

BRIEFING NOTE

Update on COVID-19 (Coronavirus) and the Council's response

31 March 2020

Current update



At Durham County Council, we continue to work tirelessly with our partners to tackle the challenges Covid-19 presents to the region.

As of 9am on 30 March 2020, a total of 134,946 people have been tested, of which 112,805 were confirmed negative and 22,141 were confirmed positive. As of 5pm on 29 March 2020, 1,408 patients in the UK who tested positive for Coronavirus (COVID-19) have died.

Please note, this figure is based on number of people admitted to hospital with the disease

What is the public health response?

All government response and guidance across many sectors can be accessed from the government: www.gov.uk/coronavirus

All health-related information and advice can be accessed on the NHS website: www.nhs.uk/coronavirus

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 PHE for health protection outbreaks and will continue during this outbreak.

County Durham and Darlington Local Resilience Forum (LRF) is also working with Northumbria LRF and Cleveland LRF to co-ordinated activities across the region to ensure effective planning across all agencies for Covid-19. Each LFF has set up a Strategic Co-ordinating Group, known as a Gold Command Group, and they are also meeting as a cross region group.

Local communications and updates are being channelled through a single point of entry www.durham.gov.uk/coronavirus. It is important that we use this link as all elements of our coronavirus response are continually updated and will provide you and the public with the most up-to-date information that is available.

What can you do to protect yourself and others?

The most effective way of protecting yourself and others from coronavirus is to practice good hand hygiene. Washing your hands regularly and thoroughly with soap and water throughout the day and try not to touch your face with your hands.

Please follow the government's advice to:

- Stay at home
- Only go outside for food, health reasons, essential work or for exercise (once per day only)
- Stay 2 metres (6ft) away from other people

- Wash your hands as soon as you get home

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. This includes businesses and individuals with financial worries, with information about the mental health support available here: <https://businessdurham.co.uk/news-events-county-durham/covid-19-information>

What is Durham County Council doing?

Since January, we have been promoting Public Health England advice and adopting the guidance across our service areas. Our leadership team continues to meet daily (virtually) to provide direction to the council's response, with regular input from Cabinet. Below is a summary of the key steps we have taken since the last briefing note on 19 March:

County Durham Together



We have set up a helpline, webpage and support network to help people in County Durham who are struggling during the Coronavirus pandemic. County Durham Together is a virtual support hub for those self-isolating. It can help with a range of requests including food supplies, deliveries, general help and guidance, as well as access to someone who can listen and support.

Over the weekend, the team engaged with 300 vulnerable people and we continue to raise awareness of the scheme through our communication channels.

Anyone in need of extra support can fill in a form on www.durham.gov.uk/covid19help. Alternatively, help can be accessed by emailing communityhub@durham.gov.uk or calling 03000 260 260.

We are also looking for local voluntary groups and individuals to support the project, with a number of volunteer opportunities available.

A leaflet has also been produced and is attached. Please share this with your friends and colleagues and help us support communities in County Durham.

Further support for individuals

Following the announcement of the Government's £500 million Hardship Fund last week, we have taken swift action to ensure those receiving Local Council Tax Support receive this additional relief as soon as possible where applicable. In County Durham, people already benefit from a Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) that doesn't cap the level of support our residents can receive. We are one of a few remaining councils to offer this.

Households who currently receive assistance through CTRS but still pay some money towards their council tax bills will receive a further reduction of up to £300. This will mean an estimated

1,600 extra households will now benefit from a 100 per cent reduction on their council tax bills, while a further 5,700 or so families will see their bills reduced by an additional £300.

We have postponed debt recovery for anyone falling into arrears with their council tax bills and are encouraging anyone with concerns about their payments to get in touch. We will be flexible with people who need help and we can provide a range of options, including spreading the cost evenly over 12 months or starting the payments from June instead of April. Many residents and businesses are taking up this offer.

We are also investing an additional £1m from the Government's Hardship Fund into our Welfare Assistance Scheme, which provides short-term cash awards to people in crisis situations. This includes those impacted by benefit sanctions, vulnerable people who need help to cover daily living expenses and residents unable to purchase essential furniture and appliances.

Support for businesses

We and our colleagues at Business Durham and Visit County Durham have been working hard to keep businesses, employees and the self-employed informed of the support being offered nationally, as well as reviewing the support we provide locally. We have already processed all of the business rate reliefs that were announced last week, and revised bills were issued on Sunday. This provided a further £44m of reductions to business rates bills and providing much needed support to local businesses

Last Thursday, we started making the first payments of the Government support grants to businesses. The grants range from £10,000 to £25,000, depending on the size of the company and, to date, 1,134 businesses in County Durham have received their grants with a total value of £12.12 million. To be able to support businesses as quickly as possible in these unprecedented times, our payments started ahead of the national Wednesday 1 April deadline and before any funding has been received from the Government. More than 8,000 businesses are eligible for the support in County Durham and in total, we expect to pay out £89m, once all applications have been received and processed.

We have also been actively encouraging businesses to take advantage of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, which will see the Government pay 80 per cent of employee's salaries up to £2,500 per month to maintain employment and support their workforce. Claims can be made here: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/claim-for-wage-costs-through-the-coronavirus-job-retention-scheme>

Lobbying the Government to assist the self-employed has been another key priority and we are now directing sole traders in County Durham to information about the support being offered through HRMC. Applications can be made here: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/claim-a-grant-through-the-coronavirus-covid-19-self-employment-income-support-scheme>

Other steps we have taken as a council include:

- Arranging to pay our suppliers immediately rather than wait the standard 30 days, including care home providers
- Suspending debt recovery action on business rates
- Offering three-month rent deferrals for tenants in Business Durham's commercial properties
- Virtual employability sessions are also being offered to job seekers
- Grants to help cover the cost of home working technology through the Digital Drive County Durham programme.
- Visit County Durham membership fees have been waived.

- Business Durham is providing guidance and disseminating information as soon it received through all of its communications channels, including social media (<https://www.facebook.com/businessdurham12/> and <https://twitter.com/businessdurham>) and its daily email newsletter. For more information, visit: <https://businessdurham.co.uk/news-events-county-durham/covid-19-information>

Schools

Most schools in County Durham remain open to care for the children of key workers and we are looking at ways we can continue to provide childcare over the Easter holidays. Schools continue to provide free meals to eligible pupils, both as a hot or cold meal in school for those still attending, or as a food parcel. We are awaiting further guidance from the Government about a possible national voucher scheme but, in the meantime, we are confident, despite the challenges of the current situation, that schools are doing everything possible for all eligible children to access the meals to which they are entitled.

What else the council is doing?

- We have paused work on all construction projects where our building and facilities maintenance team is the main contractor to help with social distancing.
- We are issuing advice and directing people to organisations that can help them look after their mental health during the lockdown.
- Over the last two weeks, our Housing Solutions team has continued to carry out daily checks on people identified as sleeping rough in the county and we are working with accommodation providers to secure suitable housing. This includes securing emergency places for those needing to self-isolate. We have been able to increase the amount of accommodation available by working with our social housing providers as well as private landlords in the county and will continue to source more as required.
- We are continuing to pay for home to school transport for those who need it.
- We and our colleagues at Visit County Durham and Business Durham are sponsoring The Northern Echo's Supporting Local Businesses campaign, which provides free advertising in the Northern Echo, Darlington and Stockton Times and Advertiser Series.

Council services update

As a council, we are concentrating on providing priority services including public health, adults and children's social care, refuse collections and looking after the local environment. We are still very much open for business with staff contactable via phone and internet and regular updates on our website www.durham.gov.uk and on social media at: www.facebook.com/DurhamCouncil, www.twitter.com/DurhamCouncil, www.instagram.com/durham_county_council/ and www.linkedin.com/company/durham-county-council

- Refuse and recycling bins continue to be emptied. Bulky waste collections were suspended on Friday to allow staff who work on them to support refuse and recycling. We are also utilising spare vehicles to limit the number of crew members in a cab. Staff are also being given hand sanitisers and crew members are also required to wear gloves - to protect both residents and employees.
- To support rubbish and recycling collections, Garden Waste Collections have been delayed until Tuesday 28 April. Residents will still receive all 17 collections as part of their subscription and we are contacting all customers to let them know of the changes.
- Environmental health, such as emptying of dog and litter bins, clearing fly-tipping and needle disposal, remains a priority. Grass cutting is continuing, with crews prioritising the

parks and recreations grounds where people can do their once daily exercise and cemeteries. Weed spraying can also continue as staff wear protective gear. All teams have stopped travelling in groups and are ensuring they comply with social distancing guidance while working.

- Our neighbourhood wardens are also prioritising health and safety and environmental health matters, such as dealing with stray dogs, loose horses and fly-tipping. Wardens will comply with social distancing guidance while working.
- We have closed all the park and ride services in Durham City, as social distancing measures has caused demand to fall. We continue to offer free parking for key workers at all council car parks, both off and on street, and have made the car park at County Hall available to hospital staff should they need it.
- Durham Bus Station closed yesterday (Monday), with all buses using street stops to avoid people having to wait in an enclosed space. Other bus stations are currently being reviewed.
- Some registry ceremonial services, such as weddings, civil partnerships and non-statutory celebrations, have been suspended in line with Government advice. Funeral services will continue to be held but attendance will be limited to 15 people, and a free webcast will be available to download of services the following day for those who are unable to attend.
- Although our libraries have closed, a large variety of eBooks, eAudio books and eMagazines can be accessed through Library Online. Visit www.durham.gov.uk/libraries to find out more.
- Our Housing Solutions will no longer be offering face to face housing advice but will continue to operate a telephone and email service.
- The Gypsy Roma and Traveller service has stopped all non-essential face-to-face contact and moved to only digital and telephone communication where possible.
- The Employability Durham team has stopped face-to-face meetings with residents but is continuing to offer support via phone, text, e-mail and social media. Last week, it introduced new virtual support sessions covering maths and English, job applications, coaching for confidence and how to deal with stress, anxiety and isolation. People are advised to email in the first instance.
- Our pest control services will also be reduced and will only be accepting bookings relating to treatment of rats, mice, bed bugs, cockroaches and fleas. This will be kept under review in line with current government advice and will be monitored on a weekly basis.
- We will be supporting key voluntary services through our 14 Area Action Partnerships (AAPs). Each AAP's Facebook site will also be used to highlight the support that is available locally.
- Events scheduled to take place up to the end of June have been cancelled, including Seaham Food Festival.

Government guidance

- For the latest Government information on Coronavirus, visit www.gov.uk/coronavirus
- For information about support for businesses and employees, visit www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-employers-and-businesses-about-covid-19/covid-19-support-for-businesses
- For information about the support available for the self-employed, visit www.gov.uk/guidance/claim-a-grant-through-the-coronavirus-covid-19-self-employment-income-support-scheme

Council meetings

Are still cancelled until further guidance from Government.

What action we have previously taken?

- COVID-19 meetings since 27 January 2020, to plan and co-ordinate our response.
- 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.
- Supporting and promoting the government's advice that people should reduce unnecessary social contact and to self-isolate if the guidance says that they should.
- Reviewed over 250 business continuity plans.
- Convened a range of task groups based on key themes to instigate action and response.
- Mobilised more than 1,500 employees to work in different ways including working from home.

We 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 and social media channels www.facebook.com/DurhamCouncil, www.twitter.com/DurhamCouncil, www.instagram.com/durham_county_council/ and www.linkedin.com/company/durham-county-council