

# PRESS STATEMENT



**WOKINGHAM  
BOROUGH COUNCIL**

## Statement from John Halsall, leader of Wokingham Borough Council on COVID-19

“We are living in the shadow of Covid-19, an unprecedented international, national and local emergency.

Already many people are suffering from Coronavirus and people have died across the country. Tragically, this will increase significantly over the coming weeks. We must face that reality without self-deception: this is the greatest challenge the country has faced since the Second World War.

However, it is a challenge for which we have prepared. We have well established emergency plans in place with our Public Health colleagues. Our technology is robust; our staff are resilient and determined to provide the services people rely on. We are meeting daily to oversee response and are working closely with our partners and providers.

Our response will be defined by kindness, professionalism and robustness. It will be focussed on those who most need our support and on providing the essential services that nobody else can offer. We are fortunate in Wokingham Borough that we have communities that will, with our support, take care of each other and it has been inspiring (although I would say not surprising) to see how people have rallied to support neighbours and to join community and voluntary sector groups to help.

The situation is moving quickly but the two constants we have kept are to follow expert advice and to fulfil the duty of care we have to all in our communities.

Our statutory duties are wide-ranging, from the children we look after as a corporate parent, to older people in care homes, and from maintaining safe highways to collecting your waste and recycling. My commitment is that, while the way we fulfil these duties will change in the months ahead, and we may have to reduce some in order to prioritise others, we will always be here for those most in need and will continue to serve you with all our endeavours.

So, today, I am setting out our eight-point pledge to residents:

**1. We will deliver our statutory health responsibilities for all:** With our partners, we will do all we can within our joint resources to protect the health and wellbeing of everybody living and working in the borough.

**2. We will target our efforts on those who are at greater risk from coronavirus:** By careful planning and through redeploying resources when necessary, we will support high risk groups (such as the elderly, those with pre-existing long term conditions and pregnant women). This will include working with our local hospitals to support transfers of care, by supporting providers of social care, and ensuring other vulnerable groups are assisted through our social care services.

**3. We will be there for other key vulnerable groups to reduce inequalities:** Self-isolation and the inevitable disruption to lives that Coronavirus is bringing will lead to an increase in safeguarding and vulnerability issues. We are aware of those at risk (including the homeless, those who use food banks, those at risk of domestic abuse and those with existing multiple and complex needs) and are working closely with providers and voluntary organisations to be vigilant and mitigate the threats.

**4. We will co-ordinate the community's response:** Our people are strong, compassionate and keen to help and our hundreds of voluntary groups are committed to supporting all communities. What they need is coordination, which is what we can provide. We are bringing together our community organisation partners to offer a joined up way for people to volunteer and a single point of contact for those who need help. Our teams will continue to work in communities, in partnership with the police, other providers and the voluntary sector to maintain community safety.

**5. We will support our businesses:** This pandemic will hit our economy just as it will all those around the globe. We await details of the Government's financial support package but welcome its unprecedented scope and will play our role in administering and communicating to businesses. Furthermore we will consider what measures can be put in place for those who are clearly struggling. We will work with business groups, our business tenants and the Local Enterprise Partnership on the best way to shield them from the shock waves Coronavirus is spreading.

**6. We will care for our staff and continue to serve the community:** We are implementing carefully made plans to deliver home working across all services thanks to our robust IT systems. Services will be delivered differently and some will be reduced in order to prioritise. But the council is here for you.

**7. Capture financial and organisational impact:** We will collate financial impact of additional burdens and loss of income for services to reduce organisational risk, and the impact of decisions taken by other organisations such as transport providers.

**8. We will keep you informed:** We have a comprehensive and regularly updated webpage [www.wokingham.gov.uk/coronavirus](http://www.wokingham.gov.uk/coronavirus) and will use social media and other channels to issue very regular updates on this plan and our delivery of it.

In practice, all this will mean difficult decisions. We have already taken some, such as the decision to postpone those public council meetings that cannot go ahead in alternative formats until suitable arrangements can be made. We are seeking technological solutions as swiftly as possible because democracy must continue.

I know there will be people struggling at this time – either with the strain of self-isolation or illness, or through the financial problems it is creating. Please do not suffer in silence: we have worked with the voluntary sector to create a single point of contact for all those in need of community support. This is through the CAB and can be reached on 0300 330 1189 (if prompted enter 0118 978 7258) or by emailing [admin@citizensadvicewokingham.org.uk](mailto:admin@citizensadvicewokingham.org.uk) .

I would like to end with a note of optimism, a vital commodity even in these difficult times. We have had an unprecedented response from people wanting to volunteer. The most basic thing we can do is to look after each other – if there are people self-isolating or vulnerable groups living near you, put a note through their door to offer help. Or, if you are fit and well and have any time to spare, please contact one of our community and voluntary sector groups that we are working with to provide support.

If you want to help but don't know where to go, contact the Wokingham Volunteer Centre at [www.volunteerwokinghamborough.org.uk](http://www.volunteerwokinghamborough.org.uk)".

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