

COUNCIL: 27 JANUARY 2022

STATEMENT OF THE LEADER

Covid-19 Update

After a record-breaking wave in December 2021 and early January 2022 driven by the highly transmissible Omicron variant, Covid-19 cases in Cardiff have decreased significantly from the post-holiday peak, although transmission remains very high. The rate of new cases in Cardiff currently stands at 550.6 per 100,000 over the 7-day period to 15 January 2022, above the Welsh average of 500.8 per 100,000. While the latest data indicates that the worst of the Omicron wave is behind us, the public health situation remains precarious, so it is vital that we continue to act responsibly and follow all guidance over the coming weeks. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the changes that came into effect in Wales on 6 January 2022, which removed the requirement for asymptomatic people with a positive lateral flow test result to take a follow-up PCR test, could also be skewing current case rate figures.

To tackle the Omicron variant, the Welsh Government moved Wales to alert level 2 last month, reintroducing social distancing and restrictions on gatherings. However, due to the recent and rapid decrease in transmission, the First Minister has confirmed that most restrictions in Wales will be removed over the next two weeks if Covid cases continue to fall. This easing of restrictions will allow crowds to return to sporting events – including full capacity crowds at the Principality Stadium for Six Nations matches – nightclubs to reopen, hospitality to operate normally and an unlimited number of people to gather outdoors. Despite this significant step towards normality, Covid passes will still be required for attending large events, cinemas, nightclubs and theatres. Furthermore, from 10 February 2022, Wales will return to alert level zero and three-week review cycles.

I particularly welcome the announcement that Six Nations matches will be held as normal in Cardiff from next month; the case for which I made in a recent letter to the First Minister, which emphasised the importance of these matches to city centre businesses that are struggling with ongoing social distancing and capacity restrictions. The significance of this for the Cardiff economy cannot be underestimated and will deliver a critical lifeline for the events and hospitality sectors, which employ over 16,000 people and face serious challenges keeping staff on payroll without the vital financial support afforded by the furlough scheme. More broadly, given the hardship that recent restrictions have created for city centre businesses, I also called on the Welsh Government to enhance the current Economic Resilience Fund (ERF) support package to better reflect the impact on businesses.

Looking to the difficult weeks and months ahead, the Council will do everything in its power to support the recovery of the city centre economy in line with our City Centre Recovery Action Plan, which was approved in principle by the Cabinet this month.

Mass Vaccination Programme

The rollout of the Mass Vaccination Programme has continued to progress at pace. As of 19 January 2022, Cardiff and Vale University Health Board (UHB) has administered 1,054,169 vaccination doses. In recent weeks, the booster vaccination programme has been a tremendous success, with 279,854 doses given to protect our residents from the Omicron wave. Over 90% of people in 60-and-above age groups have received their booster, and just under 90% of those aged 50-59. The pace and scale of the booster roll-out to the most vulnerable groups has protected our health services from being overwhelmed in recent weeks and put Wales in a position to lift restrictions over the coming weeks.

Strong progress has also been made in younger age groups, with over 80% of 40-49s, nearly 70% of 30-39s and over 55% of 18-29s having now received their booster dose. For those who not yet received their booster vaccine, I would strongly encourage you to come forward when invited for your appointment. As always, the Council will continue working in close partnership with our UHB colleagues to ensure the continued success of the vaccination programme.

Race Equality Taskforce

Last month, the Race Equality Taskforce received and considered the final round of proposals from the Council-led sub-groups on Employment and Representative Workforce, Education and Young People, and Citizen's Voice, as well as the partner-led sub-group on Criminal Justice. The approved proposals from the most recent meeting include a Community Jobs Compact, comprised of a series of inclusive and fair work commitments that the Council will sign up to and encourage local businesses across the city to join; the development of a Recruitment Plan for school governors to improve representation within governing bodies, in partnership with schools and the Education Workforce Council; the embedding of effective community engagement processes in city planning policy and the support of efforts to increase workforce representation within the criminal justice system.

The Taskforce is now coming to an end, with its final meeting to be held in March 2022; however, our work is just beginning. Over the coming months, we will focus on forwarding actions from the approved proposals and scoping possible avenues for future work on race equality and anti-racist practice. Furthermore, a full report on the work of the Race Equality Taskforce is due to be considered by the Policy Review and Performance Scrutiny Committee, Cabinet and Council in March 2022.

South East Wales Corporate Joint Committee

The Cabinet considered an update report on the establishment of the South East Wales Corporate Joint Committee (CJC) on 20 January 2022. In March 2021, the Welsh Government approved the legislation to establish the South East Wales CJC and this came into force subsequently in April 2021. The first statutory duty of the South East Wales CJC is to set its budget before 31 January 2022.

Given the alignment with the current Cardiff Capital Region City Deal (CCRCD) arrangements, the CCRCD Regional Cabinet has agreed to pursue a 'lift and shift' approach to transitioning the current City Deal arrangements into the new CJC, which also adopts the principles that local authorities would not expect to lose any powers, resources, or the ability of councils to determine their own policy as part of these arrangements. However, there are still some fiscal issues to be determined and, therefore, the South East Wales CJC will operate initially on a 'bare minimum' approach until these issues are resolved. As such, the initial meeting of the South East Wales CJC on 31 January 2022 will only consider those issues needed to meet the requirements of the legislation – holding the meeting and establishing a budget. Given the 'bare minimum' approach, a nominal budget will be set that will be covered from the funding envelope that councils have already established for operating costs of the City Deal.

As the arrangements for establishing the full South East Wales CJC evolve, further reports will be considered in future by the Cabinet, which will outline the transition model being adopted, as well as details of the operation of the CJC and its impact on the Council.

Llanishen and Lisvane Reservoirs

On 12 January 2022, the Cabinet Member for Culture & Leisure and I were delighted to attend an event at Llanishen Reservoir with representatives from Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water to view the progress being made in bringing this site, and Lisvane Reservoir, back into recreational use. This is consistent with the Administration's longstanding ambition to enable public access and deliver a new leisure development. This long-unused site will be transformed into a hub for recreation, health and wellbeing and provide an area where people can reconnect with water and the environment, while protecting and enhancing the biodiversity of the site for future generations.

Work to construct a new visitor attraction hub will begin this month, which will include changing rooms, shower & toilet facilities for watersports, training rooms for use by the local community, and a café with spectacular views across both reservoirs. This, together with the creation of circular paths, viewpoints, conservation areas and a site-wide nature trail, will provide opportunities for people of all ages to enjoy the reservoirs. I was also very pleased to hear about the comprehensive plans for increasing tree canopy around the reservoirs, which will see the planting of 500 specimen and woodland trees, together with 370 hedgerow plants and shrubs.

Councillor Huw Thomas
Leader of the Council
20 January 2022