

SODC ward councillor's report

– Shiplake – 11th January 2021

Covid-19

On 19th December, the Government acknowledged not only that there was a significant mutation of the Covid virus in the South East of England, as had been noted previously, but also that scientific analysis had now suggested that it might be 50-70% more infectious than the original version.

Cases in Kent, London and Essex were showing a dramatic surge - even in November. It is presently believed that the new mutation originated in Kent, but then rapidly spread to London and Essex – reflecting commuting patterns. The new mutation was first seen in genome sampling tests from September – but analysis of these was not complete until mid-October. There have been a number of mutations as is quite normal for viruses – but whilst it does not appear to be more deadly, the significant thing about this new virus variant is that it spreads much more rapidly. It is thus likely to add a substantial amount to the R-rate. Locally, we must note the linkage to London and a pattern whereby the increase in infections is moving west quite rapidly.

In part due to the new variant, Covid cases have surged nationally and locally such that South Oxfordshire has moved from Tier 2 to Tier 4 and on to a 3rd National Lockdown. Although steps were belatedly taken to limit traveling and social mixing at Christmas it is clear that this current surge is very serious and at real risk of overwhelming the capacity of the NHS in the weeks ahead. This is the very time of year when the NHS is most stretched by flu and other seasonal pressures and the very worst time to lose control of the spread of the virus. There is pressure on NHS staff resources, beds and supplies (incl oxygen. CPAP ventilators use more than the more traditional and invasive ones but work well and have helped, although the traditional type are necessary for the most severe of ICU cases.)

At 5/1, Oxford City was at a weekly rate of 571 per 100k population. By comparison Cherwell DC was 997, West Oxon DC at 428, SODC at **520** and Vale of WH DC at 442. Reading BC (to 8th Dec) was at 627. These numbers have been surging.

(By comparison see per my December report when I noted :

At 4/12, Oxford City was at a weekly rate of 132 per 100k population. By comparison Cherwell DC was 84, West Oxon DC at 41, SODC at **74** and Vale of WH DC at 66. Reading BC (to 8th Dec) was at 198 – rather higher.

Note that 4/12 was just after the end of the second lockdown - which did cause the case numbers to reduce. However they have subsequently surged.

There has continued to be progress with vaccines although a full roll-out of a vaccination programme through the UK population is likely to take a considerable time – perhaps to autumn of 2021, albeit that the summer period is less conducive to the spread of infection. To accelerate initial progress – especially with regards to the elderly, key health and care workers and those with health risks – priority is to be given to the first jabs – delaying the second vaccine dose by up to 12 weeks.

One uncertainty, as yet, is how long (effective) antibody immunity from a vaccine might last. A year? Six months? We don't yet know. This complicates forecasting.

Thus, despite promising news on vaccines, it remains absolutely critical to minimise the number of infections and to continue to apply firm and responsible restraint. Whilst legal restrictions have been increased, the advice must now be to proceed with the utmost caution – especially with regards to vulnerable friends and family members. In my personal view, it is now very likely that the eye of the Covid storm has now started to extend into our locality - in a way that it never has done to date. Unfortunately a difficult start to 2021 seems likely? Happily, it is believed that the new Covid variant will still be successfully addressed by the vaccines now beginning to come through.

Plans for Mass Testing and Mass Vaccination

SODC officers are working intensively with other public sector colleagues from the County Council, Public Health England and the NHS to plan for and execute mass testing and mass vaccination of the local population. The situation remains fluid with news about vaccines hitting our screens every day, but there is no scenario which does NOT involve local Council staff playing a key role. Venues are being identified and secured, supply chain logistics resolved and resources engaged in order to carry out this huge effort if we are to meet the Government's targets. This includes the support of council staff in ancillary roles at vaccination centres. When this preparatory work is added to the responsibilities of the Community Hub (see below), it is inevitable that some of the "business as usual" activities of the Council will be compromised. All these new tasks are being absorbed by the existing staff at SODC, so we ask for your patience, please, if you have a query or a problem to discuss with the Council as it may take longer than usual to respond or resolve.

The key messages to all local residents are as follows:-

- The vaccination programme is being phased in across the county following the national guidance on prioritising patients. Some people have already been vaccinated and others are waiting to be invited.
- Please do not contact your GP or another NHS service to seek a vaccine – GP practices are still open for providing care to patients and their phones could become swamped, so please wait until the NHS contacts you.
- When the NHS does contact you, please be ready and attend your booked appointments.
- Please continue to follow all the public health guidance to control the spread of the virus, protect the NHS and save lives.

Unfortunately the largely outsourced test and trace system has been impacted by the surge of cases and is presently providing materially slower results. This does not help supplementary efforts by councils' public health endeavours to track down more of the contacts missed by the national system as time is of the essence.

Covid-19 support for individuals and families

A reminder that the message to residents is to contact the Community Hub if as result of Covid-19, they or their neighbours need help with access to food, or need to claim the £500 grant if they are instructed to self-isolate.

The SODC Community Hub team is available from:

- 8.30am-5pm Monday to Thursday
- 8.30am-4.30pm on Fridays

Call our Community Hub on 01235 422600 or email communitysupport@southandvale.gov.uk.

Covid-19 business grants support

The national schemes to support business have been evolving and changing as the pandemic and restrictions change.

As regards business grants, businesses that need help and guidance should go to svbs.co.uk

District Councillor Grants

The individual Councillor Grant programme has now opened, with a deadline of early February (I suggest think end January!), and a key adjustment to the scheme is that it no longer excludes Parish Councils with their own grant-giving programmes. As last year, each councillor has £5k to allocate within our ward to projects which need a bit of seed funding or complete financing and which can be completed within a year.

David and I will work together on this area and between us can offer up to **£2,400** to **Shiplake parish**. Just to re-emphasize, happily the complications over grant-awarding parishes have now been set aside this year.

This year the grants have a linkage to the SODC Corporate Plan, so any applications should align with the priority objectives described here: <https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/uncategorised/council-outlines-priorities-in-new-plan/>

Application forms and guidelines can be found here:

<https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/south-oxfordshire-district-council/community-support/grants/councillor-community-grants/>

Town and Parish Forum

The SODC Communications Team sends very regular updates to Town & Parish Clerks, but there is also much to be gained by meeting together to discuss issues of common interest or concern. The next Forum, which will inevitably have to be a virtual affair, is planned for the early Spring of 2021, so look out for an announcement in the New Year.

Brexit Preparations

The Brexit trading deal was completed before the end of December. It provided for quota and tariff-free arrangements on goods. The UK has to respect a level playing pitch of regulation and state aid with the EU are regards goods. However it is not part of the Single Market or indeed the Customs Union – to imports and exports need much more paperwork. There will be support and advice for businesses and residents on Brexit. This will include a campaign to remind EU citizens wishing to stay in the UK that they need to register for settled status by the end of June 2021. The trade deal largely excluded consideration of trade in services. The EU did not give passporting or protection to services activities around banking, investment services, financial services and dealing and other areas where the UK presently has significant market share and competitive strengths. Regulation of services and reduction of barriers to trade is an evolving area.

Civil Parking Enforcement

SODC's Council meeting approved a recommendation at a special meeting on 22nd December to move ahead with taking responsibility for managing on-street civil parking enforcement in collaboration with Oxfordshire County Council. We now expect this to move forward without undue delay and for powers to be transferred during 2021. This will work alongside our existing off-street parking enforcement powers.

New CIL Spending Strategy

Cabinet also approved a new CIL and s106 spending strategy last month, which will take effect from April 2021. Most of the changes affect how SODC and OCC can spend their allocation of CIL funds; the Parish allocation will remain at 25% (with an Neighbourhood Plan; or 15% without – as now). This should enable more projects to be approved for each part of the district. The new, more flexible, rules should release funds more rapidly and enable larger projects to be commissioned across the District.

Happy New Year all. Let's hope to see a successful vaccine roll-out and better times.

Leigh Rawlins

District Councillor