

Cllr Jim Millard: Hello, you're listening to Talk Richmond with me your host Jim Millard. For this week's episode I'm joined by the Director of Public Health, Shannon Katiyo, to talk about the roadmap out of lockdown and the new coronavirus variants first detected in India and now spreading across the UK. So, without further ado, thank you very much for joining us, Shannon, I know how busy you are.

Shannon Katiyo: That's fine, good morning, Jim.

Cllr Millard: Nice to see you. So, we're now in stage three of the road map out of lockdown, and we finally allowed to sit inside our favourite cafes, pubs and restaurants again. However, as lots of people will be aware, a variant of COVID-19 known as Variant B1617.2 has been classed as a variant of concern. And cases have been rising with more than 3424 cases in England, confirmed in Public Health England data from the 12th of May. Shannon, what do we mean by variants of concern?

Shannon: Thank you. So, the first thing to say is fortunately, in Richmond we are at a point where the overall number of new cases is really low now. And so, on a daily basis, we're seeing really just a handful of cases of very small numbers. I think you know all viruses change overtime and they mutate, so this is absolutely normal, it's expected that we would have different strains of the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID, but listeners will remember that the B117 variant, which was first identified in Kent, was detected back in December of last year and eventually it resulted in a rise in COVID infections. We had a cancelled Christmas. And you know eventually it returned into lockdown in January of this year. And since then, we have had other variants of concern.

Public Health England always assess variants. They're always studying viruses to check whether they've developed concerning features, for example, whether they are passing on from animals to people, how readily they spread between people, how severe an infection there causing and also where the treatments and vaccines that we currently have are working against those variants. So, depending on the risk assessment by an expert committee, a variant that is under investigation might eventually be designated as a variant of concern.

Cllr Millard: OK, and that's what's happening in this case, and thank you for that detail, I think it's very helpful for people to hear. Why is it that we should be concerned about this new variant then?

Shannon: The first thing is that there's evidence that this variant is causing an increasing number of infections across the country, and also that it may spread more easily than the Kent variant, which is now the dominant variant of SARS-CoV-2 in the United Kingdom. You remember that the Health Secretary recently reported in May that cases of the variant have now been identified across 86 Local Authorities are in the country, and more recently we've had some clusters of cases in the northwest of England and also in London.

But actually, there is a lot of work that's happening to try and identify any cases and stop any onward transmission. So, one of the things is across the country most of any COVID-19 positive samples just from the PCR testing, not the rapid testing that people do at home, are now being sent for further laboratory investigation to work out whether any variance of concern are involved. We've also got waste water monitoring that's been in place now for quite a while and rapidly developing in terms of what they can do with it and that kind of gives some early indications of what spreading from particular areas that are covered by that waste water network, so that's been quite useful in terms of some of the tools that we have to have a general idea of what's happening. Because of course, as you know, not all people with COVID-19 will have symptoms. And then the third thing is in some areas they're now enhancing the rollout of vaccines, so you have heard some of the announcements around ensuring that people have had their first dose of vaccine present for their second dose and potentially try to book an earlier appointment because we know that two doses work better in terms of giving people a good protection against the virus.

It is quite interesting talking about variants, but I think the important thing for listeners to remember is that all the current public health measures that we have in place is still important. So regardless what variant we're talking about, we should all still be washing our hands covering our faces in public places, keeping our space from people who are not from our households and meeting in fresh air. And of course, get

two doses of vaccine if you've already had the first one, and if you develop symptoms, get a test.

Cllr Millard: Yes, so thanks Shannon, that's very comprehensive and just to go back on that quickly and ask a few questions. What about the role of the vaccine? Do we know if the vaccine works with this new variant and whether the successful rollout of the vaccine program will mean the road map out of lockdown will continue?

Shannon: Yeah, so currently there's no evidence that the variant causes more ill, more severe illness. That's the first thing to remember. Or that any of the regulated vaccines that we now currently have in the UK would not protect against it. So, the vaccines do work and actually some recent work by Public Health England have shown that two doses of the COVID-19 vaccines are highly effective against the B1617.2 variant.

Cllr Millard: So quite a few of us have had one dose. What about that situation?

Shannon: So, if you've had one dose and you already have an appointment to get your second dose, then absolutely make sure that you get your second dose because that will give you better and longer lasting protection. Some people who have had booked their appointment after a 12-week period are being invited to rebook their appointment earlier within an 8-week period because there's increased availability of vaccines. And obviously that will give them full of protection. And the more people we can protect then the more we can stop the help to stop the transmission of the variant.

Cllr Millard: And what about for those of us who may have had one vaccination so far? And our second vaccination is booked, but it's sort of a while in the future. What's the situation there?

Shannon: Yes, so just recently NHS England confirmed that they are bringing second doses forward for COVID vaccinations for people over the age of 50 and those who are in the at-risk groups. So, these are some of the people who were in the early cohorts from cohort one to nine who might have already had their first dose and instead of waiting for 12 weeks, they can now book an appointment within eight weeks of their first dose

Cllr Millard: And so, you already touched on this certain extent, but I just wanted to ask again, what's the situation looking like locally in Richmond upon Thames?

Shannon: I think it's an opportunity to actually congratulate the residents of Richmond because they've been absolutely fantastic in stepping forward for their vaccines and actually, we do have some cohorts of people in the first phase of the vaccination program where we've nearly vaccinated all the people in the in that age cohort so that's absolutely brilliant. To date, over 105,000 people have had their first dose in Richmond, and some further 53,000 people have also had their second dose. Obviously, for those who've had their first dose and they haven't had their second dose, please do come forward and ensure that you get that fuller and longer lasting protection.

Cllr Millard: Thank you, Shannon, yes and I would echo that very proud of our community for achieving that and what advice do you have finally really just to residents on keeping safe as we do move through this next phase of the pandemic?

Shannon: Yeah, so I think you know we are in a fairly good position, but we can't be complacent and I would strongly urge everyone to continue following all the all the rules and all the guidance that that we've had to date, because the best way to control the virus and protect your friends and family is to get vaccinated when you're called to do so, encourage others to do the same. And of course, continue to follow the national guidance. Remember hands, face space, fresh air, even if you've had the vaccine.

Cllr Millard: Ok, well thank you very much, Shannon. It's been great talking to you as usual.

Cllr Millard: Massive thanks to Shannon for coming on the podcast and for updating us on COVID and on the variants of concern. I'd like to reiterate what Shannon just said about remaining vigilant and following the rules whilst out and about enjoying our borough once again. So that's it for today. Please do share this with anyone you think might be interested. Please do give us a review if you're able to on that sort of service, do feel free to give us five stars that would be a real shot in the arm for us, ooh that's a bit of a cheesy one, I do apologise. But you know, this is a good time to say it's been the final episode of Talk Richmond Series Two. We are now going to be taking a break before beginning the next series which I'm looking forward to. If you

have any feedback or thoughts on what you'd like to hear in Series 3, do email us on talk@richmond.gov.uk. Thank you so much to all our listeners. I'm Jim Millard.
Thanks for listening.