

Dear Colleague,

It's Friday again! I can't believe we are already in our last few days of January. The mornings are beginning to get lighter and the evenings are drawing out. I noticed earlier this week in my garden that the bulbs I planted last Autumn are beginning to sprout – so the signs of Spring are certainly with us. I'm sure, like me, you will be glad to see the back of this terrible winter, which has seen everything thrown at us, the rapid spread of the virus, more lockdowns, flooding and snow.

As I indicated in my last briefing, the First Minister has this lunchtime, announced the outcome of the latest lockdown review at today's coronavirus briefing.

It will come as no surprise that there has been no significant change to existing restrictions, due to the continuing high rate of infection across Wales and our precarious position in the ongoing fight against this deadly virus. The Level 4 status remains with us and it will require further work before we are able to relax a little, into Level 3.

However, the First Minister outlined a number of key areas which I wish to highlight to you:

Coronavirus Restrictions – The existing coronavirus restrictions remain largely unchanged, so it is vitally important that we all continue to observe and adhere to current laws and guidance. A few minor changes have been made to the rules around exercising, which now allows exercise to take place with one other person and single person 'bubbles'. More information about these adjustments can be found here <https://gov.wales/alert-level-4-frequently-asked-questions>

Schools update -The First Minister indicated that some younger children may be able to return to the classroom in a careful, phased approach after the February half term break **if rates of transmission continue to fall**. More details will be announced in due course, as key discussions are required with schools, local authorities and trade unions about how this will work in practice. All those involved in these talks will have the safety and wellbeing of the whole school community at the front of our minds. We are at the forefront of these discussions at both a local and national level, with Welsh Government and the Trade unions. As these discussions progress, I will continue to keep you updated. But for the foreseeable future, blended learning and home-schooling will continue.

Business Grants – An additional £200 million has been announced by Welsh Government to support businesses affected by the lockdown. Our track record of supporting our local business community to date has been fantastic. With the finance and economic development teams working closely together in this area. Between them we have already distributed £42.85 million. We understand fully the acute pressures our business community face and we continue to process these additional funds as quickly as possible, as soon as we receive further details from WG around eligibility criteria, etc. Again, watch this space for updates.

In terms of the vaccination programme, you will be aware from my update earlier this week that a new mass vaccination centre is opening in Newbridge Leisure Centre

tomorrow (Saturday 30th January) providing increased space and capacity for our health colleagues to continue the roll out the vaccination programme to eligible residents across our county borough. Penallta House will remain available should ABUHB require the space in future as the roll out of the programme increases over coming months. In addition to this, GPs across the county borough are playing an important role in the distribution of the vaccination programme too. Whilst we have detailed daily information on a national basis around the numbers of vaccinations being distributed, we are working with Public Health Wales and Aneurin Bevan Health colleagues to develop this detail on a county borough wide basis, so we can report the progress. So far across our county borough we have vaccinated 7,056 over 80s, which equates to 76% and is very encouraging

Many of your older family members within this first phase of the vaccination programme, should have already received their first vaccination or should have received their appointment, as ABUHB are on target to complete the first phase by mid-February (continued supply of the vaccine permitted of course!). However, I am aware of reports that some residents are having difficulty getting through to the ABUHB helpline to discuss their appointments. We are working with ABUHB to assist them with this if they require, as we have been advised that the helpline is experiencing high volumes of calls at present and residents are being thanked for their patience and are asked to keep trying.

I am mindful that elected members and our call centre are receiving high numbers of calls from residents with these queries too, so a Member seminar will shortly be arranged so Members can ask questions first hand to Health colleagues and seek appropriate clarification wherever needed. I will share the presentation with you closer to the date.

Welsh Government have also confirmed that those people who were on the shielding list previously, should continue to “act carefully” for an extended period of time. To align with this announcement, a further letter is being sent to over 7,400 local people who are on our shielding list. The letter, attached for your information, outlines the support available locally should they need it. This is another example of our amazing community response efforts during Covid to support our most vulnerable residents.

So there you have it, a summary of the First Minister’s review.

There’s lots of questions that remain unanswered, including:

- When will all schools return?
- What is the likelihood around a holiday abroad this year?
- When will I be vaccinated?
- What affect does the vaccination programme have on transmission rates?
- When will we be out of lockdown?
- When will life return to normal?

And I’m sure you have many more too!

But let’s focus on what we do know :

- Health are still under extreme pressure and people are dying.
- The virus is likely to mutate into further different variants.

- The vaccination programme is progressing well and will offer protection to those most vulnerable.
- The spring and summer will be with us shortly, and that makes it more difficult for the virus to spread.
- Some form of restrictions will be with us for some months yet.
- The best way to stay safe, is to keep to the basic rules of good hygiene, social distancing and masks where-ever required.

It is clear to see that we have come so far, but we still have some way to go. So let's dig deep, I know we will get there and get there together.

Looking ahead to the weekend weather, it seems we may be in for some snow, so our teams will be on standby 24/7 and are ready to respond as always. We are also working closely with health colleagues to ensure that testing and vaccination sites are kept accessible.

Take care and have a great weekend

Christina Harrhy

Prif Weithredwr | Chief Executive