

Message from Councillor Roger Truelove (Swale Borough Council Leader)

Dear Parish and Town councils,

I wanted to update you on our response to the increase in cases of coronavirus across the borough, which are currently among the highest in England.

As you know there are limits to what we as a district council can do directly to respond to this pandemic. With the alarming increase in cases, I felt it was important that we got together as many of those involved as possible, so I called an emergency meeting of our partners and I was pleased with the response we have seen.

At the meeting yesterday, Kent's director of public health gave us the latest figures which seem to show the rate is beginning to come down.

We are hoping that the impact of the introduction of the national measures will begin to show on our figures this week, but this is not guaranteed, and there are still worrying signs.

Infection rates have been predominantly among those of working age, but we are starting to see more and more cases in those aged over 60, who are the most vulnerable to the worst effects of the virus.

Deaths are beginning to rise, but there is a delay in the data as these are based on the cause of death on the death certificate. We hope that the experience of the first wave earlier in the year will mean treatment is more successful now and so we don't see the levels we saw back in April. But, with winter coming, and the pressure this brings to our health services, it is a worrying trend.

We also had confirmation that the current rise in cases is not linked to any particular setting. There has been speculation about prisons and care homes being behind our figures, but together these made up only 15 percent of our cases in the last four weeks, and 12 percent of the last two weeks. This means that the virus is spreading in the community – in residential settings – so we need to be doing all we can to encourage people to follow the rules.

Whilst the number of cases is a serious cause of concern, I was pleased to see that we are the second highest area of Kent for the number of tests being taken by our residents. This shows that many people are doing the right thing if they have symptoms, and whilst it might not seem so now, this should help in the longer run as we identify more people who need to isolate.

I am hoping we will hear in the next few days about the possibility of mass testing for the borough. Kent County Council have been in discussions with the Government about this, and I am hopeful we will benefit from it being introduced locally. Obviously, this would be a huge logistical challenge, but we will offer whatever support we can to make it happen.

At the same time, we need to continue to enforce the rules that are in place. We all need to make sure we are doing all we can to make sure local businesses are complying with the rules. If you are aware of any businesses not adhering to the restrictions in place, please report them at www.swale.gov.uk/stay-safe-concerns so they can be investigated.

The Government has said we will be coming out of the national restrictions next week and it is likely that we will be a higher tier than we were. We need to channel all our energies on safely getting out of it as soon as we can if we want our struggling local businesses to recover, and to try to save as many local jobs as possible.

For now we need to be reminding people of the national restrictions in place until 2 December, and after that we will need to explain the restrictions of whatever tier we are placed in. We should find this out on Thursday, and I hope we can all work together to make sure people know what they should do.

There are materials to support these messages at <https://coronavirusresources.phe.gov.uk> and these should be updated in the next few days to reflect the changes coming next week.

If we don't keep trying to get this virus under control, this will be a long and painful winter for the borough.

Not just for struggling businesses and people losing their jobs, but for those who succumb to this disease, their families, and those who are unable to receive the care they need for other conditions because our NHS is under strain.

Finally, I know many of you have been doing your utmost to help the borough through this difficult time, and I want to thank you for that.

I know you are as keen as I am to get back to some form of normality, and I am confident that by working together, we will.

Yours,

Cllr Roger Truelove