

Dear Colleague,

Can you believe it's July already and it has been more than 100 days since the Prime Minister announced his national lockdown measures back in March?

I'm sure you will all agree that that it's been a heck of a rollercoaster ride over the past few months and many of you are no doubt wondering 'when is this all going to end?'

Unfortunately, there is no easy answer to that one, but I thought it would be useful if I set out our general direction of travel over the coming weeks and months.

You will have seen in the media over the last week or so, a number of local outbreaks have appeared. Leicester has been put back into lockdown and other areas across the UK are being closely monitored, but it is expected further local lockdowns will be seen over the next few months. Further local outbreaks have been linked to cold meat premises and some of those have been pretty close to us, with the nearest being in Merthyr.

It's clear that the virus is still very much with us and isn't going anywhere soon. There remains a real threat and serious concerns around a second spike in the Autumn if we don't remain vigilant. Behaviours such as those experienced at the 'jam packed' Bournemouth beach heightens my concerns that there seems to be a growing number of people who feel that we may now be 'out of the woods' and normality will soon be returning to our lives.

The First Minister continues to progress his cautious approach to unlocking the lockdown across Wales, with expected announcements around the opening of tourism venues, campsites, cafes and pubs taking place over the next few weeks. Our experience of the first week back to school has been positive and, based upon our learning of this week, we will work with Welsh Government to develop the offer for September.

Having reflected upon all of this, as well as constantly reviewing the impact of the virus across the county borough using scientific data from Public Health Wales, I wanted to share with you where we go next. I'm in no doubt that we are able to deliver efficient and effective services to our residents in an agile way, as this has been clearly demonstrated by the amazing work you have all been doing to date.

It is becoming increasingly likely that we will need to continue to work in this flexible and agile way **until the end of the year at least**, as there are too many risks associated with reopening our buildings and allowing staff and the public to return to the office in large numbers.

As I have said on many occasions, your safety is my main priority and this continues to be my position. So, until the end of this year, I want you to continue to work from home. Over recent months, a small number of staff have been required to work from our offices in order to maintain key areas of service delivery, operating on a rota basis. This will continue and will be determined and agreed by your Head of Service. I fully understand that some of you need to access the workplace from time to time

for specific tasks or to use specific equipment that cannot be done remotely. For service specific requirements only, this can continue, but managers will manage this and continuously review this as appropriate. This is in keeping with current Welsh Government guidance.

I am also, very mindful that some staff are really struggling with this way of remote working, particularly in terms of mental health and wellbeing. Senior managers will hold discussions with those individuals who are in this place, to consider the possibility of a limited and controlled return to the workplace, as part of a wider support package. Again, these will be considered on a specific case by case basis by your Head of Service. So, if you have any concerns please contact your Head of Service or colleagues within HR.

Please be clear, this is not a signal to rush back to the office, my position remains clear in that we will continue to work from home wherever possible, with only a small number of staff working from our offices in a controlled way and this will continue for the foreseeable future.

There are, of course, many staff who have been working 'normally' throughout the outbreak – particularly colleagues across our frontline services, who continue to provide our key services every day. Their contributions are really valued and I want to offer my appreciation for the brilliant work they do each and every day. These staff are not able to work from home or in other agile ways like office-based staff. It is clear that we cannot achieve a 'one size fits all' approach, as our needs across the Council are so different, so the flexible approach we have put in place must continue to operate, whilst working within the current regulations.

As you know, Penallta House and our other corporate buildings have been closed to the public since the start of the lockdown with only a core number of staff operating from the buildings. However, I am aware Facilities Management are receiving an increasing number of requests via the online booking system to use the Chamber and other main meeting rooms within our buildings.

Given that our corporate buildings will remain closed until the end of December, these facilities therefore cannot be booked through the usual system and any requests must be submitted to the FM Team in the first instance, as each request will be considered by CMT.

Leadership team continue to develop proposals for my consideration, as to how we can manage a safe, phased return of staff to the workplace, once the regulations allow, and appropriate risk assessments are being prepared. Additionally, significant changes to the physical working environment to make our buildings Covid secure will be required. Our return to work will be underpinned by two main principles of maximising agile working whilst minimising the time in our buildings. This approach must, of course, support the specific needs of the service and the safety of staff and the public.

I will continue to constantly review this position, and our approach will remain to be informed by the scientific information and the guidance offered by Welsh Government. Discussions with our Trade Unions will also continue as we constantly

review our position in line with the emerging Welsh Government guidance and regulations.

Please continue to take care of yourselves, keep safe and have a great weekend.

Take care

Christina