

New Year Update for Area Partnerships and Community Councils

As you will be aware, we begin 2021 with some significant developments in the fight against COVID-19. The confirmation of vaccines being approved and their subsequent rollout is, of course, a hugely positive step in the right direction which can help society move to a less restrictive way of life in the months ahead.

In the meantime, as highlighted on Monday, January 4th in Parliament by the First Minister, the virus continues to present a very significant risk to public health. A new strain of the virus, together with a steeply rising trend of infections across the country, is causing significant concern.

In that context, mainland Scotland, including East Lothian, has moved from COVID-19 Protection Level 4 to a temporary lockdown which will be in place for at least the rest of January. This is aimed at protecting the NHS and curbing the spread of the virus.

It is very clear that this new lockdown will present further challenges to the delivery of public services here in East Lothian, as well as to many individuals, families and business across local communities.

In the aftermath of the First Minister's announcement, the council issued an initial public statement highlighting the key points, with quotes from the Depute Leader. You can read the statement [here](#).

The First Minister's key message was that the single best way of staying safe is for people to stay at home. As a result it is only permissible to leave home for a purpose such as work which cannot be done from home, caring responsibilities, essential shopping, exercise and being part of an extended household.

Shielding People

The Scottish Government's clear advice is that people in the shielding category who cannot work from home should not go into work at all and should work from home if possible - the Chief Medical Officer is writing afresh to everyone who now falls into this category. Full shielding is not being advised in Scotland at this time. Instead, those in the shielding category can still access essential food shops and are encouraged to exercise outdoors where possible. We are aware that many will have support from family, friends and neighbours but anyone who does require extra support can call the council's dedicated helpline on 01875 824300. Extra advice can be found on the [Scottish Government website](#).

Support for our communities and vulnerable residents

The support provided by our wonderful local Community Resilience Groups to the most vulnerable in our communities during the first lockdown early in 2020 cannot be underestimated. They were a lifeline to many.

However, as there is more support in place now than in March last year, we are not asking the resilience groups to start operating again at this time. We will continue to monitor demand for support and any changes in government guidelines and we will be in touch if this position changes.

Many community volunteers continue to provide informal 'good neighbour' support which is really valuable in helping reduce loneliness and isolation during this difficult time.

Help for those who are self-isolating for any reason is available on our [website](#) and includes:

- Self-isolation support grants
- Other financial support for individuals and businesses
- Access to emergency community food provision
- Warm clothing grants
- Crisis grants
- Winter fuel grants
- Mental health support
- Befriending via the Royal Voluntary Service
- Digital support

NHS Hearing Aid batteries can be obtained from either visiting the council's main offices or libraries or by contacting the Audiology service directly by email: audiology@nhslothian.scot.nhs.uk or by phone on 0131 536 1637 during the following hours: Mon – Fri 10 am – 1 pm and 2 pm – 4 pm.

Main council office and library opening hours are as follows:

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| John Muir House, Haddington | Mon – Fri 9 am – 1 pm |
| Brunton Hall, Musselburgh | Mon – Fri 10 am – 12 noon and 1 pm – 4 pm |
| Musselburgh Library | Mon – Fri 10 am – 1 pm and 2 pm – 4 pm |
| Haddington Library, John Gray Centre | Mon – Fri 10 am – 1 pm and 2 pm – 4 pm |
| Dunbar Library, Bleachingfield Centre | Mon – Fri 10 am – 1 pm and 2 pm – 4 pm |
| North Berwick Library | Mon – Fri 10 am – 1 pm and 2 pm – 4 pm |

Pharmacies can deliver medicines, patients just need to contact their local pharmacy directly to arrange this.

If you are approached by anyone in your community who needs extra assistance, you can point them to our [website](#) for more information or they can call our dedicated Coronavirus helpline on 01875 824300 at any time.

Financial assistance

The council has received £327,000 from the Scottish Government to support individuals at financial risk over the winter months. This funding is being used to:

- Increase the grants available under the Scottish Welfare Fund, specifically Crisis Grants and Community Care Grants.
- Increase the Discretionary Housing Payment Fund to assist tenants who have experienced new/increased rent arrears in 2020/21.
- Create a new Fuel Insecurity Fund which can provide financial assistance to households in financial hardship and with fuel debts who may not be eligible for a Crisis Grant from the Scottish Welfare Fund.
- Support to tackle food insecurity in our communities by providing support for community based food initiatives and support for the Fareshare Hub.
- Additional funding for emergency payments from Children and Adult Social Work to support families, young people and vulnerable adults in financial hardship.

Details of these funding streams are available in the [Financial Support during COVID-19 leaflet](#) on the council website.

Some other key points from the First Minister's announcement:

Exercise and gatherings

Unlike the lockdown last year, the frequency of outdoor exercise is not being limited. However, the rule on outdoor gatherings has changed. Up to six people from two households were previously able to meet outdoors. Given the greater transmissibility of the new variant of the virus, gatherings are now limited to a maximum of two people from up to two households being able to meet outdoors. Children aged 11 and under will not be counted in that limit, and they will also be able to play outdoors in larger groups, including in organised gatherings. However, for everyone else – including 12 to 17 year olds - outdoor exercise should only take place in a way which is consistent with the two people from two households rule.

Travel

In addition, strict travel restrictions remain in place across Scotland. People living in a Level 4 area – like East Lothian - cannot leave home except for an essential purpose. When you do go out, stay as close to home as possible and stay away from crowded places.

Additionally, no-one is allowed to travel into or out of Scotland unless it is for an essential purpose.

Other key points

Places of worship will be closed during this period for all purposes except broadcasting a service, or conducting a funeral, wedding or civil partnership.

While up to 20 people will still be able to attend funeral services, wakes will not be possible during January. And a maximum of five people will be able to attend wedding and civil partnership services.

Schools

It was announced before Christmas that most school pupils would learn remotely – rather than in school – until Monday 18 January.

The Government has now decided to extend the 18 January date and keep schools closed to the majority of pupils until 1 February. This will be reviewed in mid-January with pupils learning remotely.

We will initially be providing childcare and then education in school for vulnerable children and the children of key workers and started working on the preparations for this prior to the Christmas break.

The First Minister said it remains the priority to get school buildings open again for all pupils as quickly as possible and then keep them open.

However, right now, the level of community transition and uncertainty about the impact of new variant amongst young people, means that a cautious approach is being adopted at this stage.

We will provide you with further information in due course.