



Northumberland County Council

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Dear Colleague

Local Services Update - Response to Covid 19 - 7th April 2020

I am writing to keep you up to date with how Local Services are continuing to work in these difficult times as we seek to protect our communities and staff during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Our main aims throughout this crisis are:

- keeping our employees safe whilst continuing to provide critical services
- playing our part in delaying the spread of the virus and
- supporting other areas of the Council and our communities

Clearly it is an extremely challenging time for all of us and I am extremely proud of the positive way in which our front line staff and service management teams have responded to the crisis, and are keeping our critical services running despite all of the difficulties being faced.

It is vitally important that we lead by example and that we protect our staff and our residents from the Coronavirus wherever possible, whilst doing our utmost to ensure we can continue to deliver those services that have been classified as critical services in the Council's 'Business Continuity Plans'.

We have quickly moved to reduce services to critical services only and have suspended other activities and asked people to work from home where possible. As a Council we have taken the view that the need to delay the spread of the virus is so important that we should suspend all activities that are not essential and that we should act as an exemplar for others.

The list of critical services may change as the epidemic progresses, however at the present time for Local Services these are considered to be:-

- Refuse Collection
- Litter bins
- Burials and Cremations

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- Fleet Maintenance
- Visibility Cutting of Highway Verges (to maintain public safety)
- Amenity grass cutting (to ensure a clean, green, safe local environment)
- Highway Maintenance & Inspections
- Gully Cleansing (to maintain a safe and resilient network during bad weather)
- Response to Emergency Highway Incidents
- Street Lighting (faults and safety issues)
- Severe Weather Response (when required)
- Home to School Transport (for children of key workers)

We will do our utmost to maintain these critical services during the pandemic. However, it should be noted that the actions outlined below are now being taken in respect of these and other services provided by the Local Services teams. Clearly this is not an exhaustive list and other service areas are also implementing changes to service provision, with updated details being posted on the Council's web page, via social media and in the press on a regular basis.

The key changes to our services can be found on our web page at <https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/coronavirus/Service-Updates.aspx> and a quick summary is given below in relation to Local Services provision:-

Waste Services

We are continuing to provide the household refuse collection and recycling service, garden waste collections, as well as a commercial waste service to those businesses that are still operating, but this may be subject to change based on availability of staff and further Government control measures. The garden waste service has been maintained in order to reduce the amount of waste being disposed of in the general waste bins, but we are not taking any new customers and the service is currently only available to those residents who used the service last year.

Residents are still being advised to place their refuse, recycling and garden waste bins out for collection before 7am on their normal collection day and, if they remain uncollected, to take them back onto their property.

Easter bank holiday bin collections - On the week starting Easter Monday (13 April) all bin collections will run one day later than normal, so collections due on Monday will take place on Tuesday and so on, with Thursday collections being done on Friday.

We have suspended bulky household waste collections from 25 March 2020. Residents are advised to safely store any bulky items and we will confirm alternative collection dates for these items as soon as normal services are resumed.

All 12 Household Waste Recovery Centres have been closed to the public from 8am on Tuesday 24th March 2020 until further notice. This action has been taken in response to the travel restrictions being imposed on residents and the overwhelming numbers visiting these facilities prior to the closure, many of whom paid no regard to social distancing requirements placing themselves, other visitors and staff at risk of infection.

Parks and Country Parks

The Council closed its Country Parks at Bolam Lake, Plessey Woods and Druridge Bay along with the car parks at these sites on 25 March 2020 until further notice.

Urban parks and green spaces will remain open to enable local residents to exercise, but playgrounds will be closed, and all residents are expected to strictly follow Government guidance on social distancing and avoiding any gatherings. We are keeping the situation under review and we may close car parks at some of the urban country parks, whilst maintaining pedestrian access to them, if we find that people are continuing to make unnecessary journeys to these sites and/or they are attracting visitors from outside of the area. For example we have had to recently close the car park at Atlee Park in Bedlington, whilst retaining pedestrian access due to the number of people travelling to the site by car.

Safety inspections of Public Rescue Equipment such as life rings will continue to be undertaken.

Street Cleansing & Litter Bins

We are operating a reduced street cleansing service which is focussed on emptying of litter / dog waste bins and cleansing in the immediate area around bins. We have suspended mechanical street cleansing activity in order to redeploy these staff to support other critical service areas such as refuse collection.

Grounds Maintenance

From May we will deliver our programme of highway verge cutting, which is essential for the safety of road users.

We have also decided to continue amenity grass cutting where possible, taking into account staff availability and the need to redeploy resources onto waste services if needed. It is clearly important to keep our local environment clean, green and safe, and the summer grounds maintenance programme is key to this. Maintaining an attractive local environment is important during this difficult time as it helps to lift public spirits and sense of well being and ensures that residents have accessible locations within their local area where they can safely take daily exercise, whilst maintaining social distancing requirements and complying with restrictions on any unnecessary travel. We also intend to undertake weed spraying on hard surfaces, pavements and around obstructions.

Car Parks

The Council has now closed its off street car parks at key tourism destinations along the Northumberland coast and other key visitor destinations such as Rothbury and Corbridge in order to help enforce the Government's restrictions on non-essential travel and social distancing. The car parks have 'Car Park Closed' signage and, where possible and appropriate, temporary physical barriers put in place to restrict access. The current list is at the bottom of this document (appendix 1)

Public Toilets

All Public Toilets have been closed until further notice.

Funeral Services

The Council will continue to provide funeral services including cremations at Blyth Crematorium and burials in Council operated cemeteries. In line with recent Government advice we ask that services are only attended by the immediate family.

During these extremely challenging times we will be reducing the numbers of chairs in our chapels to help encourage this and will introduce other control measures to limit the transmission of the coronavirus at funeral gatherings to the elderly, frail, those in vulnerable groups along with funeral directors and Council staff. However, we will also be providing a free webcasting service to enable relatives and friends to participate in services without having to be present in the chapel.

New Government regulations have now come into effect that place stringent access restrictions on cemetery and crematorium grounds. The Council had started to implement these regulations, which require the closure of cemetery grounds to all visitors other than those attending burial or cremation services. However, the Council received a number of concerns regarding this measure and is seeking urgent clarification from Government over the specific measures in the new legislation, and until we receive a response to this request all of our cemeteries will remain open to the public. However, it remains essential that people continue to strictly follow social distancing rules whilst visiting our cemeteries.

Highway Maintenance & Street Lighting

We have scaled back our operations to focus on only essential maintenance activity required to ensure that our highway network remains safe and accessible during the crisis. Our Highway Inspectors will continue to undertake inspections and instruct response teams to undertake reactive defect repairs. Similarly any highway defects or street lighting faults reported by the public will be logged and responded to in accordance with our agreed policies and procedures.

Home to School Transport

School transport is still being provided to those children who qualify for free school transport and whose parents are categorised as 'key workers' by the Government.

Northumberland Communities Together

As you may already have read, the County Council is also launching a new initiative to support the phenomenal volunteering networks that have been rallying support across the county in response to COVID-19.

'Northumberland Communities Together' is a dedicated team which will help harness the power of local community volunteers while making sure the county's most vulnerable residents are protected.

We understand the vital role that our parish and town councils play; we know that you are key connectors to local residents, and you will play a huge part in offering support and assistance to the people of Northumberland.

To assist with our planning to support you, a member of the Community Response Hub will be in touch with you within the next few days.

More information is also available at www.northumberland.gov.uk

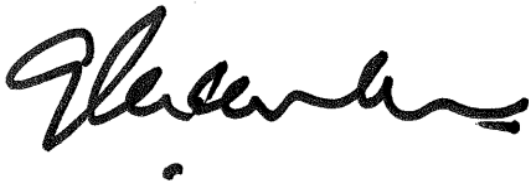
Northumberland Shielding Hub

The council has now established the Northumberland Shielding Hub which will be responsible for leading the response to support our most vulnerable residents - this is a critical role for the council.

We will be ensuring that medicines and essential supplies will be available to support those residents who are at very high risk of severe illness from coronavirus. The Northumberland Shielding Hub will be working closely with colleagues from the NHS, central Government, the armed forces and supermarket chains to ensure that we are there for the residents who need us.

I hope that you find this note helpful. Please do continue to provide feedback on any local issues or priorities so that we can continue to work together to support our communities during these extraordinary times.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Glen Sanderson', with a small dot below the end of the signature.

Cllr Glen Sanderson
Cabinet Member for the Environment and Local Services