

## BRIEFING NOTE

### Update on novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the Council's response

19 March 2020



#### What is the virus and the current picture?

The outbreak of novel coronavirus was initially named as 2019-nCoV. Since then, the World Health Organization (WHO) has named the virus 'severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2' (SARS-CoV-2), while the infectious disease associated with the virus is now referred to as COVID-19. WHO has declared the outbreak as a global pandemic.

As with other respiratory illnesses, symptoms of COVID-19 can include a high temperature and a new, continuous cough. It can be more severe for some people and can lead to pneumonia or breathing difficulties. More rarely, the disease can be fatal. Older people, and people with pre-existing medical conditions (i.e. anyone normally instructed to get a flu jab on medical grounds) are more vulnerable to becoming severely ill with the virus.

As of 9am on 18 March 2020, 56,221 people have been tested in the UK, of which 53,595 were confirmed negative and 2,626 were confirmed positive. 103 patients in the UK who tested positive for coronavirus (COVID-19) have died.

#### What is the public health response?

The Government has published a range of materials providing information and advice for the public, specific sectors, and health professionals.

As you will be aware there have been significant changes to the public health advice following the Prime Minister's briefing on Monday 16 March 2020 and updates provided daily from this week.

The key advice as of this morning is as follows:

- if you or anyone in your household has one of two key symptoms: a high temperature or a new and continuous cough, then you should stay at home for 14 days.
- everyone should stop non-essential contact with others and to stop all unnecessary travel.
- people should start working from home where they possibly can. Updated guidance here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance>
- people should avoid pubs, clubs, theatres and other such social venues. Updated guidance here: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-19-guidance-for-mass-gatherings>
- avoiding all unnecessary social contact, is particularly important for people over 70, for pregnant women and for those with some health conditions.
- by this coming weekend – it will be necessary to go further and to ensure that those with the most serious health conditions are largely shielded from social contact for around 12 weeks.
- mass gatherings will no longer be supported with emergency workers.
- all schools in the UK will close from Friday until further notice, with exceptions for vulnerable children, children with an Education Health and Care Plan and children of key workers (exact details on these categories are yet to be released). School exams in May and June will not take place and the details on this will follow.

Guidance is being updated as quickly as possible. To ensure you have the latest guidance please visit

<https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/coronavirus-covid-19-uk-government-response>.

## **How the spread of Covid-19 can be minimised**

The best way of minimising the spread of the virus continues to be to:

- wash your hands more often for 20 seconds
- use soap and water or a hand sanitiser when you
  1. get home or into work
  2. blow your nose, sneeze or cough
  3. eat or handle food

The Government continues to run a public information campaign to ensure members of the public know how they can help minimise the spread of Covid-19. It includes radio, TV, bus and social media advertising. A range of posters and campaign materials is also available. These are being shared by the Government, NHS and local authorities. Please contact [press@durham.gov.uk](mailto:press@durham.gov.uk) if you would like some materials to help promote these messages.

Regional command and control arrangements have been established. These are being led by NHS England and based upon the established North East Pandemic Influenza Framework which includes coronavirus. Well established close working arrangements are in place between Durham County Council and Public Health England for health protection outbreaks and will continue during this outbreak.

## **What Durham County Council has been doing**

Since January 2020 we have been supporting and promoting Public Health England advice that the most effective way of protecting yourself and others from coronavirus is to practice good hand hygiene. There have also been regular meetings to plan and co-ordinate our response.

We have this week started to promote the government's advice that people should reduce unnecessary social contact and to self-isolate if the guidance is that they should. We understand the impact this could have on our residents' mental wellbeing and we are increasing support and advice in relation to personal wellbeing and mental health.

## **How the Council is managing its response to the virus**

Durham County Council's leadership team is convening at least daily (virtually) to provide direction to the Council's response to the virus with regular input by Cabinet. A planning and working group, chaired by the Corporate Director, Adult and Health Services, has also been established to co-ordinate the Council's response, whilst task and finish groups are assisting in implementing specific actions.

## **Latest Council response**

For a number of weeks the Council has been reviewing its business continuity plans to ensure it can maintain essential services for residents, in particular vulnerable residents, in light of Covid-19 and following the evolving Government guidance. These essential services include adult and children's services, refuse collections and support for community and voluntary groups and businesses.

### Venues and events

Yesterday the council issued information outlining that Council-run venues, leisure centres and libraries closed yesterday until further notice. In addition all events and festivals up until the end of April have been cancelled. The council is continuing to operate its mobile and online library services as well as its customer access points. Visit [www.durham.gov.uk/article/22959/Local-information-in-response-to-Coronavirus-updated-18-March-](http://www.durham.gov.uk/article/22959/Local-information-in-response-to-Coronavirus-updated-18-March-) for more information

### Community and voluntary sector support

We are working with the community and voluntary sector to support it to help our most vulnerable residents. In addition we are putting in place a series of measures, through our Area Action Partnerships in partnership with key voluntary sector organisations, to help our communities through this difficult time. More information about this will be available over the coming days at [www.durham.gov.uk/coronavirus](http://www.durham.gov.uk/coronavirus)

### Support for businesses

In the budget on 11 March and on 17 March the Chancellor announced a range of additional financial support for businesses – with £330m in loan guarantees to business. It includes a business rates ‘holiday’ for 12 months, which will be extended to all businesses in the retail, hospitality and leisure sector, regardless of rateable value, with a £25,000 cash grant for those with a rateable value of less than £51,000. Small and medium sized enterprises will be offered a £10,000 cash grant.

Working with Business Durham, our economic regeneration arm, we will work with businesses to support them and implement these benefits, once the details are available from the Government, helping them through what will be a very difficult period. We will also look at how we can support businesses in the county too, for example through automatic payments for Council suppliers. More information will be available over the coming days at [www.durham.gov.uk](http://www.durham.gov.uk)

### Support for residents

In the budget on 11 March and on 17 March the Chancellor announced a number of additional financial support measures for individuals who may be in financial hardship as a result of the virus. This includes offering a three-month mortgage holiday for those in need, reimbursing small and medium-sized companies for the cost of statutory sick pay, supplying vouchers for children who currently receive free school meals when schools close, and continuing to fund free childcare entitlements for two, three and four-year-olds. The Government also announced £1 billion to support the financial security of vulnerable people, through a half billion boost to the welfare system and a half billion pound Hardship Fund for Local Authorities, and £3.2m of emergency funding to help rough sleepers isolate. Once the details are available from the Government we will work to implement these benefits. We are also looking at what we as a council can do locally for our most vulnerable residents in what will be a very difficult period. We will do this working with the community and voluntary sector too. More information will be available over the coming days at [www.durham.gov.uk](http://www.durham.gov.uk)

### Other action

Other action the Council has taken includes:

- Keeping our customer service functions going, including our Customer Access Points (arranging telephone appointments as opposed to face-to-face appointments, where possible) and opening a second customer contact centre to ensure our resilience.
- Keeping our One Point hubs and Families First centres open wherever possible
- Updating our website regularly and the pre-recorded information on our customer contact telephone lines.

- Staff who are able to do so, are working from home.
- Review all business continuity plans to ensure priority services are protected.
- Started to review how some staff could be redeployed to help deliver essential services.
- Reviewing how we are delivering services and where possible delivering them more flexibly to help our residents.
- The full Council meeting next Wednesday 26 March will not convene, nor will any further Council meetings until the end of March. We will welcome new legislation and guidance which enables us to conduct meetings in a more flexible way to enable social distancing.

The Council will continue to keep colleagues, members, key stakeholders and partners, and residents up to date. **Information is available on the council's website at [www.durham.gov.uk](http://www.durham.gov.uk) and social media channels [www.facebook.com/DurhamCouncil](http://www.facebook.com/DurhamCouncil) and [www.twitter.com/DurhamCouncil](http://www.twitter.com/DurhamCouncil)**