

Dear Colleague,

It feels like 'spring has finally sprung' this week with the arrival of St David's Day, improving weather conditions and the welcome sight of daffodils lining our verges and roundabouts. It certainly helps lift the spirits following a long, difficult winter which has been tough on us all.

The Covid picture continues to improve across Wales thanks to our collective efforts to suppress the spread of the virus. The current rate of infection within our county borough is 72 cases per 100,000 population, which is definitely moving in the right direction, but we can't be complacent as this can quickly change if we take our eye off the ball.

It's been great to see our younger children return to the classroom and you may have noticed that Welsh Government made a further announcement this week indicating that older year groups may also be able to check in and catch up at school before the Easter break. Our schools are currently reviewing this position and will be communicating with parents about arrangements in individual school sites, so keep an eye out for updates over the coming days.

The next scheduled review of the Wales wide Covid restrictions will take place next Friday (12th March) when the First Minister is expected provide more details about the next steps in terms of easing the lockdown restrictions in a phased and cautious manner. As long as the numbers remain at the levels they are I am anticipating an announcement around a return to school, phased re-opening of non-essential retail and hopefully the reopening of hairdressers!

I'm sure you all would love to have some certainty and clarity about the months ahead – particularly in terms of retail, leisure, hospitality and holidays, but the relaxation of restrictions is going to take place at a slow and steady pace, given the risk of variants still remains very much with us. Alongside these relaxations is of course, our return to the workplace and when we can begin to consider how this is going to work.

As I have reiterated throughout the pandemic your health and wellbeing remains my primary focus, so any return to the workplace must be undertaken as safely as possible. We will be guided by the prevailing Welsh Government advice and guidance, but we also need to undertake our own review about what our return to 'normal' working life will look like post-Covid.

We know that our return to the workplace will be on a new footing so as part of our early preparation, I have asked Managers to complete an exercise which will help categorise the various roles of staff (e.g. agile, fixed, flexible, home working etc.). It is important that we use this opportunity to embrace a new way of working so that the organisation is fit for purpose as we move forward. A staff survey is also planned over the next few weeks which will gather your views around some key issues such as agile working, wellbeing and workforce development. It is another opportunity for you to help me shape the way we will collectively work.

I chaired the Team Caerphilly board this week and I'm pleased to report there's lots of exciting progress being made. I was really pleased to hear that there is lots of interest from staff across the Council who want to be part of the many reviews we have planned. In the meeting, we got to hear about the review of our tourism service has enabled it to operate in a collective, innovative and commercial way. This new approach which will enable the Council subsidy to reduce by over £500k over the next 2/3 years. (A great achievement!). A review of our complaints and contact points is going well, as is our Workforce Development strategy. Within there is an action plan that amongst many other things, will include induction programmes, coaching and our training and development plans. Leadership development has been identified as part of our action plan and you may recall this time last year I announced exciting plans to develop a joint management and leadership development programme with our colleagues at Gwent Police. The initiative, called MeUs, was due to be launched last year and you will recall staff were invited to submit an expression of interest to become part of the first cohort.

Unfortunately, as with many other things, Covid has impacted our plans so we have been required to reconsider our approach. Therefore, the initial cohort will be limited to of 8 people (4 from CCBC and 4 from Gwent Police). This first cohort will assist me in refining the programme to ensure it meets our specific requirements, as it is intended this programme will run thereafter on an annual basis. The programme will begin during April/May and I'm sure it will be great.

The CMT, Cabinet and Council agendas continue to be busy – a few things covered in these forums over the last week have included, an update on the fleet review and our plans for electric vehicles. The Placeshaping investment framework was endorsed by full Council this week and the Council's pay policy was approved.

The Operation Jasmine inquest continues and Dave Street will be representing the Council today at the inquest. The preparation for the forthcoming elections in May, is proving to be quite a complex task, given the Covid restriction requirements and the first time voting of 16 year olds.

Just a snapshot of a busy week. As ever, continue to take care of yourself and please keep doing the great things you do.

Until next time
Christina