

More cautious progress

The government's outlined roadmap started working. On 8 March schools reopened followed, on 29 March, by a relaxation of the rule of six people meeting outdoors. The idea was to release the brakes gradually and to monitor the effect on the number of Covid cases, to manage expectations. The overall trend was still hugely downwards, with a little levelling off at the end of the month after schools reopened. The government was painfully aware this must surely be the last lockdown – 'cautious but irreversible'. Liberties had been crushed for everyone, life was smaller and greyer, and there were warnings that social distancing and face coverings would be with us for some considerable time.

In the Cherwell area there were 25 cases per 100,000 people in the week 20–26 March (the average area in England had 55). In the Deddington/Steeple Aston/Heyford area the number dropped to zero.

On the vaccination front, over 30 million people – over half the national's population – had received at least one jab, sometimes two. But that left nearly half the UK population still not vaccinated and every effort was being made to vaccinate the vaccine doubters and younger generations by early summer.* Only then could we begin to breathe easy.

In the media, conversations still swirled around vaccination passports or certificates to allow foreign travel (still illegal) or a pint in a pub (still on hold until 12 April).

The Parish Council received a £6,382 grant from the Containing Outbreak Management Fund to bolster employee and shopper safety and increase confidence in the economic recovery. Funds were available for face coverings, hand sanitisers and deep cleaning premises.

At the end of the month, the relaxation of the 'rule of six' was a real game changer. It coincided with beautifully warm spring weather which lifted spirits and allowed family groups to picnic on the grass. The Farmers' Market returned, well organised and heaving; outdoor sports resumed at the Windmill and a full cricket season was promised, as were Easter church services – albeit ticket only. We had an opening date of 19 April for the library, closed for over a year and reopening with reduced hours.

Unlike the lockdown release last summer there were signs that some people this time were respecting social distancing outdoors – and others not. The message has got through to some that we were not done with Covid and its variants – far from it. The abnormal is still the normal.

* For an account of Deddington's 19th-century anti-vaxxers, see www.deddingtonhistory.uk/plaguesandpestilence/anti-vaxxersinthe19thcentury