

Cllr Jim Millard: Hello and welcome back to Talk Richmond. I'm Jim Millard, your host. I'm excited to be back talking to you in 2021 for this new series. If you have any thoughts on what you'd like to hear on this new series of Talk Richmond, please email us on talk@richmond.gov.uk. But let's crack on with this first episode of Series 2 where I will be talking to the Director of Public Health at Richmond Council, Shannon Katiyo. Before becoming Director of Public Health, Shannon worked at Public Health England in the Centre for Infectious Disease Surveillance and Control, and Shannon is joining us to talk about the current COVID-19 situation. We will be discussing why we're back in a national lockdown, what the situation looks like in our local hospitals, the rollout of the vaccine, and the question of anti-vaxxers. So welcome, Shannon.

Shannon Katiyo: Thank you Jim.

Cllr Jim Millard: It's my pleasure. It's very nice to see you and to have you back. We spoke to you last time and that was in July 2020 when we were discussing avoiding a second peak of coronavirus. All the things we could do, and I know the community has worked really hard on that but sadly, for one reason or another, we're now experiencing another peak in infections and deaths, and we're in another national lockdown. Can you explain why we're in this position?

Shannon Katiyo: Yes, thank you, and unfortunately the time has just really gone very quickly between the last time we spoke and now and obviously a lot has happened. We're now are in what is very definitely a second peak of COVID-19 virus and we started to see the rates rise I think just after the summer holidays in September, where we had seen very little by way of new infections and then that has rapidly progressed and become worse as we've entered winter and now, I think, you know we're seeing very high levels of infection. There are possibly several explanations for that, but I'll sort of focus on the two things that I think are some of the biggest contributing factors to what we're seeing. I think the first thing is the levels of testing have increased significantly, so we're testing many more people than we did before in the first phase of the pandemic, and as some of your listeners will know, we're even testing people who don't currently have symptoms. Just because we now understand that there's a high level of transmission even from people who don't who don't have any symptoms. So, in the first phase of the pandemic, the first peak we were mostly testing people in healthcare settings, and we largely missed any cases in the community or in people who didn't have symptoms or those with less severe illness. Now the second factor, which is more worrying, is late last year we became aware of a new COVID variant of concern, and we know that this spreads more easily, and studies have shown that the new strain is transmitted up to 71% more readily when compared with other variants. So, I think these are the two main things that are contributing to the increase that we're seeing now.

Cllr Jim Millard: Yes, thank you. Thank you, Shannon. That's very clear. What's the situation like now in our local hospitals such as Kingston Hospital?

Shannon Katiyo: So, the situation in the hospitals is very serious. There is a growing strain on the NHS and in hospitals all over the country really. Particularly because we're in the winter months,

where normally would expect to see more activity. More people going into hospital and being admitted for various reasons including flu, norovirus. What we're now seeing is a rising number of hospital admissions that are related to COVID, and this is adding significant pressure on the NHS, so the hospitals are under significant pressure from the people they would normally see, from the winter activity, but also now rivalled by increasing rates of COVID admissions.

Cllr Millard: That's very serious and that's understood.

The vaccine means there's significantly more hope in this third lockdown. Could you tell us a little about its rollout?

Shannon Katiyo: Absolutely. So, in the UK, your listeners might know, that we now have three vaccines that have been approved. We've got the Pfizer-BioNtech vaccine, we've got the AstraZeneca vaccine and more recently we've also had the Moderna vaccine that that has been approved for use in the UK. Now all these vaccines require two doses in order for them to provide longer lasting protection, which is what we absolutely want, and the evidence from phase three trials indicates that they do offer a high level of protection against serious disease and death from about two weeks after the first dose. Obviously, longer term protection will be provided by having a second dose as well. The vaccine started off being offered in some of our local hospitals, but in the last few weeks has also been rolled out to GP surgeries through groups of GP practices, which are sometimes called primary care networks, and that's to ensure that within those groups of practices they can get together and ensure sufficient coverage for the population that that they serve. Now the Pfizer-BioNtech vaccine as we know it has to be stored at very low temperatures, whereas the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine can be stored in a fridge and I think what that does is allow opportunities for it to be delivered much closer to where people live and with a little bit more ease. So hopefully with these two vaccines now on stream we will see more people who are in the priority groups for vaccination getting the vaccines. And obviously as we go further down the line when we start to get supplies of the Moderna vaccine, then even more people in priority groups can access this crucial vaccine.

Cllr Jim Millard: Absolutely, the vaccine seems to be offering a lot of hope for a way out for this, and the one cause for concern is unfortunately we have seen what's called colloquially 'anti-vaxxers' perhaps on social media out there, spreading incorrect information about vaccines. And although these people are small in number, they do threaten the UK's mass immunisation COVID programme. Even recently, posters were placed in in the borough's parks that included anti vaccination sentiment and COVID denier messaging. That's really concerning. What's your response to this?

Shannon Katiyo: I think my response to that is we've always relied on vaccines for a really long time since vaccines came on board to help stop the spread of infectious disease, and I'm sure most of the people now would have had some of their childhood vaccines which have helped us to get rid of some of those childhood infectious diseases such as polio, tetanus, and other conditions that people now might not even think of. And obviously, people have never really doubted any of those vaccines and have willingly taken them in order to protect themselves and to protect the rest of the population from illness. Now the vaccines approved for use in the UK have met the same strict

standards of safety, quality, and effectiveness as all those vaccines and other vaccines that people will take. They've gone through the same clinical trials, the same safety checks as all other licensed medicines would go through. The only difference is whilst some of the processes might have been done sequentially in order to try and get this great big, massive effort to get the vaccines available as quickly as possible. Some of those steps have been conducted in parallel, and so that's potentially the change or the difference in terms of why we are fortunate enough to have these vaccines coming along as quickly as they have. Now I think it's also important to mention that you know this information is being targeted. As a local authority we're doing quite a lot of work with our communications team to try and dispel some of this this disinformation.

Cllr Millard: So, what sort of things can we do to target disinformation?

Shannon Katiyo: I think we can do things to target disinformation at organisational levels, but also at individual levels. So, for example, people who are working in the care sector, in care settings, in voluntary organisations where you might encounter people who are eligible for the vaccine or they're in the priority groups to encourage them to get their information from reputable sources of information such as the NHS website, such as the government website. I think individually we can also do our bit by not propelling some of the things that we might come across on social media, or you know, through some of these social networking groups that we might be part of and really actually confronting some of the people we know who are perpetuating some of that information, or actually to change the conversation and signpost those groups or social media users to more responsible and reputable sources of information.

Cllr Jim Millard: It's very important isn't it, that everyone gets vaccinated. I mean, how does that play into it? Obviously if you personally get vaccinated, that gives you protection, but there's a thing about the more people who get vaccinated, the more effective the vaccine is, is that right?

Shannon Katiyo: Yes, that's absolutely right. So, there is a concept that we call herd immunity where when you have a certain proportion of the population vaccinated then that means you can effectively reduce the levels of a disease spreading in the community to the level where it's less likely that those who haven't been vaccinated will get it. Obviously, it's important to remember that even if people have had infection from COVID, they might still be offered longer term or longer lasting protection by still going ahead to get the vaccine.

Cllr Jim Millard: And what's the experience like? If anyone's wondering about what it would involve for them to receive the vaccine?

Shannon Katiyo: Currently, we're encouraging people to obviously wait until they get an invitation from their GP for the vaccine, because as I did mention before, we do have these priority groups, the single biggest risk factor for death or serious illness from COVID is increasing age, so people who are often older age older adults will be the first ones to get their invitations. This could be by text, by

phone, or by letter from their GP practice. And then they will be invited to the GP practice where they would go through the usual questions that you might be asked before you're given a vaccine, and then they will just get the jab in their arm and that's it, really. Now obviously, as with any other medication there might be some side effects noted, but those would be discussed with people at the point where they're getting the vaccine, and obviously they would need to give their consent to get the vaccine.

Shannon: I'd also just like to remind Richmond residents that there have been some reports of a new scam where a person receives a text saying they need to book a vaccination appointment and it takes them to a fake NHS form or website which then asks for their bank details to prove their identity. Please share this information more widely that the NHS will never ask for peoples banking information. This is a texting scam and the scam has been reported in the media.

Cllr Jim Millard: And this is all so important and you know you've talked about the strain on the NHS and how it's affecting not just COVID care itself, but of course you know, even if you think you're in a group that's not particularly risk and someone young might think they won't get serious ill, but you know they might not have thought about the impact if they had to be rushed to hospital for a separate illness or injury it's so important that we all do what we can, and you know listeners know this and there might even be tired of hearing it. But you know I want to ask again, what should we be continuing to do now? Especially given the concerns about this new variant to help stop cases from rising and relieve pressure on the NHS.

Shannon Katiyo: Thank you, so I think the first thing that's important to reiterate is despite all the pressure on the NHS, they have made changes to make sure it is safe for people to be seen during coronavirus. And there are other ways to get medical help and prescriptions, for example online or over the phone. GPs can still do consultations with people over the phone, so I'm urging people not to neglect any urgent medical needs during coronavirus. Now the other measures that we've been following all along still apply even if we now have a new variant of COVID, we all need to continue to follow the government guidance on COVID-19. We need to stay at home. We need to remember to wash our hands all the time. Cover our faces when we're in public spaces and of course, keep our distance from anyone who we don't live in the same in the same household with. Now anyone could have coronavirus, so we all need to act like we have it and everyone else has it - and that will help to keep us safe all the time. We know that one in three people don't show any symptoms, even when they have coronavirus, and they could be spreading it without knowing. From a public health perspective, I want to urge people to keep moving. We know exercise is good for us and we are allowed to exercise once a day, so this is really important. Obviously if you show symptoms of coronavirus, get tested and stay at home, you can order at home test kit on the government website or you can call 119. And in Richmond we do have a couple of testing centres, one at Twickenham Stadium and the other one at Old Deer Park car park. And finally, if you are providing essential work, volunteering or providing support for someone who is vulnerable and you are not experiencing symptoms, you can also apply for a rapid test on the Council website. And if you don't have access then you can call the Council on 020 8891 1411.

Cllr Jim Millard: Thank you so much for your time Shannon. I know you're very busy, so it's very much appreciated. And thanks to everyone for listening. It's been really good to hear from Shannon

about this. It is a scary, a difficult and an exhausting time. And I really hope that everyone is listening at home, is doing OK and you know if you are struggling, that is totally normal and help is available and we've put information about that in this episode's show notes, so check those for further information. The next few weeks are going to be critical, so it's really important as Shannon has pointed out, to stay at home, to do everything we can to protect our loved ones and the NHS.

In our next episode will be talking to the police about how they're managing during the crisis, including making sure people are following the rules. If you have any feedback or questions, please do email us on talk@richmond.gov.uk and feel free to leave a review and subscribe if you're on a platform that allows you to do that. I'm Jim Millard, thanks for listening.