

19<sup>th</sup> March 2021



**Chief Executive**

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Good afternoon,

Headlines have been dominated this week by the vaccination programme, with the good progress being made delivering the jabs tempered by concerns about the safety of the AstraZeneca vaccine.

The positive news is that the vaccine programme continues to go well with around 25m people across the UK now having had their first vaccination – including 57,412 people in West Berkshire. The progress made has been staggering, and the country remains on track to offer a first dose to all adults by the end of July. Of course, this is important for keeping us safe and, in time, paving the way for the further easing of the restrictions that are currently in place.

To give ourselves the best possible chance of this, we need people to feel confident in the vaccine programme and, of course, the vaccines themselves. Providing reassurance about the vaccine is something which has been a focus for all the organisations involved in the programme. In recent days, however, you may have read reports suggesting a link between the AstraZeneca vaccine and a risk of blood clots. However, there is no cause for concern.

In fact, there is plenty of evidence to support the safety and effectiveness of the vaccine and it continues to have the confidence of both the UK's Medicines and Health Products Regulation Agency, and the European Medicines Agency. The reality is that blood clots occur naturally and are not uncommon, so there is no reason to be concerned. If you receive an invitation for a vaccination please do take it to protect yourself, and others, from coronavirus.

As the vaccination roll out continues we begin to look ahead from responding to the pandemic to recovering from it. Coronavirus cases are falling and yesterday the Government started writing to residents who are shielding to tell them that from April they no longer need to do this. It's yet another small step towards normal life, but our Community Support Hub will continue for a while longer so our most vulnerable residents have somewhere to turn if they need help.

It does feel that now we can look ahead with a degree of confidence about things slowly opening up again, and the planning we're doing is focused on supporting our communities and our local economy through this. Teams across the council are working together in preparation for the relaxing of restrictions – from our economy and highways teams to our health and public protection teams we're getting ready. The reopening of shops and hospitality, the resumption of amateur and grassroots sports and ability to hold events will each require a degree of support and coordination across the Council – and we're committed to doing what we can to help.

Our small businesses and high streets have been particularly badly hit and this is an area we are particularly looking at to make sure we have the right support in place. We're busy working on our plans to support our high streets and encourage residents back out to support local businesses and bring the buzz back to our high streets. If restrictions are relaxed as planned, we really hope it will be a summer to remember.

Until then we continue to support local residents who have been particularly badly hit by the coronavirus pandemic. Recently we announced that we will continue to provide Free School Meal vouchers to eligible children during the Easter holidays. It follows on from the COVID Winter Grant Scheme which provided 660 vouchers during the Christmas and February school holidays and helped 1,750 people to buy food and pay for other essentials such as utilities. This support has made a difference until now, and it will continue to do so this Easter.

Yours sincerely,



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