

Why has Government placed both Dorset and BCP Councils into Tier 2 restrictions?

While I realise that many people will be frustrated and dismayed by the decision about going into Tier 2 on December 2nd, as Director of Public Health, I support the decision Government has taken, on public health grounds. This is based purely from the perspective of the need to reduce our infection rates. Infections were climbing rapidly in both Council areas before lockdown on November 5th, when effectively both areas were under Tier 1 measures. These were not sufficient to control the spread of the virus, which is passing mainly through contact between households.

If we exited lockdown at our current infection rates, then Tier 1 restrictions would not be sufficient to continue to bring rates down, and we would risk having to go back into tougher measures. Avoiding this potential yo-yo situation is a more sensible course of action, although I realise the undoubted difficulties that the restrictions are bringing for us all.

A second reason is that there were several factors being considered, not just our headline infection rates. This includes the infection rate in older people, the impact on the care sector, and pressure on our local hospitals - all of which continue to be a concern in both Council areas. Taking into account all of these measures, it is my view that Dorset Council would still be placed into Tier 2 restrictions, even discounting the higher rates in the BCP Council area.

The roadmap to reach Tier 1, and achieve further freedoms is to keep faith in obeying the rules now, stopping social mixing between households, and to further bring our infection rates down. If we all continue to do that, as hard as it is, we stand a good chance of reaching the next review on December 16 with a strong chance of a positive decision to move to Tier 1. By then, if infections continue to fall, we can expect less pressure on our hospitals, and a falling infection rate in our older population, all of which will be crucial in how that decision is made.

A further point has been asked about whether our hospitals could effectively be considered separately for each Council, to support the decision-making process. This would be extremely difficult because of the way that our health and care system operates as a single integrated care system, spanning both Council areas. The acute hospitals each admit patients from across the county, from both Council areas. Further, because of the need to balance pressures in the hospital system, NHS colleagues work as a single system to try to ensure as much capacity as possible is available in the right place, and at the right time. It would simply not be possible to designate Dorset County Hospital as the COVID hospital for the Dorset Council area in this way.

I do realise that there are many other considerations affecting people's health and wellbeing as the pandemic continues, but from the perspective of the very real need to keep from having our local NHS overwhelmed, and to continue to ensure we have the right level of critical care capacity to care for all who require it in our county, I consider it was necessary to make this tough decision now, in order to secure a better chance of a more sustainable future and a return to low COVID rates once more.

yours sincerely

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Director of Public Health
Dorset and BCP Councils