and months as we outline the finer detail of it, but needless to say it is a huge piece of work for the whole authority and it will shape the future of our county borough for many years to come. I hope you take the opportunity to get involved as it really is exciting stuff!

I am aware I have offered only a snapshot of events this week, and I know there is so much more happening in so many places and I continue to be inspired and humbled by everything you do.

In the words of the late legendary Sir Captain Tom, *"the sun will shine again, the birds will sing and we'll all have a lovely day tomorrow"*

Take care
Christina