

Update on Communities and Libraries

Registration and Coroners

1. This service has remained open and fully staffed since 23 March. Staff have been working from their usual office base (registration offices), but these premises have not been open to the public. During this time, they have been registering deaths by telephone which became possible with the introduction of the Coronavirus Act.

Weddings/Civil Partnerships

2. In line with government guidance, the service stopped all forms of weddings/civil partnership from 23 March. 464 weddings were due to take place from 23 March to 31 May. 294 of those have been re-booked, 143 are still waiting to decide when to re-book and 27 have been cancelled. There are a number of ceremonies that are booked between June and October that are also moving to next year.

Deaths

3. Throughout April and May, the Service has been solely focused on registering deaths. There was a notable increase in the number of deaths and therefore registrations. It is pleasing to note the this is now reducing to 'normal' levels for the time of year. Detailed below is a year on year death rate comparison to illustrate the current situation. More recent data is incomplete due to time lag of date of death vs date of registration.

Week number	Dates (2020)	Number of Deaths	
		2019	2020
10	2nd-8th March	123	114
11	9th-15th March	121	121
12	16th-22nd March	109	121
13	23rd-29th March	103	162
14	30th March - 5th April	130	215
15	6th -12th April	107	251
16	13th-19th April	108	231
17	20th-26th April	111	212
18	27th April - 3rd May	110	171
19	4th -10th May	124	134
20	11th -17th May	132	118
21	18th -24th May	128	103
22	25th - 31st May	102	95
	TOTAL	1508	2048

4. The service has been running flexibly to meet the demand, working over weekends and bank holidays as required. This has given the ability to register up to 64 deaths per day when required.

Registration Service – Recovery

5. The suspension of Birth Registrations and Notices of Marriage was removed on the 31 May 2020. Neither the service or the General Register Office was aware of the plan prior to the announcement meaning initial plans have had to be brought forward to implement the appropriate adaptations to premises. This includes access to building, appropriate facilities for users, screening in the offices, signage and guidance to ensure ongoing adherence to social distancing. The service will delay opening until the completion of the adaptations– this is expected to be Tuesday 9 June for birth registrations.

6. Notices of Marriage will be undertaken for urgent requests (marriages overseas etc). Remaining Notices will resume once further guidance has been received around Marriages/Civil Partnerships. Not all locations will be able to complete birth registrations due to the co-location with services that are currently closed and therefore inaccessible to the public. This includes Malvern and Evesham where the service is co-located with libraries. Bromsgrove is planning to re-open as the physical layout differs and subject to suitable access control. There are plans to increase availability of appointments in the other offices to compensate

7. No announcement has been made as yet about the recommencement of our other services including Marriages/Civil Partnerships and Citizenship Ceremonies. It is envisaged that small ceremonies will be allowed during phase 2 in July and resource capacity is available and planned to be available at this time.

Coroners

8. All long inquests and jury inquests have been adjourned until September onwards, following the Chief Coroners guidance. Any small inquests that can be completed e.g. those where witnesses are not required to attend or where the evidence can be heard by telephone link and family are content. These are generally scheduled for one day a week and details of the hearings are published as normal on the Coroner Service website. Service is generally busy with an uplift in referrals where the GP is not able to issue medical certificate causes of death without coronial input.

Coroners – Recovery

9. Plans are in place to resume small inquests where attendance at court may be required. All the necessary preparations are well underway to prepare the court facilities. These are planned to start from the end of June.

10. The service is working with Place Partnership Limited to explore other locations for larger inquests/jury inquests scheduled for later this year, taking into consideration the current social distancing guidance. Should this not be possible then they will be adjourned until 2021.

Libraries

11. All Worcestershire Libraries closed on Tuesday 24 March in response to the central government announcement. Since then the focus of libraries has been centred around the following:-

Here2Help campaign and service

12. 61 library staff were re-deployed to form part of OneWorcestershire's Here2Help service (see more on Here2Help). These staff are responding to requests for support from Worcestershire residents either by answering calls coming through the Access Centre number and calling people back who have asked for support.

Creation of a Digital Library Hub.

13. The new Digital Library Hub is focused on helping Worcestershire residents to stay active and connected with their communities while living under social distancing restrictions. The Hub brings together a wide range of new and improved digital library resources and services which are accessible from home and which provide opportunities to attend virtual library events and engage in activities that promote reading, learning, business enterprise, job seeking and the development of digital skills. <http://www.worcestershire.gov.uk/DigitalLibraryHub>

14. More new digital library services will continue to be created and added to the Digital Library Hub, expanding Worcestershire Libraries' digital service offer in line with the Library Strategy 2020-2025.

15. From the closure of libraries to end May 2020, there have been 27,028 e-book and e-audiobook downloads from Worcestershire's digital library, an increase of 137.8% on the same period in 2019. In the same period, there have been 878 new digital library members, a 362.1% increase on the same period last year.

Library Transformation

16. Work has commenced on the creation of a Strategic Library Communications Plan which will play a key role in driving the implementation of the Library Strategy 2020-25. An initial scoping session was held in mid-April with an external cultural communications consultant, secured through a successful bid to Libraries Connected Expert Bank pilot. A draft plan is expected by end June 2020.

17. Planning for the procurement of Open Library technology is underway in preparation for roll-out at three early adopter sites at Droitwich, Stourport and Rubery libraries. A new library procurement framework has become available which will enable a shorter procurement process and a requirements specification is being produced with reference to material shared by other authorities who have recently run similar procurements.

18. Work continues with the University of Worcester to identify a mutually agreeable approach for re-balancing Hive staff costs across Council and University which will

deliver library efficiencies for the Council. Planning for a Library Management re-structure, incorporating the Hive, is due to start shortly.

Libraries Recovery and Re-opening

19. Guidance currently indicates that Libraries could reopen in early July 2020. As the country discusses when and how to safely lift COVID-19 restrictions, library professionals in all sectors of the industry are planning and preparing for reopening operations and rethinking the experience offer for all. The key principles underpinning Worcestershire's library re-opening will be steered by the DCMS taskforce for Recreation & Leisure.

20. Current planning is based on three phases of library re-openings. Re-opening protocols have been shaped by Libraries Connected Toolkit, as well as the County Council's Public Health and Health and Safety professionals, to ensure safe social distancing environments for staff and customers. A phased approach will support social distancing as well as gauge public response and demand for services, refine safe operating procedures and ensure a sustainable service offer.

21. A summary of the three phased approach is outlined below.

Phase 1: 6 July 2020 for 2 or 3 weeks

22. Phase 1 will focus on opening the 6 main libraries; The Hive, Redditch, Kidderminster, Malvern, Bromsgrove, Evesham. The service offer for Phase 1 will comprise:

- Reserve and Collect Service (home library items only)
- Book returns (into quarantine)
- Managed access to Public Network (PN) Computers
- Possible Library Service At Home (LSAH) depending on availability of volunteers

23. Current advice from Public Health England is that returned books should be quarantined for 72 hours, after which time they pose no risk for transmission of the virus.

Phase 2: End Phase 1 to end August 2020

24. Phase 2 will incorporate additional libraries that have sufficient staff available to open the library, manage entry to the building and support social distancing. At present they include: Droitwich, Stourport, Pershore, Tenbury. The service offer for Phase 2 will comprise:

- Self-service browsing and borrowing service
- Signposting
- Normal reservation service (depending on availability of van deliveries)
- Book returns (into quarantine)
- Managed access to PN Computers
- Managed use of space for wi-fi

Phase 3: 1 September 2020 until further notice

25. Depending on the extent to which social distancing guidelines can be relaxed and availability of staff and volunteers, Phase 3 will see a re-opening of all libraries where there are adequate staff and/or volunteers. The Service offer for Phase 3 will comprise:

- Self-service browsing and borrowing service
- Signposting
- Normal reservation service (depending on availability of van deliveries)
- Book returns (into quarantine)
- Managed access to PN Computers
- Managed use of space for wi-fi
- Possible LSAH depending on availability of volunteers
- Library events and activities that can be delivered safely
- Mobile Library - subject to social distancing restrictions and driver availability

26. Throughout all the recovery plans, work will continue to develop a comprehensive and high-quality digital library service offering as an effective and attractive alternative to physical library visits. Re-opening plans also include emergency plans for closing in response to the possibility of a second wave or local outbreak of COVID 19. They have also ensured that requirements to sustain the Here2Help service, with appropriate levels of support continuing, can be met.

Archives and Archaeology

Archives

27. On 31 March 2020 it was announced that Worcestershire's Archive Service had retained its Accredited Archive Status after completing its first full cycle of assessments and visits by The National Archives. Worcestershire was one of the first six archives in the Country to join the scheme in 2014 and one of only three to have successfully completed a cycle. This success is a clear recognition of the continued good performance of the service. Work has now commenced on plans to address the recommended areas of continued improvement, which includes developing a digital archive.

28. The face to face service stopped on the 24 March when The Hive closed along with other Libraries. As original archive material must stay in The Hive, staff have laptops and are working from home to update catalogues, improve guidelines and work on our website. The enquiries service is open to the public (and County Council staff) as normal although the team cannot answer questions that need access to original archives. However, there is a very large amount of on-line data including the service's catalogue and the team are pointing all enquirers to the free online guide to the collections (including archaeological information) which can be downloaded here <https://www.explorethepast.co.uk/discover-your-past/>

Archives – Recovery

29. As the Hive re-opens the face to face service will phase back in line with public access to the building, availability of staff and the ongoing social distancing measures.

Field Section Archaeology

30. Following the announcement of the lockdown of 23 March all fieldwork was ceased although some works such as the reinstatement of trenches for safety reasons was carried out on 24 March. Over the following couple of days, a limited team removed archives and excavated material from the Hive to allow post-fieldwork analysis to continue.

31. As the situation has continued it has become clear that while some other archaeological companies have taken the same approach, it is a mixed situation (this is demonstrated by the preliminary analysis of a Chartered Institute of Archaeologists (CIfA) survey on COVID-19 impacts on work) and some construction companies, in line with advice from the Ministry of Housing have also continued to operate.

32. The team therefore resumed small scale excavation work in late April on sites where industry standard social distancing guidance could be followed, and the works are deemed to be essential.

Trading Standards

33. Officers are now authorised under the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020 which provides powers to enforce business closures and the team is in close liaison with the Worcestershire Regulatory Service (WRS) Environmental Health and Licensing team that operate on behalf of the District Councils in this work. The Head of Service is working with the other Heads of Trading Standards in the region to try to achieve a consistent approach to enforcement of these provisions.

34. The first phase of response from the Community Environmental Health Team was to make proactive checks that businesses were closed. Officers were tasked to undertake proactive patrols at reasonable times to check that businesses were closed. Formal checks were not recorded for every property that was noted to be compliant and closed but we know that over 2,200 visits were made to businesses county wide. The level of compliance was found to be generally excellent, with only 7 Prohibition Notices and 30 written warnings being required for non-compliant businesses across the County. These checks were supplemented with work of the licensing Team who carried out spot checks on 550 pubs and clubs during the Easter Bank Holiday weekend to ensure businesses were not trading. Further proactive checks were made by the Community Environmental Health Team over the Spring Bank Holiday.

35. Over the same period, the Trading Standards team has been maintaining a flow of information going out to the public on potential COVID related Scams. At a national level, fake PPE has been a clear issue and the team has taken referrals from the Worcestershire County Council Logistics cell. So far these have been

referred on to other bodies or local authorities. We are working with local business to get their processes right so they can use the relaxations Government has provided on some of the PPE certification.

36. The next phase for regulators is to support the re-opening of the economy. It will not be enough to just inform the public that Worcestershire is now “open for business”, so to bring back visitors and get people using High Streets, businesses are going to have to demonstrate that they are “open, safe and healthy” places to visit. A team has been set up within the Community Environmental Health unit to support this and resources have been temporarily re-deployed from other parts of WRS to make this deliverable.

37. Further, the service is beginning to engage with the local outbreak management process that is seen as the key mechanism for controlling the spread of COVID-19 going forward. A number of Environmental Health Officers will be working as part of the team that controls outbreaks. Beyond that, the main focus is likely to be those in workplaces and similar premises where our Health and Safety at Work role is relevant.

38. The service is also looking at how to help restore business as usual activities across Trading Standards, Environmental Health and Licensing. Risk assessments are being updated to allow safe ways of working.

Countryside Greenspace

39. Waseley Hills and Worcester Woods Country Parks cafés closed during March following Government announcements. Both businesses have been offered rent holidays and have been signposted to business grant support.

40. All parks remained open for public use and social distancing messaging have been placed around at all sites. Staff have carried out daily health and safety checks (following social distancing guidelines) on the two main sites with all other sites being visited weekly. General ground maintenance (e.g. grass cutting) has still been taking place as staff and contractors can safely do this without contact with others. Wildflower seeding at County Hall is being planned for the spring.

Countryside Greenspace – Recovery

41. The Café's at Waseley Hills and Worcester Woods open on the 1 June for takeaway only. Things have been going well so far, busier at Waseley Hills than at Worcester Woods at the moment. The café tenants have risen to the challenge and prepared really well. Worcester Woods has altered their opening times to be 10-7 to take advantage of the evening meal trade a bit more.

42. Health Walks in partnership with our Public Health colleagues are currently suspended and the officer who leads this area of work has been redirected to work on Here2Help.

Here2Help

43. Here2Help was launched as One Worcestershire's community action response with the sole aim of supporting residents through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Here2Help is a campaign as well as a dedicated response service for all residents who ask for help and those individuals and organisations who offer to help. It aims to complement the national scheme to support those individuals extremely vulnerable and being the most at risk of becoming severely ill from COVID-19 (our **shielded** cohort) and the NHS Volunteer Responders initiative.

44. The purpose of Here 2 Help is to provide support to people in Worcestershire who are having to self-isolate and/or have additional needs due to the COVID-19 outbreak and cannot get that help and support from friends, family or neighbours.

45. Individuals can make a request for help and individuals; groups and organisations can also offer help via the Here 2 Help website. www.worcestershire.gov.uk/here2help For those with no internet access, a helpline has been set up 01905 768053.

46. A summary of the impact of Here2Help is below:-

- As of the 3 June 2020 there have been 2920 requests for help made and over 2000 offers of help
- The main reasons individuals contacted Here2Help were food and supplies related concerns. These took the form of needing help with shopping, needing support on central Government food parcels and problems accessing supermarket delivery slots.
- The second most common reason for accessing the service was in relation to health and medical needs, mainly concerning prescription collections.
- Advisors supported people who were contemplating harm, feeling anxious, stressed or concerned about their situation.
- Almost two thirds of all survey respondents suggested that they were less able to be independent due to the current coronavirus situation.
- 40% of respondents to the survey said that they have felt lonelier during the coronavirus lockdown.
- Here2Help advisors from the Public Health team, Worcestershire Libraries and Worcestershire Children's First supported individuals with guidance, advice and signposting to voluntary and community sector organisations for local level support.
- Several local voluntary and community sector organisations also supported with similar services vulnerable and shielding individuals in their communities
- In a number of emergency situations, Worcestershire County Council transport teams supported the collection and delivery of medication and the delivery of food parcels prepared by WCC.
- Here2Help also worked closely with District Council colleagues to make contact with shielded groups and deliver 'safe and well' checks to individuals who did not respond to repeated attempts to contact.
- The review of the six main categories in reason for help request, produced a number of smaller sub-categories and found that aspects including 'informal care needs' were not being fulfilled due to friends and family isolating
- Overall, over 80% of all respondents were "Very satisfied" or "Quite satisfied" with the Here2Help service, with almost two thirds of respondents stating that they were "Very satisfied".