

## COVID-19 (NOVEL CORONAVIRUS) - COMMUNITY COUNCIL BRIEFING NOTE 16/03/20, Ian Bancroft, Chief Executive, Wrexham County Borough Council

### BACKGROUND

There are now **more than 1300 confirmed cases** of Covid-19 in the UK and **more than 30 fatalities**. Based on the first 44,000 cases world-wide, 81% have been mild, 14% severe, 5% critical and 1% fatal, but experience in Italy, the rapidly growing numbers in the UK and the disproportionate impact on the elderly and those with pre-existing medical conditions means that the effects will be significant and the scale of impact great.

Latest information on the nature and spread of the virus and how people in general, and Councils in particular, should respond to it is provided by daily TV statements by the PM; daily official briefings from the Department of Health and Social Care (with the Chief Medical Officer and Public Health England) (at 2:00pm) (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-the-public>) and Public Health Wales (at 3:00pm) (<https://phw.nhs.wales/topics/latest-information-on-novel-coronavirus-covid-19/>), though, not surprisingly, given the need for a consistent message, PHW's statement is based on and linked to that of DHSC/PHE with additional Wales-specific content; and periodic UK Government statements of a general and service-specific nature (e.g. about social care).

The UK Government's response has moved from 'contain' to 'delay' and people who develop a NEW persistent cough or high temperature are being asked to self-isolate at home for 7 days and contact NHS111 only if their symptoms worsen. On medical advice, this replaces the 14 day self-isolation period that applied to people who had been in contact with confirmed cases or who had returned from 'hot-spots' like northern Italy.

In Wales, the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984 can be used to enforce isolation/containment and the Council's Legal and Public Protection teams have been working with WG and PHW to support a 24-hour service to require such containment in the event that it becomes necessary. However, this will be a stopgap measure until widespread community transmission occurs, which seems likely.

The UK Government intends to enact emergency legislation before the end of March to relax certain statutory requirements (e.g. minimum staffing numbers in social care settings, Planning conditions on supermarket deliveries, audits and inspections) and to make Government guidance legally enforceable (e.g. with regard to isolation and public assembly/events). If the virus progresses rapidly this will involve the postponement of large events and the closure of schools and colleges, but for now this is not the approach being taken (though schools trips abroad are being cancelled). **Needless to say, this is a rapidly evolving situation and what is said here may change very quickly.**

The North Wales Local Resilience Forum (LRF) and North Wales Local Authority emergency planning team are working together on preparedness for Category 1 Civil Contingency Act responders, such as the 'red-light' emergency services and the 6 local authorities. A Strategic Coordination Group teleconference chaired by North Wales Police is being held weekly, as are other service-specific multi-agency groups, such as for WG and Directors of Social Care.

### WREXHAM COUNCIL'S RESPONSE

The Council has responsibilities for the provision of services and the dissemination of accurate information to partner agencies, businesses and the wider public, either because of its legal duty under the Civil Contingencies Act or because of its wider civic leadership role. It also has responsibility for the welfare of approximately 6000 staff and for supporting local residents, particularly the most vulnerable.

## **Provision of Council Services**

The virus has the potential seriously to impact on the provision of Council services, principally by reducing the number of Council, partner and supplier staff available for work (because they are directly affected, are supporting those who are or cannot otherwise get to work due to transport disruption or lockdowns).

To maintain services, all Council staff are being advised to follow national advice on hygiene. Those who can work from home are being asked to test these arrangements and ensure that they are able to operate key processes in anticipation that there will be a phased increase in staff being asked to work from home. Those who cannot work from home are being advised to spread out in the offices and undertake other 'social distancing' measures. Advice is also being issued to staff on how to work from home, work in social care settings, report sickness/self-isolation, etc.).

Council departments have contingency plans in place to deal with the impact of a variety of major events, including pandemics, and these are being activated and reviewed. Particular emphasis is being placed on ensuring that social care, refuse collection, education and housing are prepared for a reduction in staff.

If the effects of the virus become severe the Council's overall Business Continuity Plan identifies around 50 **critical functions** that it will prioritise (including social care and refuse collection). Clearly, reducing Council services to this level would be a significant step to take and one that will only be taken by the Chief Executive based on national scientific/medical advice and Government instruction. This will mean that some other services and functions, for example, deciding Planning Applications, may be performed on a limited basis or not at all for the duration of what will then be an emergency.

## **Warning and informing the public**

The UK Government is running a major public awareness raising campaign and will, no doubt, expand on this when legislation is passed in the coming days/weeks. From today, the PM is now holding daily televised briefings.

The Council has begun informing its partners and the wider public by signposting the official national sources of information on our website, Twitter account and other social media and by circulating advice (e.g. on the virus and schools to all the school Heads). **In this respect, it is important that the public receive a single, consistent message, so it is not appropriate for the Council to issue its own, separate advice, except where it relates specifically to Council services and events in the County Borough.**

Borough Councillors have an important role to play in ensuring that factually correct and consistent information is passed on to their constituents and have been advised to refer them to the central sources of information via the links on the Council's website.

## **COMMUNITY COUNCIL'S RESPONSE**

While the Council would not presume to tell Community Councils what to do, it is clear that, because of their local knowledge and sources of intelligence and their community leadership, Community Councillors and Clerks have an important role to play in supporting the most vulnerable in your communities, for example by signposting them and their relatives to the Council's website and published numbers for access to Council services ([https://www.wrexham.gov.uk/assets/pdfs/contact\\_wrexham/popular\\_contact\\_numbers.pdf](https://www.wrexham.gov.uk/assets/pdfs/contact_wrexham/popular_contact_numbers.pdf)) and to Public Health Wales and NHS111 for medical advice (<https://111.nhs.uk/covid-19>).

In Wrexham, voluntary groups and organisations are building a bank of volunteers to help with Covid-19. For example, AVOW has signposted a specific national website for volunteers to register to help their communities (<https://volunteering->

[wales.net/vk/volunteers/my\\_opportunities\\_info\\_ur.htm?pID=10155655](https://wales.net/vk/volunteers/my_opportunities_info_ur.htm?pID=10155655)) and will be launching its own publicity campaign this week in coordination with the Council.

With regard to accessing Wrexham Council services and communicating with the Council, you and your communities are advised to **use the normal published numbers and the Council's website**, even if those services are reduced to critical functions only – creating different 'emergency' Council numbers and structures will only duplicate and disrupt the existing systems. If the Council has to move to a position of providing critical functions only, the public will be informed via the website, press and published numbers and the Council will inform you directly by emailing your clerks. We will also inform you and the public as soon as normal service is resumed.