

This week marked one year since the vaccination centre at the Totally Wicked Stadium opened. The way that our local NHS, GPs, St Helens RFC and our own Council Public Health team have all worked together to deliver a world class vaccination programme has been incredible.

My thanks go to everyone involved in delivering around 390,000 doses, and to the tens of thousands of residents who have done the right thing and come forward to get vaccinated.

I tested positive on Tuesday this week so will be following the rules and isolating. Thankfully at the time of writing I don't feel too bad – vaccines work!

We've seen a fall in the total number of cases in the past week but numbers still remain very high and it remains important to get tested regularly and get vaccinated.

The high case rates are putting a strain on services, schools and businesses across the country, and the NHS is hard hit right now too. However, even before the pandemic the health service was struggling and ill-equipped, with 17,000 fewer NHS beds than in 2010, 100,000 full-time NHS staff vacancies, public health services cut, and GP numbers down across the country.

The NHS is struggling not simply because of Covid but because of the Conservatives.

I'm particularly concerned about our mental health services after a decade of decline. Right now 1.6 million people are waiting for mental health treatment. After the last two years we need better mental health support than ever.

The government also have questions to answer about other challenges facing St Helens residents right now, with many families experiencing a tough winter because of rising costs and inflation.

Last October the Chancellor Rishi Sunak raised taxes for working people to the highest level we've seen in Britain since the 1950s, and when National Insurance and energy bills rise in April things will get even harder. It beggars belief that last week Tory MPs voted against a Labour proposal to cut VAT on energy bills.

By 2026/27 the average household will pay £3,000 more tax than when Boris Johnson became Prime Minister. The Tories' skewed priorities are hitting those who can least afford it the hardest.

While times are tough, the council and our partner agencies will do all we can to provide support and to stand up for St Helens.