

COUNCIL: 18 MARCH 2021

STATEMENT OF THE LEADER

Covid-19 Update

The number of Covid-19 cases has fallen significantly over the last two months following the lockdown restrictions that were introduced in Wales from midnight on 19 December 2020. As of 11 March 2021, the rate of new cases in Cardiff currently stands at 39.5 per 100,000 over the 7 day period to 6 March 2021, the lowest it has been since September 2020 and below the threshold at which point the Welsh Government imposes 'circuit breaker' lockdowns. Given this improved situation, the Welsh Government has begun to ease lockdown restrictions, with Foundation Phase students returning to school from 22 February 2021 and all primary and certain secondary school pupils returning from the week beginning 15 March 2021. The Council is committed to ensuring the safe re-opening of schools in Cardiff, and I would like to thank everyone who has been involved in this effort for their incredible work and dedication.

Whilst we have come a long way since the peak of the pandemic, we must remember that this progress is fragile and it essential that we continue following all public health measures. Case levels are still relatively high and, for now, Wales remains under the highest alert level – Alert Level 4 – although the Welsh Government will review this status this week and announce any changes on 12 March 2021. As part of this review, the Welsh Government will also decide whether to re-open non-essential retail this month and self-contained tourism by Easter, as well as whether to replace the 'stay at home' measure with a 'stay local' rule.

In anticipation of this potential easing of restrictions, the Cabinet considered a report at its meeting on 25 February 2021 concerning the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the need to address the urgent issues facing the city as we gradually come out of lockdown. At this meeting, the Cabinet approved the allocation of appropriate resources to support the Council's continued response to the pandemic and the emerging economic crisis. This package includes the provision of staff and buildings to support Cardiff & Vale University Health Board in the rollout of the mass vaccination programme in Cardiff, as well as the formalisation of the Council's role as host of the Test, Trace, Protect (TTP) National Surge Capacity. Our TTP effort has been outstanding, and I am proud to report that TTP staff have recently been commended by senior Welsh Government officials for all the hard work that they undertook before Christmas to establish the all-Wales contact tracing surge team. Their efforts have made a real difference in supporting contact tracing capacity across Wales and getting the pandemic under control locally.

Mass Vaccination Programme

The rollout of the Mass Vaccination Programme has continued to progress at pace, supported by the opening of an additional Mass Vaccination Centre (MVC) at Pentwyn Leisure Centre at the beginning of February 2021. As of 11 March 2021, Cardiff & Vale University Health Board has administered 177,763 vaccination doses, and the rate of vaccination will accelerate significantly as new MVCs become operational in the weeks and months ahead, including the new Bayside MVC at the former Toys R Us site in Cardiff Bay by the end of March 2021. The local vaccination effort has been nothing short of phenomenal, and I am pleased to report that we reached our targets of offering a first vaccine dose to all frontline social care staff by the end of January 2021 and everyone in the first four priority groups by mid-February 2021. Looking ahead, our next target is vaccinating priority groups 5 through 7 by 19 April 2021, which includes people aged 60-64, 65-69 and those with underlying health conditions, and we are well on our way to meeting this goal.

Brexit

The UK/EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) has now been in force for over two months, and the Council is continuing to support Cardiff's citizens and businesses as they react to the inevitable change and challenges that the Agreement has introduced.

As part of its effort to mitigate the economic impact of Brexit, the Council is working closely with local employers to help ensure the sustained supply of critical goods, as well as to ensure that businesses are signposted to the latest guidance and support as changes are phased in. Like many local businesses, certain members of the city's EU communities have been left vulnerable by the UK leaving the European Single Market, and members of these communities will require further support in securing their continued residency and working rights in this country. The latest Home Office statistics show that, as of 31 December 2020, 19,790 applications had been made to the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS) by EU nationals residing in Cardiff. Given that an estimated 20,000 to 25,000 EU nationals live in Cardiff, the level of take-up to the scheme has been positive; however, we will continue our work to promote the scheme and ensure that all eligible residents apply before the 30 June 2021 deadline, which will entail addressing the barriers experienced by those who have not yet applied.

Moving forward, the Council will continue to work with its partners to provide information, help, guidance and support to Cardiff's citizens, businesses, organisations and communities as they adapt to this new reality.

Cardiff Capital Region City Deal – Homes for All the Region Programme

I am due to attend a meeting of the Cardiff Capital Region (CCR) City Deal Regional Cabinet on Monday 15 March 2021, which will consider progress of the 'Homes for all the Region' Programme, following the approval of the Viability Gap Fund Full Business Case in March 2020 and the associated Evaluation Framework in September 2020. Local Authorities were able to submit up to a maximum of three applications to the Viability Gap Fund, which is comprised of a CCR Base Fund of £30m and a further £5m from Welsh Government.

The deadline for submitting applications was 11 January 2021 and the CCR received a total of 18 applications, with a total funding request of over £52 million. The Regional Cabinet will be asked to approve a proposed indicative shortlist of schemes to progress to the next stage of the process, which includes two schemes proposed by Cardiff Council that form part of our housing development programme – one scheme for an estimated 500 new homes in the city, which will be considered as part of the £30m CCR Base Fund and another for an estimated 50 new homes for consideration as part of the £5m Welsh Government Fund. Subject to the approval of the Regional Cabinet, it is proposed that CCR and its appointed advisors work with all the shortlisted schemes to resolve any identified key risks prior to a ‘final list’ of schemes being considered for approval in June 2021.

Cardiff Bay Rugby Codebreakers

Initial designs for the statue commemorating the Cardiff Bay Rugby Codebreakers have been submitted and will be reviewed by the Fundraising Committee once Covid-19 restrictions are lifted. In the meantime, the Committee, in partnership with the Council’s Planning team, has commenced work to identify and review potential locations for the statue. I am pleased to report that a potential location has already been identified adjacent to the newly refurbished Cardiff Bay Train Station, which is less than 200 yards from the birthplace of both Billy Boston and Gus Risman – two of the three men chosen to adorn the statue. Furthermore, with the aid of the Council’s planning officers, a wider location search has begun and alternative options will be discussed in the coming months.

Due to the pandemic, the Committee’s fundraising and promotional activity continues to be on hold and will remain so until restrictions are lifted; however, the donation page is still live and contributions can be made at any time. Despite the lockdown’s impact on our fundraising efforts, we have received £1,500 in public donations to date, and we are preparing to accelerate this work in anticipation of restrictions easing in the spring and summer.

Councillor Huw Thomas
Leader of the Council
11 March 2021