**Oxford city officially moved to ‘high’ COVID alert level as cases continue to rise**

Oxford city will be moved into the government’s ‘high’ or tier 2 alert level after a further rise in cases of COVID-19 – meaning that the city’s residents will need to abide by new rules from Saturday 31 October.

The central government decision follows intensive discussions between central government, local councils, MPs and others in recent days.

Rates per 100,000 in Oxford city rose to 134.5 for the week ending 23 October. For Oxfordshire as a whole, the rate was 117.5 for the same period.

The rest of the county remains at tier 1 or ‘medium’ level – although figures here too continue to rise. Cases per 100,000 are 151.5 in Cherwell, 92.2 in South Oxfordshire, 91.2 in Vale of White Horse and 109.4 in West Oxfordshire.

Evidence continues to show that, in the past three weeks, the virus has spread to a much wider age range across the county and is no longer confined to younger people in urban areas. Hospital admissions have begun to increase as a result.

Bruno Holthof, Chief Executive Officer at Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, said: “We have moved from a position of low and stable hospital admission rates over the summer to one in which admission rates are increasing. We know there is a time lag between rising cases and an increase in hospital admissions, and so we expect to see a further increase in hospitalisation rates over the coming weeks.”

Residents are being urged to play their part and stick to the new rules in Oxford to help tackle these recent trends.

**What are the features of the high level of COVID alert?**

·        People must not meet socially with anybody outside their household or support bubble in any indoor setting, whether at home or in a public place.

·        People must not meet in a group of more than six outside, including in a garden or other space.

·       People should aim to reduce the number of journeys they make where possible. If they need to travel, they should walk or cycle where possible. If taking public transport, they should plan ahead and avoid busy times and routes.

Further information is available at [www.gov.uk/guidance/local-covid-alert-level-high](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/local-covid-alert-level-high)

**Making the case for Oxfordshire**

Discussions have taken place with central government this week about whether all areas of Oxfordshire should move to the high alert level, given concerns over the spread of the virus to wider and potentially more vulnerable age groups.

However, the decision was made by government to move just Oxford to high alert level at this stage. This was despite requests for the whole of the county to move to tier 2, which had the full backing of the leaders of all six local authorities and the chief executives of Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust, Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group, and the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (OxLEP).

Councillor Ian Hudspeth, Leader of Oxfordshire County Council, said: “The continued rise in numbers across the county has once more been discussed with central government and Public Health England and it has been agreed that this is the appropriate moment for Oxford move to tier 2.

“However, we remain seriously concerned about the rise in the number of cases across the county, and not just Oxford. We are deeply disappointed that despite clear evidence showing the virus is now spreading to older and more vulnerable communities across the county, our request that Oxfordshire as a whole should move to tier 2 was not approved.

“My five fellow local authority leaders and I firmly believe this is a necessary step to stem the spread of the virus, protect our communities and the Oxfordshire economy. Our position has the full backing of the chief executives of our NHS partners and the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership, and we will continue to push for a move for the rest of the county to happen as soon as possible based on the epidemiological evidence.”

Dr Kiren Collison, GP and Clinical Chair of Oxfordshire CCG, said: “We need everyone in Oxford to make sure that they follow these new rules so that we can carry on being able to provide care to those who need it. If we don’t act now, the rise in number of patients with coronavirus will put a greater burden on GP services and the wider NHS which could have serious consequences for people who need our help.”

Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of Oxford City Council, said: “I know that many residents in Oxford City will be worried about what this means for them. In Oxford, we are being asked to make some small but important changes in behaviour. If everyone plays their part by sticking to the new rules, we hope we can keep life as close as possible to how it has been for the last few months and avoid more stringent measures being put in place.

“You can still meet outdoors (within the rule of six), businesses can still operate, schools are still open. These are the cornerstones of our lives – family, work and friends. I’m asking everyone to make sure they know the rules and to stick to them. If you need help, please ask for support. Family, friends, communities and the council are all here to help you do the right thing.

“However, I do want to put on the record that this is not the decision that leaders in local government and our local NHS recommended and asked for. Our director of public health advised government, on the basis of local data, to put the whole county in tier 2. This has been ignored. The decision to put Oxford alone into tier 2 is shocking, when the spread and case numbers outside the city are also of grave concern, and when so many people commute into our city. Those responsible for not protecting communities in the rest of Oxfordshire need to be held accountable for their actions to block a measure intended to save lives locally.”

Dr Nick Broughton, Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust CEO, said: “Our community services and hospitals expect to see more people with any rise in infection rates, particularly in the event of increased spread across generations. We also need to look after people’s emotional and cognitive wellbeing and our mental health services will continue to provide safe support, including helplines and digital consultations, to meet people’s needs. We will continue to work very closely with all our colleagues in health and social care services across the county to do all we can to support the communities we serve.”

Councillor Barry Wood, Leader of Cherwell District Council, said: “I am deeply concerned by the sharp rise in cases of COVID-19 in Cherwell. The data shows that coronavirus is now spreading in all age ranges through our district. Make no mistake, the virus is a clear and present threat to the health of our friends, colleagues, families and communities.

Councillor Emily Smith, Leader of the Vale of White Horse District Council, said: “We need to see government act urgently. We don’t live and work within the district council boundaries, and neither does the virus.

“Despite the rise in COVID-19 cases, government has failed to listen to those with the local knowledge, and who are best placed to understand local context and assess local risk. It is regrettable that by not listening to the position of agreement of our NHS colleagues, the local enterprise partnership and local councils that the whole of Oxfordshire should move to tier 2, that more local lives are now being put at risk and there is a greater threat of our economy being impacted more in the longer term.”

Councillor Sue Cooper, Leader of South Oxfordshire District Council, said: “It is very disappointing that government has not responded to help us move into tier 2. We know from discussions with our NHS colleagues that the virus is spreading across all age groups throughout Oxfordshire, putting our most vulnerable residents as risk. Data shows us that cases of COVID-19 will continue to rise, so we urge everyone to help prevent the spread by remaining vigilant and following government guidance.”

Nigel Tipple, Chief Executive of the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (OxLEP), said: “Following the decision to move Oxford into tier two measures, we will continue to work with health officials, our local authority counterparts, our local MPs and our business community to ensure the additional support that our businesses will undoubtedly require during this period is in place and readily available.

“We ask that businesses follow the new guidelines and adhere to any actions required where applicable to their industry. We also encourage them to be as proactive as possible to seek any business support that is needed, whether via existing government schemes or indeed the support and advice we are able to offer as the county’s local enterprise partnership.”

Councillor Michele Mead, Leader of West Oxfordshire District Council, said: “Even though we have not moved to tier 2 in West Oxfordshire, there is no room for complacency. We must remain vigilant, act sensibly and abide by the rules. We will get through this with everyone working together.”