

Cllr Jim Millard: Hello, welcome back to Talk Richmond with me, your host, Jim Millard. In this episode I'm joined by the Director of Public Health, Shannon Katiyo for an important discussion on the current COVID-19 situation and what people should be doing this winter to help stop the spread of the virus. Thank you for joining us, Shannon.

Shannon Katiyo: Thank you Jim, and it's a pleasure to be here again.

Cllr Millard: Yes, we've had the pleasure of your company before and last time we spoke to you was back in May when we were in stage three of the government's roadmap out of lockdown. We now out of lockdown and learning to live with COVID-19 and in this scenario our main line of defence is vaccinations rather than lockdowns. However, it's almost winter and there's been a fair amount in the news suggesting that our case numbers may get worse. So, I just wanted to start off by asking what is it about cold weather that could lead to a rise in infections.

Shannon: Thank you, so as we're approaching winter, there are a number of potential interactions between cold weather and COVID-19 that we would be concerned about. We'll be concerned about people who've got shared risk factors for poor outcomes from both the cold weather as well as COVID, and this includes older people, people with underlying health conditions like diabetes, heart disease, respiratory disease and also people who are pregnant. Or, for example, experiencing homelessness or rough sleeping are also at increased risk of poor outcomes this winter. The other concern is that the human body responds in several different ways to exposure to cold weather and even at temperatures that would be considered as relatively mild, exposure to cold temperature has a range of effects, including increased blood pressure, increased risk of clotting, suppression of the immune system, and a diminished capacity of the lungs to fight off infection. So actually, we need to understand more how these effects of cold weather on the body could interact with COVID infection.

We still have quite a lot to learn about how COVID infection affects the body. However, it is possible that clinical outcomes may be more severe if a person is exposed to both cold and COVID relatively at the same time. So, and then we also know that people's behaviour changes in the winter. People are more likely to spend more time indoors and also if their socialising there might do that indoors and then they're also wider impacts in terms of, you know, more people could have increased exposure to cold temperatures due to changes in patterns, patterns of energy use. We've got more people working from home. Some people are experiencing potentially fuel poverty and reduced access to warm public spaces. So, all of these things lead to us having more concern over the winter period.

Cllr Millard: It's a very good point Shannon. I should say at this point, as a councillor, I'm aware that if you are concerned about paying your fuel bills, do get in touch with the Council because we have a range of things that can help or grants, we can give people if they're in that situation, so there's no need to go without fuel this winter. I think that's really important and but to come back to what you were saying in terms of staying safe this winter and the vaccines, there are two as I understand it, to essential vaccines, flu and the COVID-19 booster. Can you tell us a little bit more about why they are so important and who can get them?

Shannon: Thank you, that's so that's absolutely right. These two vaccines are really important this winter and the flu vaccination particularly is important because firstly, flu levels were extremely low globally in 2020 to 21 during that winter period because of mask wearing, social distancing, and, of course, we had restricted international travel. So as a result, there is a lower level of population immunity against flu this winter, so really this will be the first winter in the United Kingdom when seasonal flu and other respiratory viruses are circulating at the same time as COVID-19. Now secondly, if you get flu and COVID-19 at the same time, research is showing that you're more likely to be

seriously ill and then the last thing is obviously getting vaccinated against flu and COVID will offer you the best protection and also offer protection for those around you from both these seriously potential illnesses. I think the other thing to add is like some other vaccines, the levels of protection may begin to wane over time. We know this already, so the COVID-19 vaccine booster dose has been brought about to especially help people to extend the protection that they've already gained from the first two doses and then to give them longer term protection. And so, in short you know the booster will help reduce the risk of you potentially needing admission to hospital this winter. Actually, it's quite straightforward to find out information on the boosters or to book your booster vaccine on the NHS.uk website.

Cllr Millard: OK, so and who is eligible for the booster? Or is that something they should look up on the website?

Shannon: Well, there are a number of people who are eligible and there's a list there are on the NHS website and primarily it will be based on age, so people over the age of 50 and we've just heard an announcement on the news today that you know potentially soon the over 40s could become eligible as well. And then we've got people with long term conditions. Some of the ones that I've mentioned and then we'll have the other groups as well who might be eligible even if they don't have a long-term condition. So, the best thing is to go on the website, look whether you're eligible. If you're unsure, actually, when you try to book, the website can advise you whether it thinks you're eligible and, and if you find for some reason that you're not getting an offer through the website, then you can your GP practice if you think you should be eligible.

Cllr Millard: OK, thank you, thank you. And what about the vaccination program for children aged 12 to 15? How successful has this been?

Shannon: So, a lot of hard work has gone into this vaccination program and the school age immunisation service led by Hounslow Richmond Community Healthcare Trust, together with the council and with SW London CCG have been coordinating a huge effort around this programme. So, at the beginning of November, around 45% of children aged 12 to 15 had been vaccinated in Richmond and over 500 vaccinations were given on a single day during the half term, which is really good. Now we're looking at the potential for a mop up service because we know that since the program has started, there are some children who were not able to attend the first time around and so we're looking at how we can pick those up. And we also have a process in place through the local authority to invite children who are schooled at home, so they don't miss out on the vaccinations. There is a walk-in clinic that's available for 12- to 15-year-olds that were set up at the Harlequins Rugby ground a few weeks ago in Twickenham, and that's still operating and further information on other vaccination sites can also be found by going onto the South West London CCG website or the Council website.

Cllr Millard: Thank you Shannon, and it's interesting what you're saying about the figures there. For how many have already been vaccinated, I wonder what we what sort of figure? If you can put a figure on it, I don't know where we're aiming for and what will happen if not enough 12- to 15-year-olds are vaccinated?

Shannon: So, there isn't a magic figure that I can put my finger on in terms of how many children we would like to get vaccinated, but I think you know the point is this - whether it's the 12th to 15-year-olds or any other age group, the more people we can get vaccinated with the COVID vaccine, the more people that we can protect and potentially the more lives we can save as well, I think the key thing to remember is vaccinating children is really about reducing the need for children to take time off school

and also reduce the risk of spread of COVID-19 within the schools. We've seen this at the beginning of every term that even if the rate of infection were relatively low, as soon as the school children return to school, we start to see increasing rates of transmission in this age group, and then of course they take it back to their homes and their communities and then we have outbreaks in the schools as well. So, the 12- to 15-year-old vaccination program will help to reduce the disruption in face-to-face education for children this winter and also the chance of further outbreaks happening in our schools.

Cllr Millard: You make a good point there. Because we were aware of Richmond upon Thames has recently experienced quite high case numbers, even ranking as the highest COVID rate in London at one point I believe in the middle of October. And you start you sort of touched on that, but I wonder if you could tell us a bit more about why you think that is?

Shannon: Yes, thank you, and unfortunately COVID-19 is not one of those things where we would like to be highly ranked, but actually at this was the case after the autumn term started in the schools and I think the key thing to remember is you know, throughout the last 18 months the pandemic has shown that it can change course very rapidly and unexpectedly. So, to some extent it still remains a little bit hard to predict with a certainty what will happen. But there are several factors that played that we know contribute to the fluctuations that we see in the rates, and these include the levels of vaccination in a particular community, the levels of social contact and interaction that people are having, mobility in terms of people using public transport more and traveling to places of work or congregation, and also particularly the start of the school term. Now other factors, include holidays and travel because previously we have also seen some little spikes in Richmond that tends to start maybe midway through the summer holidays or just after a half term holiday, for example. So, a range of factors there in play in terms of why we might have seen increasing rates of infection in Richmond. I am holding my breath at the moment because we've started to see the rates go down again, which is really positive for Richmond and we're looking to the next couple of weeks to see that downward trend established to close, or where we think that Richmond ought to be in terms of the rate of new cases. I think the important message for members of the public is to remain vigilant because, you know, we're not out of the woods yet with COVID it will be with us for some time.

Cllr Millard: So, do you think people aren't taking enough personal action to stop the spread of COVID? For example, are people testing themselves enough?

Shannon: Yes, so we do have some indications when we look at the public health data in terms of what's happening, so we've got an idea of the rate of testing. We've got an idea of the kind of settings where we're tending to see outbreaks being reported, and I think you know, the first thing is to absolutely congratulate Richmond residents in terms of testing, because we've continued to see a really good rate of testing for Richmond, which is usually generally higher than the London average and also higher than the national average. So, we know people are getting tested and people are making use of the testing offers that we have in the borough.

Now obviously it's important for people to continue to follow some of the other measures that that we have available. What we call non pharmaceutical interventions. So, people to try and you know, reduce level of mixing with people they normally wouldn't mix with. You know to meet in well ventilated spaces and preferably outdoors. I know it's getting a little bit colder if people can ensure that the spaces their meeting in are well ventilated that will help. Also, in some settings where it's indicated to continue to wear their face coverings, and I think all of this will help us to make a way forward through winter that doesn't drastically change the course of action.

Cllr Millard: Yes, well thank you. And I mean it's clear we need to continue to take it seriously and you know you've been very clear about that. How do we get people to remember that COVID is still here?

Shannon: Well, I think you know. Certainly, we can remind people from, you know, from the figures you only have to look at the last seven days up to the 8th of November where 595 people in Richmond had a confirmed positive test result. So even if you're not seeing people who are symptomatic, and we know that one in three people may not show any symptoms, actually the figures are telling us that COVID is still circulating from March this year up until the 10th of November. We sadly had 302 deaths from Covid, so even though the unfortunate number of deaths is down to relatively low levels thanks to the vaccination program, but we do continue to see in those sad and rare instances people dying from COVID and I think you know that should be kind of a stark reminder and warning from us that you know whilst the COVID numbers have maybe disappeared from the mainstream media and you know the daily updates, actually in public health we do look at these figures on a daily basis. We know people are still being infected. People are still being admitted into hospital and sadly a few individuals are still succumbing to COVID-19.

I think the important thing that I can emphasize that will help us, you know to see this through the winter and disrupt more measures are these five things you know: ensuring that buildings are well ventilated, wearing a face covering on public transport and in crowded indoor settings, regular hand washing, it's great for COVID it's great for flu and other infectious disease, as well as people turning up for their offer of vaccinations and the booster whenever they've been offered it.

Cllr Millard: Well, thank you and I hope coming on talk Richmond to talk about this to our listeners has helped to get their message across. What happens if cases do rise in Richmond and across the country?

Shannon: Well, the government have clearly said that they will continue to monitor the data closely and take action to support and protect the NHS when necessary. So, in preparation the government did publish earlier contingency plan with a plan A and a Plan B and made it clear that if plan A, which is what you know the conditions are where we're currently living within, is not sufficient to maintain the virus at manageable levels then potentially a Plan B could be enacted, which may have further measures in place over and above what we have currently. So, I think you know will really be closely monitoring this as well at a local level to see what's happening and strongly encouraging all our residents to continue to do all the good things that they're doing to prevent this potential escalation.

Cllr Millard: Thank you Shannon. Well as ever has been absolutely fascinating talking to you. Thank you for coming to talk to us, and thanks for your time today.

Shannon: Thank you.

Cllr Millard: It's clear we all need to be doing what we can pay our part to protect ourselves and those around us and the NHS. So, if you're eligible then the best protection is to get your vaccines. Whether that's your booster jab, your first or second jab or the flu vaccine. I'm getting mine tomorrow, Shannon. So, there you go. And as always if you're listening, you can check the show notes for further information and please if you have the opportunity to do so on your service, do like this episode and leave a review. Five stars I hope that'll be real shots in the arm for me. And yes, I have used that joke before. I'm Jim Millard. Thanks for listening.