

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 1

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing and Sport:

Covid-19 vaccine rollout in Reading

Please can the Lead Councillor update me on the rollout of the Covid-19 vaccine in Reading. In particular what are the local challenges? And does the Lead Councillor agree with me that as well as prioritising the most vulnerable in society frontline workers should also be prioritised?

REPLY by Councillor Hoskin (Lead Councillor for Health, Wellbeing and Sport):

Delivery of the vaccination programme is being led by our colleagues in the NHS and organised at the Berkshire West footprint. Three routes of vaccination are being used:

1. Hospital Hubs
2. GP surgeries- often one surgery used per "Primary Care Network"
3. Mass vaccination sites

Rollout via all three is progressing well locally, with our Hospital Hubs in Wokingham and at the Royal Berks delivering vaccine to frontline health and social care staff. Every local Primary Care Network is now offering vaccine to over 80's and care home residents before moving through subsequent priority groups that have been determined nationally. Residents will be directly contacted by the NHS when it is their "turn" for vaccination and don't need to proactively contact their GP to request vaccination. A Mass Vaccination site will be going live in the coming weeks.

It is clear that the mass rollout of vaccination needs to ramp up hugely over the coming weeks if government promises on this are to be kept.

Unfortunately, and somewhat ridiculously, the NHS are not, at the moment, allowing us to publicly share specific vaccine delivery numbers. A regular update on progress from the NHS to councillors and MPs is promised but has not been seen yet.

I agree that vaccinating front line workers is important. This is why we have the vaccine available at the two Hospital Hub sites I have mentioned, and these sites are delivering vaccine to the frontline health and social care staff in line with the relevant national guidance. This includes staff that work for the NHS, council, commissioned providers and the Voluntary and Community Sector. Furthermore I strongly believe the government need to remember all essential frontline workers who put themselves in harm's way in order to ensure our town continues to function. This includes school staff, drivers, shopworkers, police, firefighters and frontline council staff, but probably not MPs as suggested by the Conservative MP for Winchester. Our Lead Councillor for Education, Ashley Pearce, and Matt Rodda MP have publicly supported the Reading secondary school leaders' call for school staff to be prioritised for the vaccine whilst we, the Council and Brighter Futures for Children, have made representations to the Department for Education as well.

In terms of challenges, it is not only about the logistics of rollout or vaccine supply chains, but ensuring we communicate and engage with people effectively about the vaccine and address residents' concerns or "misinformation" they might receive. For example, we and NHS colleagues are regularly explaining that although it has been developed at pace to strengthen our pandemic response, the vaccine is safe, has passed all the usual regulatory checks and there is strong evidence of its effectiveness. It is also true that for those who are vaccinated, they still need to follow the same lockdown and "hands, face, space" rules as everyone else, as they can still inadvertently pass the virus on to others and no vaccine will provide 100% immunity.

COUNCILLOR QUESTION NO. 2

Councillor White to ask the Lead Councillor for Housing:

Long-term empty council properties

Council owned 117 Cumberland Road has now been empty for approximately four years. Can the council confirm how many long-term empty properties it has and why this property has been empty for so long when Reading is in a housing crisis?

REPLY by Councillor Ennis (Lead Councillor for Housing):

The Housing crisis in Reading is a long-standing challenge and remains a priority for this administration. As you will be aware the new Affordable Housing SPD has recently been consulted on, when approved it will enable us to secure some truly affordable housing as a result of the private developments in the town. Also, the Council's own new build scheme continues to progress with contractors on site for 31 homes, starts on site in the spring for a further 127 homes, and planning obtained for another 23. A total of 181 new Council homes in the next three years.

Reviewing the Council owned assets has formed part of a strategic review to enable the council to maximise the value from sites and help meet its priority for improving access to decent housing. 117 Cumberland Road has formed part of this review and the site is likely to be developed in 2021.

In terms of Council owned homes there are currently 45 long term empty properties as follows:

- 26 are within the Dee Park Regeneration area and due for demolition as part of the development,
- 11 have structural issues and solution/ estate renewal options are being considered,
- Four are being used as show flats for trialling and demonstrating new environmental measures we are looking to install,
- Three are General Fund properties that have not previously been used for social housing, although options are being considered for these to be converted. This includes 117 Cumberland Road, and the Willows which is due to be discussed elsewhere on this agenda,
- One home is being held to support a project being delivered by Brighter Futures for Children.