

A matter of life and death



Dear resident,

I have never written to anyone on a more important subject. I would ask that you please take a moment to read this message.

We are facing the biggest challenge of our times. Coronavirus is a killer. If we do nothing, 500,000 people across our great country will die.

But that horrendous outcome will not happen, provided we act.

The Government has issued good advice. But not all of us are following it.

This is not good enough. We MUST heed the advice from Government.

It is simple. And it is in our hands.

STAY HOME. SAVE LIVES.

Across Essex this weekend, we have seen people behaving in a way which was very much like going about their usual business.

I will be blunt. This is not acceptable.

We MUST socially distance.

Even though some schools across Essex will stay open, you should ONLY take your children to them, if you have been notified that you are a critical worker AND if you absolutely have NO other option.

The NHS

If the epidemic peaks, as it has in Italy, which has a world-class health system, the NHS will be overwhelmed.

We must not allow the 'peak' of the epidemic to outstrip the NHS's capacity to care.

Every single one of us can ensure that this nightmare scenario does not happen.

In China, and South Korea, the spread of the virus has been kept in check because Governments have acted quickly enough, and people have followed advice. We must follow suit. Our great County of Essex has always risen to the challenges over the decades. This is the greatest one of our times.

Please, follow the advice. Stay Home. Save Lives. #StayHomeSaveLives

Cllr David Finch, Leader, Essex County Council

Dr Mike Gogarty, Director of Public Health, Essex County Council

Government announces school closures from Friday - 20 March 2020 update



31 March 2020 update

During the current closures, schools are being asked to make sure eligible pupils have continued access to free school meals where the pupil is not attending school. Eligible pupils are those eligible for benefits-related free school meals.

The Department for Education (DfE) announced a national voucher scheme to support schools with this process. It says that where schools aren't able to provide eligible pupils with meals or food parcels through their current food provider, they can provide eligible families with supermarket vouchers in term time weeks. Schools will receive an email from DfE's supplier Edenred regarding how to access and administer the voucher scheme locally.

If schools decide to use the scheme they will purchase and send an eCode directly to the parents or carers of eligible pupils. Parents will receive instructions on how to use this eCode to buy an eGift card from their choice of a number of supermarkets.

If parents don't have access to the internet, schools will arrange to print and post a gift card. Some schools who have established processes to deliver free school meals via local sandwich companies or their own caterers may continue to do this.

GOV.UK has more information on [COVID-19: free school meals guidance for schools](#).

20 March 2020 update

The Department for Education have released the [list of key workers](#).

Each school will be receiving a form for parents to fill in if they believe they meet the criteria. Your school will then advise on the provision they will be offering.

19 March 2020 update

Following yesterday's announcement on UK school closures, please see below further information for parents and carers of children with SEND who have an Education, Health and Care plan (EHCP).

- If your child has an EHCP they will have a place to attend school. However, it is not mandatory to take up that place, and you will not be fined should you decide to keep your child/ren at home. You will need to let your school know what you decide.
- It is highly unlikely that schools will be able to provide the same level of provision that is in your current EHCP.
- Schools that remain open for children with EHCPs will not be open normal times and will not be operating in the same way. Your school will provide you with details of what their plans look like as and when they have worked this out.
- There is likely to be a delay in the timescales for requests for assessment and EHCPs.

Local arrangements may take a few days to introduce and may be affected at any time by staff absence due to illness. Please ensure you are in contact with your school who can provide details on their plans.

The government also confirmed earlier in the week that funding for [early years entitlements](#) will continue during any periods of nursery, preschool or childminder closures, or where children cannot attend due to coronavirus.

Original announcement on Wednesday 18 March

Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson has announced the closure of all UK schools from this Friday.

We understand that this announcement must leave you with lots of questions and worries. Please feel reassured that we are working hard to make sure those affected will be supported.

We are working on providing further information to parents which will be available on this webpage in the coming days.

Cllr Ray Gooding, Cabinet Member for Education at Essex County Council, said: “The Government has announced that schools will close to the vast majority of pupils until further notice from Friday afternoon.

“As the Prime Minister said, the judgement of the experts is that this is the right time to do so.

“The exception to this will be the children of key workers, such as NHS staff, police officers, delivery drivers, who would otherwise have to stay away from work, and also the most vulnerable children – those who have a social worker, or have an Education Health and Care Plan.

“Early year providers, nurseries and sixth form colleges will be expected to support this plan.

“There will be meal vouchers for those who receive free school meals. Exams will not take place in May and June, but the Government has said pupils will get the qualifications they need.

“We are anticipating further guidance from the Government imminently, and we will immediately begin working with schools on arrangements in Essex.

“We understand that families, teachers and school employees will have many questions and will be understandably worried about the situation. I would like to reassure everyone that we will be doing all we can to support those affected and share more information as it becomes available.

“The point of all of this is to contribute to the delay of coronavirus, and stay below the critical threshold when the NHS is placed under intolerable pressure.”

Last updated 22 March 2020

Guide to social distancing



Social distancing are the steps you should take to reduce social interaction between people and help reduce the transmission of coronavirus (COVID-19).

The most important message is wherever possible Stay Home. Save Lives.

- Work from home, where possible.
- Use telephone or online services to contact your GP
- Avoid large and small gatherings in public spaces, many places are now shut including pubs, restaurants, leisure centres and similar venues because infections spread easily in closed spaces where people gather together.

If you do need to go out for work or to get essential supplies then the advice is:

- Avoid non-essential use of public transport
- Avoid gatherings with friends and family. Keep in touch using technology such as phone, internet, and social media
- Avoid contact with anyone who is displaying symptoms of coronavirus – cough, high temperature.
- If you go outside for fresh air, to walk the dog then maintain a safe distance! Stay 2 metres away from other people wherever possible; avoid close contact. This is critical to containing the spread of the virus

The Government has issued good advice. But not everyone is following it, if people go within two metres of people they don't live with then they're helping to spread the virus and people will die. Now is the time to listen. Stay Home. Save Lives.

For further advice visit <https://www.nhs.uk/>

ECC responds to latest Government guidance and volunteering



Yesterday (Monday 23 March), Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that police and relevant authorities will be given powers to enforce new measures to keep people at home, to stop the spread of Coronavirus.

These new measures require people to stay at home, except in very limited circumstances, which Essex County Council fully supports.

Last week we set up a [Coronavirus Action Group](#) on Facebook, working with local community Facebook group admins to share information, offer advice and create a group of volunteers willing to help those in need during this uncertain time.

Over 3,000 people have already registered as volunteers. We would encourage people to continue to [sign up](#).

The Council is urging people to follow the guidance, and stay at home to protect themselves and others.

If you do want to continue to support your neighbours and family, please remember the social distancing rules. Don't go into other people's houses and leave supplies on doorsteps if needed.

We also want to ensure that volunteers don't do more harm than good. Gatherings will only spread the virus. Work is underway to understand how we can continue to support communities and keep people safe.

We will post updates in the coming days via the [Essex Coronavirus Action Facebook group](#)

The latest advice on coronavirus (COVID-19) is available on the [Public Health England](#) (PHE) and [NHS](#) websites.

Coronavirus volunteering: Your neighbours need YOU!



Essex County Council has issued a rallying call to everyone in Essex to help your neighbours and volunteer to support the county's most vulnerable during the coronavirus crisis.

There are a huge range of ways you can help at the moment. Calling in on neighbours to check if they are okay, picking up shopping, fetching prescriptions and walking dogs are all ways you can support others around Essex.

If you want to volunteer in your local area, we are encouraging you to do so using the links below. Please then stand by to be called on.

- [Sign up to volunteer](#)
- [Sign up to volunteer as a business](#)

Last week, we set up the [Essex Coronavirus Action Support Group](#) on Facebook, working with local community Facebook group admins to create a group of volunteers willing to help those in need.

The Facebook group has already encouraged 3,000 people to register as volunteers, but more are still needed.

Leader of Essex County Council Cllr David Finch said: "We have been amazed by the kindness shown by the people of Essex in this difficult and uncertain time. Family, friends, neighbours and

communities are going out of their way to help each other. It just shows what wonderful people we have in our county.

“We have already seen more than 3,000 people sign up as volunteers to help the county’s most vulnerable, but we need more. So please, sign up. And in the meantime, remember to check on your neighbours to see how they are.”

If you are already supporting your neighbours, friends and family, you should follow the government's [latest social distancing rules](#). This means not going into other people’s houses and leaving supplies on doorsteps if needed.

Updates about the volunteering scheme will be posted on the [Essex Coronavirus Action Support group](#) on Facebook. You can also visit the [Essex Welfare Service](#) to get support or volunteer.

The latest advice on coronavirus (COVID-19) is available on the [Public Health England](#) (PHE) and [NHS](#) websites and in [our coronavirus news hub](#).

You can also check our website for [impacts on our services](#).

Community Shield – getting food and supplies to our most vulnerable



People across Essex are doing an amazing job supporting their family, friends and neighbours who are at the most risk from coronavirus because they are older, vulnerable and have health conditions.

From now, public services across Essex are stepping up support for people who may not have help from their nearest and dearest.

Cllr David Finch, Leader of Essex County Council, said: “The way Essex has rallied around the vulnerable across the County has been incredible and I would like to thank each and every person who is helping friends, neighbours and relatives stay home and stay safe. You are literally saving lives across our great County because you are protecting our NHS.

“Now Councils, the NHS and all our public and voluntary sector partners are stepping up to try and make sure no-one who needs help is missed out. It has been a huge effort, involving round-the-clock work. I am very proud of what is being put into place to shield our most vulnerable residents.”

We are supporting the national effort to get food and supplies to the County’s most vulnerable residents.

The Essex Resilience Forum (ERF) made up of all the county public sector organisations, is tasked with ensuring that people with the most serious health conditions across – Essex, Southend and Thurrock - are shielded from social contact for 12 weeks during the peak of the epidemic. These people have been contacted already by the NHS and offered food package deliveries.

A distribution hub has been set up in Witham (central Essex), with two other hubs set up by Southend and Thurrock Councils. From this weekend, food deliveries to hubs will begin to be dispatched to the most vulnerable residents.

Given the importance of social distancing and the most at risk being able to stay in their homes, ERF members and the voluntary sector are also mobilising resources across the county to provide assistance to a larger group. These are residents who are also vulnerable during the peak of the epidemic, and include residents over the age of 70 or pregnant women, and who do not have the support of friends, family or neighbours.

These residents will be contacted by the NHS or their GP surgeries, starting from early next week (w/c Monday 30 March).

The message will set out the instructions for those people who do not have the support of friends, families and neighbours to register with the Essex Welfare Service (EWS), part of PROVIDE (a health and social care provider), should they need food deliveries.

They will be able to contact the EWS via their [website](#) and phone on 0300 303 9988 (Mon-Fri 8am-7pm and Sat-Sun 10am-2pm)

We recognise not all of residents identified will need support, and many will have organised their own arrangements already. However, Community Shield's aim is to ensure that no-one slips through the net. If you need support and have not received a message, please contact the EWS directly.

Councils across the county are working with supermarkets, delivery companies and other organisations on developing supply lines to people.

District Councils will also use their local hubs, which have been established in every district/borough/city council area, and using volunteer support.

Updates will be posted on the [Essex County Council website](#) and via social media.

Emergency Food Provision – Community Shield starts in Essex



As the country prepares to enter its second weekend under unprecedented restrictions on movement, the scale of the challenge of providing food to our vulnerable residents is significant.

Category A residents are those with the highest risk, including those with severe, pre-existing medical conditions. Over the weekend, Essex County Council has mobilised help for over 1,000 of our most vulnerable residents who needed food provisions. We remain determined that nobody should go hungry or be forced to go to the shops putting their health at risk, and have worked throughout the weekend to ensure we keep our residents safe.

The next most-vulnerable residents - the over 70s, pregnant women and people with underlying health conditions – will receive a message from GP surgeries on Tuesday and Wednesday, to check if they need food supplies.

Cllr David Finch, Leader of Essex County Council, said: “I am delighted to see how everyone has pulled together to make this happen so quickly. This has been a whole system effort and, along with our dedicated network of volunteers, we are committed to ensuring that every Essex resident - particularly those that are most vulnerable - has the support they need at this time. I would like to thank everyone that has and continues to work so hard in such challenging circumstances.”

Over the course of the last week, we have established a central food distribution centre in Witham, obtained enough food to provide over 220 initial food packages and are implementing our plans to massively scale this up to support all residents who require it.

The weekend required the team to overcome significant challenges – for example, no vegetarian food was supplied so had to be commissioned at short notice from local company Purple Olive. The food received from Government comprised of catering sized supplies of, for example noodles and porridge, which all needed splitting into smaller parcels. These supplies then required supplementing from local supermarkets.

We are appealing to supermarket managers to urgently contact us to support food deliveries to people who need it around the county and to help us with providing food, essentials or delivery services in their area.

We also need an army of volunteers to help us make sure that our most vulnerable residents are supported. If residents and businesses would like to volunteer, they can help with a wide variety of roles, including shopping, transport, being a phone buddy, posting mail, delivering urgent supplies such as food and medicine. If you are able to help join over 3,000 Essex residents who have already signed up by visiting essex.gov.uk/coronavirus and clicking on ‘Volunteer to help your community’.

Supporting businesses in Essex through coronavirus



Coronavirus is set to have unprecedented impacts on businesses in Essex, nationally and globally. It is likely that there will be significant disruption in the coming weeks and months. We are working with partners to do everything we can to support our people and businesses.

What we are doing

We are actively looking at ways to provide support to businesses, working with our partners, in a way that complements the financial packages announced by Government.

While we continue to consider how this might best be done, initial areas we are focussing on include:

- Regular liaison with partners, districts and boroughs on our response to the current situation, including the implementation of the Government's support package and engagement with businesses
- Working with partners to look at how to tackle specific short term issues, such as unemployment and immediate staffing shortages in areas where we expect there to be a skills need including cleaners, security and health and social care staff
- Direct engagement with major employers in Essex to help share experiences in similar business across Essex and to act as a vehicle for information back to government
- Looking at how best to provide information and acting as a single point of contact for businesses via social media and online.

As further details of the support measures outlined by the Government are released, we will be providing further information on our website and direct to businesses, as well as working with partners to develop our approach moving forward.

A summary of the Government's measures

The measures announced by Government to support businesses through the coronavirus outbreak are at an unprecedented scale, and include:

- a Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, which will support all UK employers to continue paying part of their employees' salary (80% of relevant workers' wage costs, up to a cap of £2,500 per month), for any employees that would otherwise have lost their jobs
- the deferral of VAT payments for three months (and deferral of income tax payments for the self-employed to January 2021)
- support to small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in meeting the costs of statutory sick pay
- business rate reliefs for all retail, hospitality, leisure and nursery businesses
- grants for small businesses and some retail, hospitality and leisure businesses
- support for business lending through the Business Interruption Loan Scheme and help with suspension of business taxes.

Local authorities will have role in administering some of the above measures, and we are discussing the implementation of this with our colleagues in districts, boroughs and with business partners.

For more information

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy have [published guidance for employers and businesses on coronavirus](#) and [support for businesses](#).

The [South East Business Hub](#) provide regular updates on guidance for businesses.

The [British Business Bank](#) have information for businesses about the [Business Interruption Loan Scheme](#).

If you can't find an answer to your question in the information available online, please email Essex County Council's Business Support Team at COVID19BusinessSupport@essex.gov.uk

Traffic reduces as Essex stays at home



Initial reports show that Essex residents are adhering to Government advice to stay at home and only go out for urgent trips.

Traffic data shows that on Tuesday 25 March, the day after the Prime Minister's announcement of more extreme measures, traffic was a down 53% compared to the same time last year.

This continued to increase throughout the week, reaching a 60% reduction compared to last year by Thursday, the last day for which current data is available.

With initial reports from Italy and Spain starting to show that, if adhered to rigorously, current measures can have an impact it's more important than ever than we continue to observe government guidance so that our Country can see improvement in the coming weeks and months.

However, Deputy Leader of Essex County Council and Cabinet Member for Infrastructure, Cllr Kevin Bentley had a clear message for the County: "While it's great to see such a reduction in travel, it's critical that this continues to decrease, and that residents stay at home. Let's 'not forget that in Italy and Spain the restrictions were much more stringent, with permits required to leave home and a ban on exercise outside the home."

An important reminder to Essex residents of just how critically important it is that we follow Government guidance and only leave home for one of four reasons:

- Shopping for basic necessities, for example food and medicine, which must be as infrequent as possible.
- One form of exercise a day, for example a run, walk, or cycle - alone or with members of your household.
- Any medical need, or to provide care or to help a vulnerable person.
- Travelling to and from work, but only where this absolutely cannot be done from home.

Stay safe Essex. Stay home. Save lives.

Essex Park and Ride services temporarily suspended



Coronavirus (COVID-19) has led to the decision to suspend all Essex County Council Park and ride services from the end of normal operating hours on Saturday 28 March.

The suspension of these services is in response to strict government guidance urging people to stay in their homes and only travel when absolutely necessary, to prevent the spread of the virus.

The service, and sites at both Chelmsford and Colchester, will remain closed until further notice.

Deputy Leader of Essex County Council and Cabinet Member for Infrastructure, Cllr Kevin Bentley said: "While we seek to retain public transport services for individuals who are making essential journeys, those using the Park and Ride have access to a car, so will have an alternative mode of transport available should they need it.

"Our Park and Ride services are valued, high quality and sustainable services, however during this crisis we need to use our resources wisely which means deploying resources to support commercial bus services where passengers on these services may have no other options available."

"The closures will be for as short a time as possible as we know how valued the service is. We look forward to welcoming back our regular travellers and hopefully new ones when it re-opens"

Essex County Council has been working closely with both Broomfield and Colchester Hospitals to ensure key workers who use the Park and Ride services have suitable alternatives available to them.

Providing accommodation for rough sleepers in Essex



Essex County Council and partner organisations have provided accommodation for over 40 of the county's rough sleepers, following instruction from the Government.

In Chelmsford, rough sleepers moved into hotel accommodation, with food delivered from local food banks. Borough Councils have provided accommodation in Colchester, Basildon and Harlow with rough sleepers staying in a hotel, re-purposed vacant social housing and temporary accommodation.

Communal night-shelters and street-encampments are high risk environments for spreading COVID-19, and the new accommodation also protects those rough sleepers, who would be at high risk should they contract Coronavirus.

Authorities will now co-ordinate efforts to prevent a return to rough sleeping and avoid begging. While a handful of rough sleepers have refused to come inside and a few people unknown to services claiming to be rough sleepers have come forward, great progress has been made.

Cllr Tony Ball, Cabinet Member with responsibility for housing, said “The work underway to offer accommodation, food and medical supplies is a substantial achievement and we would like to thank everyone who has ensured some of the most vulnerable have been protected.”

Daily exercise in your immediate local area



We are asking you not to get in your cars to visit more distant beauty spots, but instead explore your immediate local area and use the local green spaces and footpaths in close proximity to your home. Do not travel unnecessarily.

Why not find out what’s right on your doorstep to enjoy for your once-daily exercise, for instance:

- a) green spaces whether they be woods, marshes, commons green etc
- b) local footpaths, cycleways and bridleways
- c) the sea, a river or a canal, these often have paths running along them or seafronts
- d) beaches can offer huge open spaces at low tide in particular
- e) local history sites such as churches, castles, forts or ancient burial mounds offer a different historical perspective on your area

But how do you find out where to go and check out if you are allowed to visit? Here are some tips!

There are some simple ways to find out about walking, running and cycling in your area:

1. Search ‘walking and cycling in your local areas’ on the internet and usually a variety of options will come up
2. You can look at the Ordnance Survey Map, which you can buy online and locally, on which accessible areas and footpaths are shown. OS maps have huge amounts of local information about recreation sites, historical monuments etc. – such as OS Greenspace – getoutside-ordnancesurvey.co.uk/greenspaces
3. Look on Google Maps and find walks and open spaces there.
4. You can look up the history of your immediate area and sites like Wikipedia will show pictures of historic buildings, people and features which you can step out and see.
5. If you enter the name of your village or town, local nature reserves and wildlife sites will be shown

6. Find out about local parks, open spaces at www.gov.uk/find-your-local-park
7. Try an evening/night walk if it's safe to do so and enjoy the night sky – the roads and paths may be less busy too.
8. Finally, wash your hands as soon as you get home.

Of course while doing any of this you should continue “social distancing” from anyone you do not live with when out exercising, making room for people to pass on paths and not moving within two metres of each other. Please follow [Government guidance on accessing green spaces](#).

Most places we live do have interesting walks or cycles, but we are all guilty of travelling to somewhere else to visit when we often have great places right on our immediate doorsteps!

Remember, in any given day, you can still only go outside for one form of exercise, such as a walk, a run or a cycle, if you're well enough and as long as you're on your own, or with members of your household.

Country Parks and Recycling Centres

Essex County Council run Country Parks and Recycling Centres have been temporarily closed to ensure that the health of the public and employees remains protected. These spaces can attract large numbers of people making it difficult to enforce social distancing. These will be kept under continual review and we will follow Government guidance to determine when it will be safe to reopen them again.

Simon Walsh

County Councillor for the Thaxted Division.