

A new beginning?

The January 'How Life Changed' report ended with the question, 'would the longer February days bring any substantial changes? Doubtful'. How wrong I was as, on 22 February, the government announced its 'roadmap' out of lockdown. It had four stages with a 5-week interval to assess results: (1) 8 March, schools to reopen, followed on 29 March by a relaxation of the rule of six people meeting outdoors; (2) 12 April, non-essential shops, community centres and outdoor sports could reopen, as could pubs but only to serve outdoors; (3) 17 May, indoor venues like theatres and cinemas to reopen, along with indoor hospitality; and (4) 21 June, all legal restrictions to be off. All subject to review and reversal if numbers dictated.

The government had learnt its lesson and was being cautious, saying this lockdown must be the last, no more stop-start. Yet Tory backbenchers were snapping at their heels again, saying businesses were on their knees and the economy needed to be opened up. For once the government resisted, saying they were relying on 'data not dates' to allow a cautious return to 'normality'.

There were two reasons for the roadmap: firstly, the number of hospitalisations and deaths from Covid was rapidly decreasing and, although it was still higher than in the first wave in Spring 2020, it was recognised that the extreme pressure on the NHS had passed. And secondly, we celebrated the huge success of the national vaccination programme, with over 20 million jabbed at the end of the month (nearly a third of the population). In an effort to persuade the naysayers, even the Queen urged people to 'think about other people' when offered a Covid jab. And as the WHO had said 'no one is safe until everyone is safe'.

Cherwell still had the highest number of cases in Oxfordshire after Oxford City, while in the Deddington/Steeple Aston/Heyford area the number dropped from a high of 50 to 4 by 19 February.

Our local vaccination programme continued apace with more vaccination centres being made available at Kassam Stadium in Oxford, in Buckingham and Milton Keynes. All those 70 and over had been offered a jab, and the conversation turned to who should be next: the next age cohort down or those perhaps in most need, like teachers and the Police.

Locally, the Windmill hurried to complete projects that were better done while the Centre was closed, with major roof repairs and indoor toilet refurbishment among items on the agenda. The Holly Tree Club was undergoing a major refurb of its own during this time.

Meanwhile our local councils were not slow to help those struggling throughout the Covid crisis: we had a £4,000 grant from Cherwell District Council to help set up a Deddington offshoot of the Banbury Foodbank; £1,000 from Oxfordshire County Council to pay for Christmas dinners, with the left over (cash not dinner!) for a post-lockdown feast and put towards Christmas dinner 2021; and £2,000 to the Primary School from Community First Oxfordshire, topped up by Deddington Charity Estates, the Church and local residents. This provided 15 laptops to children who otherwise had had no access to online learning. (It's

interesting to note in passing that throughout the most recent lockdown the Primary School had enough pupils attending for every teacher to be in the school, and for the daily school buses to run.)

Another scheme run by CDC with EU funding (!) enabled us to look at ways to advertise 'Deddington is open for business – safely'. The aim was to improve both employee and shopper safety and increase confidence in the economic recovery.

Ideas for spending under another two schemes were still being researched: the Containing Outbreak Management Fund offered £6,300; and Supporting Communities Through Covid-19 offered up to £10,000 for community action projects with a maximum of £50,000 for collaborative, broad-reach projects.

So there were funding schemes out there and we had various teams – the Parish Council, Covid Emergency Team, Windmill Management Committee and the Church – all looking to take full advantage of them.

Let's see where the country is this time next month.