

Press release

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Council's continuing response to COVID-19 guidance

Durham County Council has announced further details of how its services and events are affected in response to government guidance on Coronavirus.

The council is continuously reviewing emerging government advice on how best to stop the spread of COVID-19, and considering how it can maintain essential services to residents in light of this.

The authority yesterday announced the cancellation of next month's Bishop Auckland Food Festival, with stallholders and those who had bought tickets to receive full refunds.

It has today announced the following further changes to services and events based on the latest guidance:

- All council venues are to shut from close of play today, or not reopen following winter closures, until further notice. These include Durham's Gala Theatre, the Empire Theatre at Consett, Bishop Auckland Town Hall, Durham Town Hall, Binchester Roman Fort, Bowlees Visitor Centre and Killhope Lead Mining Museum. People who have bought tickets for shows and performances up until the end of May will be contacted to arrange refunds. Gala members will have the period of the closure added to the end of their membership.
- All council leisure centres and libraries are to shut from close of business today until further notice. Leisure centre memberships, including fitness, swimming and swimming lessons, will be frozen for the period of the closure and direct debit payments automatically adjusted while sites are closed. Anyone who has paid up front for any membership, will have the period of the closure added to the end of their membership. The mobile library service will continue to operate and residents can continue to access a range of online library services, including e-books and e-magazines. The council is currently looking at how access to computers currently provided at libraries can be maintained once they close. Fines accrued while they are shut will be waived.

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- All council events up until the end of April will be cancelled or postponed. Durham Adventure Festival, which was due to take place at the Gala Theatre from 24 to 26 April, has been cancelled. People who have bought tickets will be contacted to arrange refunds.
- The full council meeting scheduled for next Wednesday 26 March will not convene, with all other council meetings cancelled until the end of the month when the situation will be reviewed in light of government guidance.
- The Big Spring Clean litter-picking campaign has been cancelled with a decision to be made on whether events as part of it can take place later in the year.

In addition to the above, the Police and Crime Commissioner election planned for May has already been postponed.

The council is prioritising essential services, including adult and children's services, refuse collections and support for community and voluntary groups and businesses. Customer access points will continue to be open and provide a service to residents, as are the One Point hubs and family centres. Household waste recycling centres remain open.

The council's schools are open and following the latest government guidance.

Terry Collins, the council's chief executive, said: "We are continuously reviewing the guidance from government as it is issued and considering all the services we provide and the events we organise in light of it.

"We have had to take some really difficult decisions but these are based on government advice and out of a desire to protect the health, wellbeing and safety of everyone in the county.

"We are doing our best to ensure the priority services we provide to residents – particularly the most vulnerable such as adults who receive social care and looked after children – are affected as little as possible. Similarly we are doing all we can to support businesses and those who suffer financial hardship, and working with other agencies to co-ordinate volunteering efforts in communities at this difficult time.

"We are looking at whether we need to change how we deliver some services in light of the current situation and will ensure residents are kept fully informed in the fast changing situation."

Amanda Healy, the council's director of public health, added: "The decisions we have taken are to assist with the government's advice that people should reduce unnecessary social contact and to self-isolate if the guidance is that they should.

"We would encourage everyone to follow the advice from Public Health England on how best to protect themselves which includes washing their hands for 20 seconds more often. We understand the impact this is having on our residents' mental wellbeing and we are increasing support and advice in relation to personal wellbeing and mental health."

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Information about how services and events are affected will be available on the council's website at www.durham.gov.uk/coronavirus

Ends

Notes to editors:

Details of leisure centres in County Durham can be found at <http://www.durham.gov.uk/leisurecentres>

Details of libraries can be found at <http://www.durham.gov.uk/article/1996/Find-a-library>

Please find attached a copy of a speech given by council Leader Cllr Simon Henig at today's Cabinet meeting on the authority's response to Coronavirus. This can also be found online at ...

A video of Cllr Henig addressing Cabinet can be viewed online at...