West Sussex County Council – COVID-19 Response: Written Questions

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17 July 2020

1. Written Question from **Cllr Michael Jones** for reply by the **Cabinet Member for Adults and Health**

Question

Recent figures have shown the test and trace service had been unable to reach many people who tested positive for COVID-19 meaning their contacts could not be traced. What action has this Council taken to ensure our residents are clear how they can help prevent a spike in cases locally?

Answer

Since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Council has shared a wide range of relevant public health and preventative messages across its communications channels including social media, local press, website and in regular bulletins including the weekly residents e-newsletter, which that is sent to 180,000 people. The content has included information on how residents can prevent COVID-19 infection through maintaining social distancing, regular handwashing and hygiene and how to arrange a test, including the location of local testing sites. As restrictions continue to be eased, we are continuing our efforts to share and remind residents of the continued need to follow public health guidance. These details will be localised and targeted to areas where we identify particular needs.

In addition, the County Council has produced a COVID-19 Local Outbreak Control Plan, as required by the Government, which was published on 30 June 2020 on the Council's website. The publication was communicated to residents via social media, local press and radio. The plan details how local, regional and national organisations and responses will work together as a system to prevent cases of the virus, where possible, in West Sussex and respond to any local outbreaks. The County Council, like all upper-tier local authorities, was asked to produce a first version of a local outbreak control plan by the end of June 2020. The plan will evolve over time.

Next week, week commencing 20 July, sees the launch of the Keep West Sussex Safe campaign which will run throughout the summer across all channels including print and radio advertisements. The aim is to further reinforce these messages including the importance of arranging a test if you identify early symptoms and the guidance around isolation.

In addition, a targeted social media campaign for Crawley is being delivered. This is supported by community engagement work aimed at sharing the messages effectively with hard to reach groups as well as specific groups who have been identified as high risk, for example members of the BAME community.

2. Written Question from **Cllr Brenda Smith** for reply by the **Cabinet Member for Adults and Health**

Question

Does the Cabinet Member regret care homes in West Sussex were required to accommodate residents being rapidly discharged from hospital between March and April 2020 without them having tested negatively for COVID-19, and does she consider this directly led to deaths of residents in care homes?

Answer

The Government first published the guidance documents COVID-19 Hospital Discharge Service Requirements (PDF, 919KB) on 19 March. This has been updated throughout the pandemic, based on emerging evidence and advice as it has become available. It sets out the Hospital Discharge Service Requirements for all NHS trusts, community interest companies and private care providers of acute, community beds and community health services and social care staff in England. It also describes requirements around discharge for health and social care commissioners (including Clinical Commissioning Groups and local authorities). Unless required to be in hospital patients must not remain in an NHS bed. It established the requirement that 'acute and community hospitals must discharge all patients as soon as they are clinically safe to do so' in order to free up hospital capacity for the treatment of those infected with COVID-19. There was an expectation that the NHS would work closely with social care to ensure the discharge pathway was in place. Within West Sussex a multi-disciplinary discharge hub and combined placement and sourcing team was rapidly put in place to ensure the delivery of the discharge requirements in as safe and efficient a way as possible. The guidance has been followed by the County Council since its publication and there has been close working across the health and social care system throughout the period.

- Public Health England's Health Protection Teams have, from the outset, been testing residents when an outbreak is reported at a particular care home.
- On 16 April the Government announced that "the NHS now has responsibility for testing patients being discharged from hospital to a care home, in advance of a timely discharge". This guidance was implemented within West Sussex.
- On 28 April, the Government announced that testing would be expanded in the care sector to include both symptomatic and asymptomatic care home staff and residents.
- On 11 May the Government gave guidance as to how all symptomatic and asymptomatic care home staff and residents in England became eligible for testing. Testing was prioritised for care homes that look after the over 65s.

Throughout the pandemic people have been discharged from hospital to the place considered the most appropriate for their care, in some cases this would have been a care home; in other cases, people have been discharged home.

Where care homes continue to take new admissions the Government's guidance on Coronavirus (COVID-19): admission and care of people in care homes and COVID 19: our action plan for adult social care is followed. This details how to provide care during the COVID pandemic, including how to care for those discharged from hospital while supporting the wellbeing of those already living in the service. Please note it is the registered managers of care homes and care homes with nursing who are responsible for the safety of the service including considering whether the needs of

any person being admitted to the care home can be met safely when considering those people already being supported and cared for in the home.

Where care homes and care homes with nursing had challenges in obtaining PPE directly, the County Council has enabled access to stocks. It is worth noting that PPE guidance has also changed throughout the period, at the point the country moved to sustained transmission; in April, enhanced PPE recommendations for a wide range of health and social care providers were introduced.

The County Council has communicated directly with providers on a regular and often daily basis and ensured that all available guidance is shared. There is also a specific information page for providers on the County Council's Connect to Support webpage. A high volume of calls and contacts have been received from care homes which have been responded to directly or via newsletters.

Recognising the importance of effective infection control, particularly in care homes, the Government has provided grant funding to care homes through a specific Infection Control Fund. This highlighted that a contributory factor to increasing the rate of infection may be linked to staff who work in more than one service, including agency workers, thereby increasing the risk of infection across multiple sites. The grant, therefore, includes specific reference to supporting care homes to reduce the use of agency staff.

Testing is also an area that has evolved throughout the pandemic and the County Council welcomes the introduction of the national testing portal and expansion of testing to now include weekly tests for people working in care homes and monthly tests for residents. The County Council is working with the sector to ensure that all Council staff visiting Care Homes are also tested following the same regime.

It is recognised that COVID-19 is a very complex and novel virus and the understanding of its impact is ever evolving. The County Council is, therefore, not in a position to say that people being discharged from hospital between March and April directly led to deaths of residents in care homes; as you will read from the response there are a number of factors that are likely to have contributed to death in care homes.

The County Council is, of course, extremely saddened to hear about any death attributed to COVID-19, be that in a care home or the wider community and collectively extends sympathy to all those directly affected.

3. Written Question from **Cllr Bob Smytherman** for reply by the **Cabinet Member for Adults and Health**

Question

For each calendar week starting on Monday, 16 March 2020, would the Cabinet Member please advise:

(a) What is the number of excess deaths in West Sussex; and

(b) What is the number of deaths in care homes in West Sussex due to COVID-19?

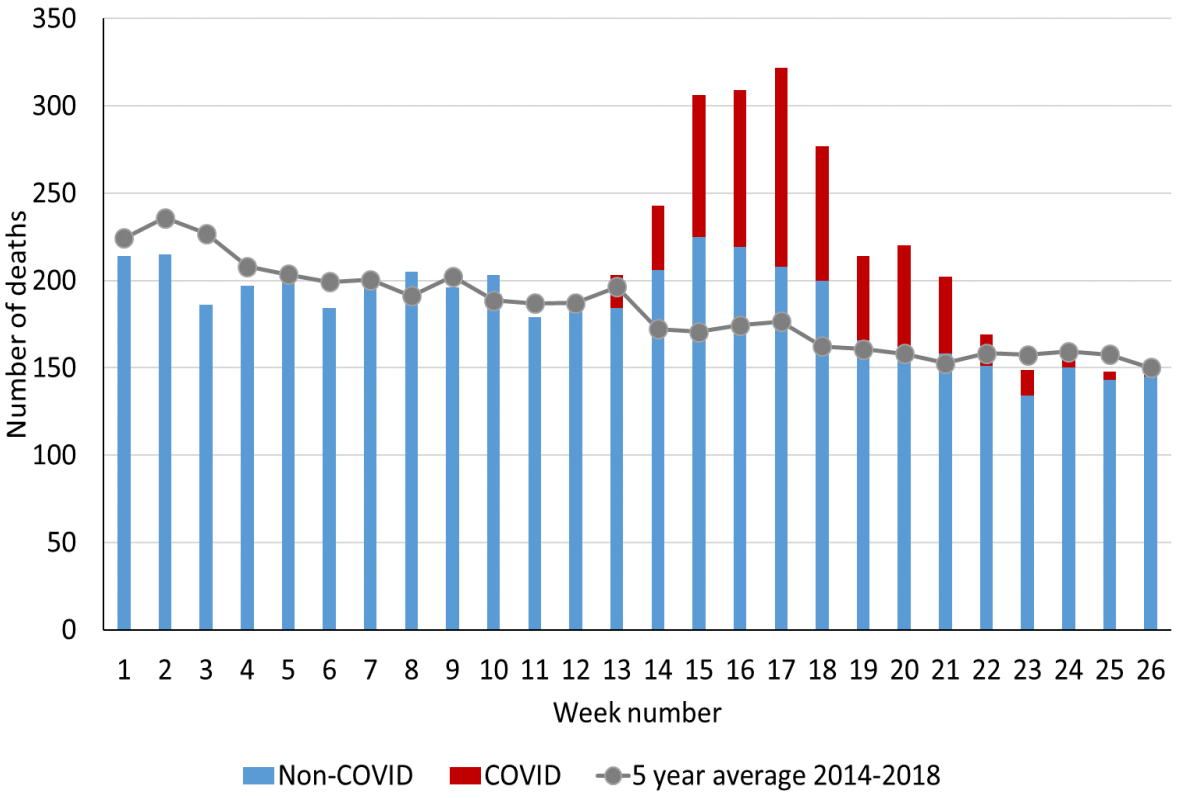
Answer

(a) For the 26-week period of week ending 3 January to week ending 26 June 2020 there were 670 excess deaths (registered by 4 July 2020); this equates to 14 more deaths than the 2014-18 yearly average.

Graph 1 below shows weekly excess deaths, and deaths where COVID-19 was mentioned on the death certificate.

Please note that excess deaths have been calculated as the number of deaths observed in 2020 compared with the average number of deaths in the corresponding period for the five years 2014-18. The information presented here relates to the date of occurrence of death, not the date of registration.

Graph 1: COVID-19 and non-COVID deaths 2020, by week of occurrence of death and five-year average 2014-18, West Sussex residents

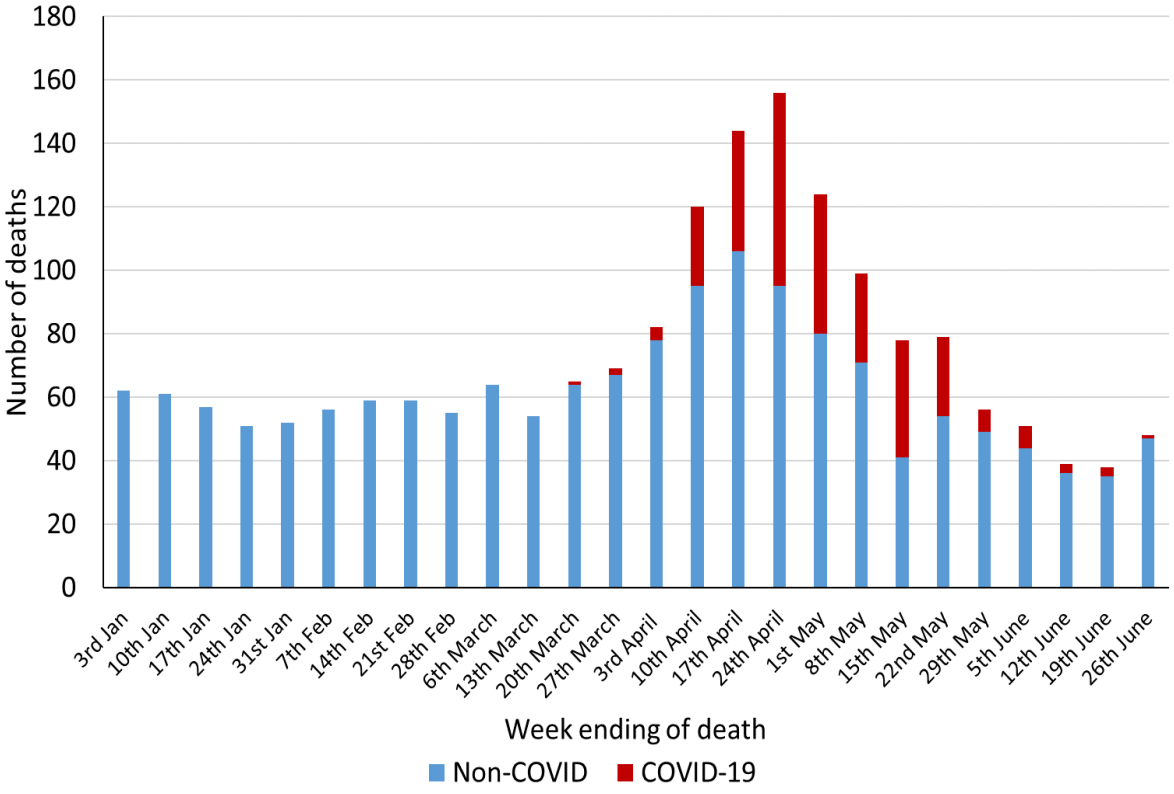


(b) In relation to deaths of care home residents, for the 26-week period of week ending 3 January to week ending 26 June 2020 there were 286 deaths where COVID-19 was mentioned on the death certificate.

Graph 2 on the next page shows all deaths, and the number of deaths where COVID-19 was mentioned each week.

Please note that this is where death occurred in a care home. However, there will be some care home residents who were admitted to hospital prior to death; these deaths will not be included in this data.

Graph 2: COVID-19 and non-COVID deaths in care homes 2020, by week of occurrence of death, West Sussex residents



4. Written Question from **Cllr Kirsty Lord** for reply by the **Cabinet Member for Children and Young People**

Question

Given the lack of face-to-face support for new parents during lockdown, would the Cabinet Member please advise:

(a) How many more users accessed the Family Assist website compared to previous periods; and

(b) What steps are the County Council and partners taking to address the impact on maternal mental health, breastfeeding rates and child wellbeing?

Answer

(a) The number of people who accessed Family Assist and comparisons with previous periods are as follows:

- At the end of May 2020 there were 11,084 total registered users of the Family Assist resource.
- When looking specifically at new registrations at the start of the pandemic, Family Assist saw a 95% increase from 270 new registrations in February 2020 to 527 new registrations in March 2020.
- In the three-month period between 1 December 2019 and 29 February 2020 there were 890 new registrations.

- This compares to 1,442 new registrations in the three-month period between 1 March and 31 May 2020.

(b) The question relates to steps the County Council and partners are taking around maternal mental health, breastfeeding and child wellbeing during lockdown. The main actions undertaken by the Council and its partners and providers for these three areas, are summarised below.

Maternal mental health:

Family Assist

When COVID-19 began, Public Health shifted its focus to developing and expanding the digital resource, Family Assist, to ensure that pregnant women, new mothers and their families were supported during these particularly worrying times. In particular, the operational group, led by the Public Health Directorate, worked to:

- Upload new content on mental health of parents as well as children onto the website, alongside information on COVID-19 itself and particularly its implications for pregnant women.
- Upload videos to reassure new parents of what to expect when they came onto the wards during COVID-19.
- Start using new social media platforms such as Facebook to advertise and promote links to the above.
- Launch a Live Chat facility to enable residents to communicate with midwives and health visitors in real time.
- Add additional content on issues which we anticipated might be useful for new parents e.g. cooking on a budget, physical activity during COVID-19.

The Public Health Directorate are in the process of designing an evaluation to help assess which Family Assist services people have found most useful during COVID-19 to inform future service delivery.

ChatHealth Telephone Service

- School nurses adapted the ChatHealth telephone service to allow parents to use this service as well, as previously this service was only available to children. Most calls are recorded as being in relation to emotional health and wellbeing.

Sussex and East Surrey Perinatal Mental Health Clinical Network

- The Sussex and East Surrey Perinatal Mental Health (PNMH) Clinical Network experienced an increased demand for the support of specialist PNMH nurses and an increase in referrals following COVID-19; however, many of the PNMH trained champions had been redeployed.
- The PNMH Specialist Health Visitor in West Sussex developed targeted support for service users with PNMH issues in West Sussex and has supported her list of concerned perinatal mothers daily or weekly as needed.

Support groups for new parents

- Two informal virtual support groups for new parents have been offered in Mid Sussex by the Maternity Voices Partnerships, one focused on mental health and the other on infant feeding. The virtual support groups have been well received by parents.

Breastfeeding:

The Infant Feeding Team was prioritised as an essential service following the onset of COVID-19 and capacity was increased from four to 11 members, including four Lactation Consultants and experienced Infant Feeding Advisors who run the Milk Drop Ins.

To help meet the needs of all infants and mothers within West Sussex during the pandemic the Infant Feeding team:

- Set up a new advice line for all antenatal and postnatal women leading to approximately 100 new calls each week.
- Encouraged access to the Specialist Infant Feeding Service by any Health Professional within West Sussex who needed advice or referral for complex breastfeeding. Video consultations were offered alongside ongoing support with feeding issues to all mothers referred into this service.
- Supported the Live Chat facility on Family Assist.
- Opened an infant feeding Facebook page to provide up to date information for all parents regarding feeding and caring for their baby.
- Training and updating of peer supporters was continued via Google Classroom.
- Although the Breast Pump Scheme, jointly run between West Sussex Children & Family Centres and the Milk Infant Feeding Team was suspended due to concerns regarding the safe management of distribution, collection and cleaning of units across West Sussex, the team made alternative arrangements to enable families to source breast pumps whilst some of the Children and Families centres were closed. Similarly, with Healthy Start, partners worked together to develop a new system to ensure families could apply for and receive their vouchers and vitamins.

Child Wellbeing:

A host of resources have been advertised to schools and GPs in relation to children and young people's wellbeing. These include:

- Information and support via websites such as a new e-wellbeing website, Young Minds and apps to help young people manage anxiety.
- Early intervention and support services such as YES (Youth Emotional Support), MIND and Be OK services.
- Support for specific issues such as bereavement and sexual abuse.
- Specialist mental health services, such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and services for eating disorders.

Digital e-wellbeing Website

- Our newest information resource is the digital e-wellbeing website developed by young people in partnership with YMCA and Sussex

Partnership Foundation Trust to support mental health in children and young people.

- The areas of West Sussex where young people were accessing the website most were highest Crawley and Worthing.
- Young people were focusing on obtaining information around COVID-19, low mood and depression.
- A Back to School Campaign is also being developed with the YMCA over the next few months.

Mental Health Support Teams

- New resources are also emerging in the form of Mental Health Support Teams in schools in two areas (Crawley and Arun) after West Sussex successfully bid for funding.
- Staff are already in schools and being trained to deliver support to children with low to moderate mental health needs in 15 schools in Crawley and 14 in Bognor. Unfortunately, the Council's bid to roll these out to schools in Worthing was not successful.
- Anticipating that Emotional Based School Avoidance might be one of the consequences of COVID-19, the Educational Psychology team in West Sussex has taken steps to ensure that this issue is becoming embedded in the developing work of the Mental Health Support Teams as school term begins in September 2020. There has been interest in this approach from the Department of Education and West Sussex were invited to lead seminars on this topic.

5. Written question from **Cllr Brian Quinn** for reply by the **Cabinet Member for Education and Skills**

Question

Can the Cabinet Member please tell me whether he anticipates increased school transport will be required in order to accommodate social distancing when schools return in September and if so:

(a) Does the Council have the capacity in place to deliver this; and

(b) Has the Government provided adequate funds to cover these costs?

Answer

Initial guidance on school transport has been released by the Government; however, there is a further update expected shortly. It is, therefore, not possible to be definitive about social distancing on home to school transport contracted routes in September 2020. The guidance, as it stands, makes it clear that there is scope for applying social distancing flexibly because school transport is not the same as general public transport. We await schools' confirmation of their opening arrangements in September as this will have an impact on the overall requirement for transport.

Public transport, including buses and rail, and the social distancing on board are subject to separate guidance. The bus companies are in the process of relaxing the social distancing guidance to accommodate c.50% capacity on board. Capacity up to this point has been c.25%.

(a) The County Council is working closely with suppliers to understand the capacity in the market that could be made available. The requirement to do so is still unclear for the reasons given above. The County Council has also secured additional capacity within its own transport fleet for September.

(b) The Government has not confirmed if additional funding will be allocated to cover any additional home to school transport costs that are necessary.

6. Written question from **Cllr Karen Sudan** for reply by the **Cabinet Member for Education and Skills**

Question

Can the Cabinet Member please confirm that, if and when pupils return to school in September, the County Council will not issue a fine to the parents or require head-teachers to do so if the parents decide not to send their child to school due to concerns about the current pandemic.

Answer

It is recognised that some children may be anxious about returning to school and the County Council will work closely with schools to help them prepare children and build the confidence of parents and carers in the plans for a safe and managed return.

The Education and Skills service will continue to work with schools to engage with and support parents in getting their children back into school before considering issuing penalties for poor attendance. Issuing fines for non-attendance is always a last resort. We will be exploring strategies for schools to engage and communicate with parents about the importance of school attendance and also about the actions schools are taking to minimise health risks on school return. We believe that work principally needs to build confidence and support a return. However, should there be instances where all efforts to engage with and support parents prove unsuccessful in improving a child's attendance then, in accordance with government guidance, the County Council will consider whether fining would be appropriate.

7. Written question from **Cllr Nigel Dennis** for reply by **the Cabinet Member for Highways and Infrastructure**

Question

Most bus services in West Sussex have been operated commercially (without subsidy) by the bus operators until the COVID-19 pandemic. Given Government advice against using public transport and the collapse in passenger demand, how will the County Council maintain the network as many of these services may be never commercially viable again?

Answer

The Government has been supporting the commercial bus network through the Coronavirus Bus Services Support Grant (CBSSG) paid directly to bus companies since the start of the crisis based on commercial bus mileage. The first tranche of the funding was to allow reduced services, targeting where key workers may need services. The second tranche of the grant (known as CBSSG Restart) has recently

been paid, allowing the bus companies to start to increase their services towards pre-COVID-19 levels to allow increased access to work and essential services for the wider population. The County Council has also received the first tranche of the local authority component for supported bus services and awaits news on the Restart grant.

The future of the bus network in West Sussex has clearly been adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the full extent is not yet understood and likely support needed is not yet known. The County Council will, therefore, continue to work closely with the bus companies and neighbouring local transport authorities to understand what changes are happening and how the commercial bus network might be sustained. If routes become unsustainable in the longer term the County Council will work with all those with a stake in bus services, as well as with the Government, to look at possible solutions for existing services. This work will also include alternative provision such as community transport.