

The first in-person council meeting in over a year took place this week as councillors and staff gathered at the town hall for the Annual Council meeting. Because of social distancing and ongoing restrictions the meeting took place in the historic Assembly Hall rather than the council chamber, and it's great to be able to use this special place once again.

It's one of our aims to open up the town hall more for public events and concerts, and council officers have been working on plans for this behind the scenes which we hope to be able to share once restrictions are relaxed and life gets back to normal. The town hall belongs to the people and the more accessible it is the better.

Clr Paul McQuade has reached the end of his term as our civic Mayor and I want to thank him for doing a great job in very strange circumstances. Our new Mayor is Cllr Sue Murphy and I know she will do a fabulous job. Hopefully things will continue to open up in the weeks and months ahead because I know Sue is very keen to get out around the borough and support as many community events as possible.

Good luck to Sue, her husband Mike, and our new Deputy Mayor Cllr Linda Maloney MBE for the year ahead.

We've had confirmation this week that the new Covid variant has been detected in St Helens. There's no need to panic – we just all need to make sure we continue to follow the latest guidance and take as much care as possible, as well as getting tested regularly and getting the vaccination as soon as we're offered it. I've got my second jab booked in for later this week and I can't wait.

You can find all the latest testing information for both symptom-free and symptomatic testing at www.sthelens.gov.uk/letsgottested.

The spread of the new variant does beg questions about how it got into the country and why India wasn't placed on the 'Red list' restricting access to the UK much sooner. This should be among the questions – including the many other delays since March 2020 to PPE supply, testing, track and trace, border closures, and the hundreds of millions of pounds given to Tory donors and friends of Government Ministers – that Mr Johnson will have to answer when the public inquiry takes place next year.

Here in St Helens our local public health, NHS and council staff continue to do all they can to keep essential services running, support businesses with reopening and adapting to new ways of working, helping residents, and of course continuing to deliver the vaccination programme from the home of the back to back champions. Thank you to them all.

Keep up to date with the latest advice and support at www.sthelens.gov.uk/coronavirus.

Best wishes to all Star readers.