

Like everyone else I'm disappointed with the confirmation that the lifting of restrictions has been delayed by four weeks. With the vaccination roll-out going so well locally thanks to the efforts of our NHS, CCG, public health and council staff, and the overwhelming majority of people still following all the advice and doing everything they can to keep each other safe, it's tough to take an extension. However, with the new Delta/Indian variant causing case numbers to rise, a short delay in fully opening up was sadly inevitable.

Of course, we heard it via leaks and 'off the record' briefings to the media first – as always – rather than directly from the Prime Minister. It was obvious they'd decided to delay Step 4 some time last week, but they kept the public and businesses hanging on until Monday teatime for the confirmation.

The blame for this delay lies firmly at the door of the government. The public, NHS, public services and businesses are all doing our bit, but Boris Johnson and his ministers failed to do theirs when they delayed closing the border to arrivals from India as soon as they were warned about the new Covid variant.

Their delay has cost lives and now threatens businesses, jobs, and mental health.

Because of the rise in cases and the spread of the Delta variant, St Helens and most of the north west have been placed in an 'Enhanced Response Area', bringing some extra support for the region.

As well as being advised to minimise travel in and out of the area and continuing to work from home if you can, we will get support with surge testing, supervised testing in schools, and enhanced contact tracing. What it sadly doesn't include is any additional vaccine capacity or permission to open up vaccinations to all over 18s.

Myself and other local leaders have written to the government twice to ask for extra vaccinations and permission to offer it to all adults, and on Monday this week in a call with government Health Minister Lord Bethell I asked him directly, but we were refused.

Given that the overwhelming majority of people now ending up in hospital with Covid are unvaccinated, and young adults haven't been vaccinated yet but are seeing the steepest rises in case numbers, we want to offer them the vaccine as quickly as possible – it's a very risky government strategy not to allow us to do so, and one I and others will continue to challenge.

In the meantime, we've all got to continue doing our best to suppress the virus, follow the basics of hands, face, space, get tested regularly, and most importantly get vaccinated when you're offered it. Find out all the latest at www.sthelens.gov.uk/coronavirus.

Finally this week, the announcement of the Queen's Birthday Honours brought great news for the borough with recognition given to some local heroes for their outstanding contributions to St Helens.

Councillor Sev Gomez-Aspron, Martin Blondel, Sara Barlow and Leonard Broadhurst have gone above and beyond to support residents through the pandemic and I'm delighted for them all. They're great examples of the fantastic community spirit we have in the borough and that's only got stronger as things have got tougher. Well done, and thank you, to each of them.

Best wishes to all Star readers.

