

Holding our breath yet again

And it was all going so well. At the end of May we were meant to be looking forward to a complete lifting of restrictions on social contact on 21 June, and I'd hoped to be reporting on a resumption of 'normal' life in Deddington. But it was not to be, so this piece concentrates mostly on the national picture.

The bad news was that we were hit by a hugely transmissible strain of the virus, the Delta variant, first identified in India. Politics were again thought to be involved and the government faced huge criticism for delaying a ban on travellers arriving from that country. At first the outbreaks were in localised areas in the northwest but quickly spread across the country. Numbers were far higher in the UK than other European countries, either because of greater numbers travelling between India and the UK or because the UK was able to spot variants more easily.

By mid-June it was becoming clear that we were starting a third wave. The number of cases among the young rose exponentially though cases were not so severe that they needed hospitalisation and there were few deaths. In the last week of June there was a 66% increase in the number of school pupils with confirmed coronavirus infections. A pupil testing positive meant that whole bubbles of children were sent home, sometimes whole schools closed. The discussion moved to whether on-site testing was a better solution.

The good news was that, in the race between the virus and the vaccine, the jab was winning. Over 18s were now also being vaccinated, and they came forward in their thousands, particularly in 'Grab a Jab' weekend at the end of June.

By the end of the month, in the Cherwell area 78% of residents had had their first jab, and 57% had received their second dose of the vaccine – a little under the national average. Three cases were reported in the Deddington/Astons area. The intention was that by the end of July everyone over the age of 18 would have been offered their first jab.

The Government's credibility was temporarily shot to pieces again, this time over the antics of the Health Secretary which led to more accusations of 'one rule for them and one for the rest of us'.

From the beginning of the month pressure from scientists and the public was increasing to delay the 21 June release date. And on 14 June a four-week delay was announced, with the new date of 19 July deemed 'irreversible' by the government. Predictably there were howls of anguish from hospitality night-time sectors, theatres and the travel industry.

Inevitably there were inconsistencies and winners and losers as lockdown came to an end, but the huge success of the vaccine rollout programme meant that we could begin to see an end to it all. And no local Covid-related Facebook postings meant that the virus was becoming something we had learned to live with.