

We are living and working in unprecedented times and the past few days have seen North Yorkshire – along with the rest of the country – move into a position of necessary lock-down. I cannot emphasise enough how important it is that every one of us takes this very seriously. We absolutely must support our NHS by shielding our most vulnerable residents and helping to free up beds in hospitals for those who will sadly need them over the coming weeks. To everyone living and working in our county this is my ask:

Stay at home for all but essential travel – government guidance on this is very clear and essential travel does not include day trips and visiting second homes.

By doing this we can help protect the NHS so it can cope with the terrible burden this virus will continue to bring over the coming weeks.

Save lives - Help us shield our most vulnerable residents by adhering to the social distancing guidance rigorously and for as long as it takes. Don't put others at risk by being tempted to get together with family or friends. Very sadly more people will die and the worst is very much still to come.

As a council we are playing a number of key roles. Our health and social care teams are working flat out with other health partners to help discharge people who could be cared for in the community. We are standing up additional support with community health colleagues to support this critical effort. The response from our staff has been outstanding and while we are focussed across the organisation on continuing to deliver essential services by sending many staff home to work, that is not an option for these frontline staff. They must continue to care and support people who desperately need their help. I am sure you will join me in paying tribute to their professionalism and dedication at the most difficult of times.

We are supporting our communities – as you would expect – with a mix of financial and practical help. Later this week we hope to be able to talk more about the establishment of a hardship fund which will be targeted at those who need it most to buy food and pay utility bills for example. We are also finalising a network involving ourselves, around 30 well established community and voluntary sector partners and district colleagues to help those in long term social isolation. Again my message is very clear on how we need everyone to rise to this huge challenge:

Turn to family, friends, neighbours first – they are your frontline support while you self-isolate.

If they can't help look to faith groups or other community groups for help with essential food and medical deliveries – I am pleased to say there are many throughout the county.

If you have no one to help you, we are here and will step in. You will not be left alone to deal with this. You do not need to be afraid. If you have no one else and no local groups you can call us on 01609 780780.

Schools are another key player in this. I want to pay tribute to the very positive and dynamic way the head teachers and teaching staff have responded to the need to support essential services, including the NHS, by continuing to open their doors to the children of key workers. This has taken considerable organisation and flexibility. Our schools are providing care for around 5% of the pupil numbers they would usually have and are playing a critical role in supporting the county.

Following the government mandate regarding certain businesses like cafes, bars and restaurants closing to prevent groups of people congregating - our trading standards team will also be playing a key role in enforcement where that is necessary. The national government directive is that environmental health and trading standards officers, with police support if appropriate, will work together to issue prohibition notices. These will be used to challenge unsafe behaviours where businesses do not follow these restrictions. Under the Business Closure regulations introduced on March 21, officers will have powers to prosecute for breach of regulations. The Government will ensure that local authorities are funded for the new requirements as quickly as possible, in line with the New Burdens doctrine.

I am pleased to say the vast majority of business in our county have responded positively to the situation but where they don't it's important we are empowered to respond.

We also stand ready to help our district council colleagues to facilitate businesses in North Yorkshire to access the support packages which have been announced, should they need any assistance in that regard. And, as you would expect – we are working very closely with the LEP to ensure we understand the impact the situation is having on the county's economy – we will take this intelligence back to Government.

You will probably be aware too that we have undertaken a managed closure of our libraries and also now our Household Waste Recycling Centres. It would have been simply impossible with the restrictions that are in place for people to use them. Quite rightly disposing of such waste is not classed as essential travel. Children's centres have closed and our registrar's service is working hard to try and help the many people who have weddings planned. All the latest service interruptions are listed on our website.

These are without doubt extremely difficult times but I feel confident that if we all pull together – as we do so well in North Yorkshire – we will be better placed whatever the next weeks and months may hold. I am incredibly grateful to our staff for their sterling response – at a time I am sure you will feel tested to the limit – but I know they will continue to give it their all. Stay strong North Yorkshire and stay safe – abide by the rules – they are in place for one very important but simple reason – to try and keep you safe.

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