

SODC ward councillor's report

Shiplake – 13th December 2021

Covid-19

Covid cases are increasing quite sharply. We now have increasing impact from autumn/winter weather and of course the new Omicron (B.1.1.529) variant. Omicron is known to be much more transmissible and has some extra capacity to somewhat evade past vaccinations (1st and 2nd) – especially as anti-body levels fall over time. However, early evidence suggests that the current booster vaccinations (3rd jab) really improve our defences.

Because of superior transmissibility the Omicron variant is expected to become dominant over the current mostly Delta (Indian - B.1.617.2) variant in the near future. It is suggested that the doubling rate of the new Omicron variant may be a little as 2.5 days – indicating exponential growth potential.

Accordingly the Covid alert level has been raised from 3 to 4 – meaning fast growth likely to cause more NHS pressure. The highest level is level 5 (which is defined as being a situation where the NHS is at risk of being overwhelmed).

Because of natural lags the likely hospitalisation rate of Omicron and indeed its death rate are not yet known. Early evidence – including some from very different conditions in South Africa suggest a somewhat lower rate than for Delta. However because of the high transmissibility and growth of infections, even lower rates have the potential to take the number of NHS beds occupied with Covid to the highest ever in the UK at a time when the NHS faces strong demand from the previous backlog of conditions and where flu may make more impact than it did last year.

The Government have instituted “Plan B”. Those changes, which have now been expanded in light of the variant, are:

- Reintroducing guidance to work from home, if you can, from 13 December
- Legally mandating face masks in "most public indoor venues", including theatres and cinemas from 10 December, with exceptions "where it's not practical, including while eating, drinking, exercising or singing"
- NHS COVID passes required for nightclubs, unseated indoor venues with more than 500 people, unseated outdoor venues with more than 4,000 people, and any venue with more than 10,000 people
- Daily testing for people identified as a contact of a coronavirus case - with isolation required only for people who test positive

Face masks were already a legal requirement in shops, banks, post offices, hairdressers and on public transport in England as of 30 November.

Presently there are no restrictions applicable to hospitality where face masks are not required – not at the bar, in general circulation - or of course at tables. However the sector is reporting a lot of cancellations and reduced demand.

There are however suggestions that a Plan C may be required – with more restrictions – subject to fast evolving evidence.

At 7/12, Oxford City was at a weekly rate of 567 per 100k population. By comparison, Cherwell DC was 763, West Oxon DC at 658, **SODC at 840** and Vale of WH DC at 652. Reading BC (to 7th December) was at 652. These rates are around double what I reported to you in November.

The vaccine programme continues – with particular focus on boosters and reaching out to those with vaccine hesitancy. The booster programme is working down to those in their 30s and is now being rapidly expanded to extend on to all adults (18 or over and 16 or over if vulnerable). Walk-in centres are being offered and expanded with the aim of getting boosters to as many as possible before the New Year. Flu vaccines are also available – free for those over 50, those who are vulnerable or whose health job or care role implies a particular need.

The risks of co-infection or twin infection with both flu and Covid are troubling virologists.

Whatever the rules may be, the advice must be to proceed with caution to enjoy the festive season and protect the more vulnerable.

Enforcement

Like the NHS, planning enforcement built up a backlog during Covid. SODC is a top performer amongst councils with regards to enforcement – although the Government do not specify planning enforcement as a statutory obligation on councils and in fact have greatly eroded enforcement powers over time. SODC spends rather more on enforcement than most councils – and some councils do not offer an enforcement service.

SODC treats enforcement seriously and, given the backlog has set out a recovery plan. Within this plan resources will be focussed on the most urgent and the most serious cases. Thus a system of “triage” and assessment will be used to focus on these. Processes are being tightened up and less resource will go on the most minor cases. Moreover for reasons of GDPR and efficiency less updates will be given to residents during the investigation process. Due to the backlog many requests are received for updates which are eating a lot of resource and cause GDPR issues and risks. By exception district councillors will be able to get updates on key cases.

The intent is to recover the backlog by summer 2022 and to then review the process going forwards with lessons learnt.

Gambling policy

At council on 9th December SODC approved updates to its gambling policy as regards the licensing of premises. As had been done some years ago by Vale of White Horse, SODC has also set policy to oppose any casino proposition that might come forwards. Whilst the likelihood of a casino proposal does not seem particularly likely it is also judged not to be appropriate to the rural character of South Oxfordshire and its use of land.

Constitution review

With the advent of a new head of service for the Legal and Democratic service at SODC and VoWH (Vale) there is to be a review of the constitution of each council. As the two councils shares officers and offices, the constitution is considered jointly – although there are certain differences between the two when it comes to detail. The review group will consist of 6 councillors with 6 from each council. Final decisions will be made by each council following recommendations being put forward by the review group(s).

Separately updates of the councillor code of conduct (including as regards parishes) and councillors’ parental leave policy were agreed by council.

Motions

At its council meeting on 9th October SODC agreed :-

- 1) To write to ask the Secretary of State to review the national planning enforcement system and to make it tougher with additional powers. Also to propose certificates of commencement and completion (as applies in Scotland) to improve the clarity of process. This was unanimously agreed.
- 2) To write to and engage with the Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) to address lack of delivery of built facilities and services to support housing growth. Also to seek assurances that matters will improve with the Bucks., Oxfordshire and West Berks Integrated Care System (ICS) which is scheduled to take over from the CCGs under the latest reorganisation. Unanimously agreed.
- 3) To publish a Climate Change Action Plan to address key issues, to encourage the Government to provide the necessary powers to help drive forward the aims agreed at COP26 and to work with other councils and partners for success in this.
- 4) To seek further detail on the national planning and housing policy of the LibDems. (This was proposed by the Conservative group as a Christmas joke and with a view to receiving guidance on levelling up and mix as it relates to policy on housing numbers – with particular reference to how it might relate to South Oxfordshire. Many abstained from this Xmas joke.

Grants

The capital grants scheme is now open for applications from voluntary and community sector organisations and town and parish councils until 17th December.

This vital funding offers capital grants to improve community facilities to help build and support thriving communities and improve the quality of life for the residents of South Oxfordshire. The total budget is £320,000 and organisations can apply for up to £75,000, and a maximum of 50 per cent of their total project cost – so matching funds are required.

For further information about the grants scheme and scoring criteria please take a look at the website southoxon.gov.uk/grants. The Community Enablement Team on communityenablement@southoxon.gov.uk will welcome enquiries for help and advice. This is expected to be a very competitive funding round.

The Councillor grants scheme (round 2 of 2) has re-opened and will close around the end of January.

Keep safe!

Leigh Rawlins

District Councillor