

Dear colleague,

I hope you are keeping well and enjoying the warm weather (although I understand it is forecast to change over the weekend!)

I enjoyed a lovely day off with my family on Monday and it was great to be able to pop into Abergavenny for the first time in months. A handful of shops were open and the measures they had all worked so hard to put in place worked really well. However, you could see how people were easily forgetting to socially distance when walking up and down the high street. It really is something you have to constantly think about.

The re-opening of non-essential retail earlier this week, has begun to bring many of our town centres back to life. Last weekend, the highways teams worked tirelessly to put in place all the social distancing signage and other measures in readiness for Monday morning. We expect to see a relaxation of the “5 mile travel guidance” in a fortnight and the gradual reopening of tourism/hospitality and possibly pubs and restaurants in three weeks. You can now do more outdoor sports, gather for prayer, etc. Things are definitely changing. Over the next few weeks/months we will be making some further changes, with some areas being re-zoned for cycling and walking, areas designated for outdoor eating and new road markings introduced. Officers are currently engaging with traders and other key stakeholders to seek their views. Another big task but we are onto it.

Next Monday our schools re-open. Capacity will be limited so unless you are the child of a key worker, attendance will be limited to a day a week for the three weeks that remain of this term. Schools will also be maintaining distance learning support and head teachers will not only be ensuring safe environments but their minds will have to scan forward to September and prepare for many different potential delivery scenarios. For example 2 metre social distancing, 1 metre social distancing, expansion of a phased return, more distance learning, a return to full lock down – I could go on! These scenarios have to be prepared for, whilst recognising constraints such as only 10% of school transport being available. It's not lost on me that the pressures on parents are likely to build as employers increasingly expect them to return to work with many previous childcare arrangements not back in place and unfortunately for many, previous employment will not be there.

I'm also considering our own approach to employee welfare. Many of you have not stopped for over 15 weeks, be that in your typical role, a redeployed role or working from home. I've said many times that we will not sustain our performance unless we allow time to recover. I just want to spend a few moments talking to those of you who are working from home if I may. Whilst many of you have enjoyed this way of working and want it to remain with us as a core element of how we work. I also know it isn't the panacea that many believe it is. Working from a kitchen table, eroding gaps between work and family life, for many home schooling your children at the same time and learning to be away from busy social environments that most of us enjoy. The stresses and strains will be telling, I know, and some of you will be struggling and feeling isolated. It is now time to start thinking about a slow return to our place of work. I still believe that you are better off being at home if you can and are comfortable to be, but some of you are telling me that the walls are closing in

and a different environment, if only for a short period, will help. So I have asked the Heads of Service to start planning a return to our buildings but with the main focus still upon agile working and minimising the number and the time, staff are in the buildings. I want to stress that this is not a pressure to get back, this is an attempt to assist those that would like a change of scenery. I am sure we will find a balance and I will update you over the next few weeks with this.

Last Wednesday saw the first virtual meeting of the Cabinet and it went exceptionally well. I do hope that you have taken the time to look at the video footage of the meeting as the Leader and all Members of the Cabinet offered their appreciation of the work that you have all done over the last few months. They were absolutely amazed with the scale of what you have delivered and the impact that you have made to so many. I must admit it, it was quite an emotional moment!

So that's all for now. I'm looking forward to meeting some of you at the first meeting of the "Caerphilly Cwtch" later this afternoon. It's your opportunity to put your questions directly to me. It's something new – so let's see how it goes!

Take care
Christina