

Members information bulletin

Central
Bedfordshire

Update briefing for members – 17 March 2020

COVID-19

1) Introduction and purpose of this briefing

As the COVID-19 outbreak develops and taking account of the change in the Government strategy in response announced last night, we are introducing a number of measures to ensure a co-ordinated and proactive approach to the management of the outbreak locally. We will be keeping Members up to date with these via MIB.

Today's edition is a bespoke COVID-19 MIB. Our intention is to use our regular weekly Friday Bulletin to update Members in future but will supplement this with more immediate or regular editions of the bulletin if this proves necessary.

2) The Government response model to the COVID-19 situation

Members will be familiar with the national COBRA Committee which is convened as required to provide a co-ordinated cross government response to any emergency situation.

All public sector organisations, including councils, have a role in delivering the requirements of the COBRA Committee and we are taking action and developing plans in this context.

3) The Bedfordshire Local Resilience Forum (BLRF)

Across Bedfordshire, all blue light services (police, fire, ambulance), NHS organisations, unitary councils (Bedford, Luton and Central Bedfordshire) and other key stakeholders such as the voluntary sector, work together in co-ordinating responses to emergencies.

In relation to the COVID-19 outbreak, a Strategic Command Group has been established by BLRF to develop and direct responses to COBRA direction and local circumstances.

Richard Carr is the CBC representative on the Strategic Command Group, which is Chaired by the Director of Public Health for Bedford, Central Bedfordshire and Milton Keynes, Muriel Scott.

4) Central Bedfordshire Council's response

As well as our role within BLRF, we have also introduced a local co-ordinated response within CBC.

The Corporate Management Team, under Richard Carr's leadership, has established daily COVID-19 meetings to look at the implications and impacts of the outbreak for the Council's services and communities.

a) Service /operational continuity

As Government has changed its advice to the public, informed by expert advice, covering isolation and social distancing, the implications of this on services is under constant review.

i) Schools

Current advice is that schools across the UK should remain open, not least to reduce the impact on the wider economy and public services as closures would have a significant impact on the availability of our workforce.

However, given the possibility for more stringent restrictions being introduced in the future, Children's Services colleagues are involved in contingency planning should Government advice change and /or schools close.

The latest Government advice is being shared with all schools along with prompting schools to think about how they can provide education virtually, some schools are well ahead in developing this and we are encouraging schools to share best practice with each other.

ii) Children's Centres

These centres provide a range of services to families, including various group activities. Given concerns about social distancing and particular advice surrounding pregnant women, the Council will be discontinuing group activities at the centres for the foreseeable future whilst maintaining its important one to one support services to families.

iii) Highways

The Council is working with its primary contractor, Ringway Jacobs, over their contingency planning and service prioritisation in the context of a potentially reduced workforce. For example, they are suspending some non-essential services like dropped kerb requests.

iv) Leisure Services

In the context of the Government advice to the public to avoid attending gatherings, including theatre performances, we are considering options about both the Grove Theatre and Leighton Buzzard Library Theatre. The Council is working with Stevenage Leisure on their contingency planning for a potentially reduced workforce and the implications of this for leisure centres.

v) Waste Services

The Council is working with its primary contractor, FCC, on their contingency planning to cope with a potentially reduced workforce.

vi) Housing

In line with Government advice for minimising person-to-person contact, the Housing team will be prioritising only essential repairs if they are inside someone's home. The team is also reducing group recreational activities in housing and Independent Living schemes.

b) Supporting vulnerable residents

The Council has access to data about some local residents who are likely to be in one of the vulnerable groups*, including, for example, those who are in receipt of our care.

Work is underway in Social Care to quantify these groups and evaluate the adequacy of care and support being provided to them at a time of significant challenge. This extends to those residents we already provide support to, so-called self-funders and people who have informal care arrangements, for example through friends and family.

In the meantime, residents (from vulnerable groups) who are concerned or in need of help and support will be directed to a point of contact in the Council. We are working through how this will work and will update Members on the detail by the end of the week.

*The vulnerable groups include those over the age of 70, pregnant women and those with underlying health conditions.

c) **Supporting voluntary effort**

The Government is keen to encourage community action in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak and is planning a drive to increase neighbourliness.

At a local level, we are working with our key voluntary sector support organisations (Community of Voluntary Organisations in Bedfordshire, the Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity and the Community Action Bedfordshire) to co-ordinate and support community effort. Our Emergency Planning Volunteer organisation, BLEVEC, will also be a key partner in this endeavour. We will be encouraging people who want to offer assistance to register that interest via these partners and more details of how to do this will follow.

d) **Support for local business**

The Government has announced a range of measures to help the business community, including business rate relief and grants. Our Business Support team is exploring the detail of these opportunities and how they can be deployed to support our local economy. In the meantime, we have advised those companies who qualify for rate relief not to make the first tranche of payments requested of them by their recent bills.

e) **Support for individuals**

Our Council already operates a hardship fund for those who may struggle to meet their Council Tax payments. As additional resource is to be made available to local authorities for such funds, we are looking at ways in which we could extend our current scheme to broaden access to this support.

5) **Public health advice**

Our local authority, in common with other councils, is supporting national communications over public health advice. Core messaging about the virus and appropriate behaviours to protect ourselves and our communities is being centrally determined. At a local level we are sharing this advice through both conventional and digital products.

Members can view the advice, and refer their residents and local organisations to it either via the NHS Website at <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>

or by following the link on the home page of our Central Bedfordshire Council website at <https://www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk>

In terms of social media, we are also using national resources to raise the profile of the national advice which Members can find on our Facebook pages and on Twitter, should you wish to forward these to your own communities. It would also be helpful if Members could reinforce responsible behaviour, including reducing unnecessary social contact and avoiding panic buying.