

MAYOR OF NEWHAM'S STATEMENT ABOUT CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19): SCHOOLS LATEST AND SUPPORT FOR SMALL BUSINESSES - 19 March 2020

Dear Newham Resident,

I am sad to report that the Coronavirus (Covid-19) has continued to take a toll on our community. Today NHS England informed us of one more death attributable to the virus at Newham University Hospital, bringing the total to four.

On behalf of the Council and myself, I send my deep condolences to those of you who have lost loved ones. To those suffering with the virus I wish you a speedy and complete recovery, you are in our thoughts.

Yesterday the Government announced that all schools are to close from Friday afternoon until further notice as part of the response to the coronavirus pandemic. While some schools will stay open, these will only be for children who have been assigned a social worker, have special needs, or are the children of keyworkers.

In recent days, our schools have worked incredibly hard, in really challenging and uncertain circumstances, to both remain open and prepare for a potential complete closure. I want to thank all our teachers and support staff for their efforts during what has been a very difficult period.

Newham schools have been preparing educational resources for their pupils to be able to continue their learning at home. This includes a combination of Learning Packs and a range of virtual learning platforms, which they will be communicating with parents and students. We anticipate further governmental guidance on tests and exams which have been cancelled for May and June, and I will provide an update to you as soon as that becomes available.

I know a number of parents, carers and young people have been anxious about schools remaining open during this crisis. However, I also know the closures will add extra pressure for some families in Newham, particularly those facing challenges. That's why next week, we will be announcing details of more support for parents and carers with SEND children, or those who are key workers. We are actively planning a healthy food distribution network for those children who are eligible for free school meals. We are also examining the safest and most effective ways to continue with youth service provision.

I will be saying more about that next week and eagerly waiting clarification from government on its plans, including the money it will be making available to local authorities.

As well as carefully monitoring the number of coronavirus cases in Newham, and the impact this is having on our residents, I am deeply concerned not only about their health but also about their livelihoods.

That's why we are working up a range of measures to support Newham households, the voluntary sector and local businesses, as we know the economic impact of what lies ahead will be significant.

As well as the Hardship Fund announced by the Government in its Budget last week, there is an additional £330 billion in loans and financial support for small businesses. We'll be making sure that we secure a fair share of this extra money for Newham's hard-working traders, while demanding more financial support to help our most economically vulnerable families.

We have already cancelled direct debits for those businesses that qualify for help under the Government's scheme, and immediately changed the way we collect rates to support local businesses in the hospitality, leisure and retail sectors. Next week, we'll be announcing more measures to help small businesses in Newham, who can get in touch with the council's business rates team for more information on 0208 430 3250 or email business.rates@onesource.co.uk.

To support our fantastic market traders who offer a range of healthy and fresh food and commodities at affordable prices, we have decided that from today, all pitch rents across borough will be suspended for an initial period of four weeks. We understand that traders are facing a difficult period with reduced footfall. So we hope by this measure we can offer some immediate respite.

Now from the good to the ugly - a number of residents have been in touch with me and the council's trading standards unit about the unscrupulous way some businesses, including some online, are hiking the price of food and key essentials. That is why today, we are calling on Government to give councils extra emergency powers to allow us to enforce against this kind of disgraceful practice. It's immoral that a minority are seeking to profit in this time of national crisis, especially when people in Newham are facing severe economic hardship.

And, finally while I have been deeply moved by the generosity of the many Newham residents who have been in touch, asking how they can help the less fortunate, I have also been alarmed and appalled by some of the ugly scenes, and reports from our supermarkets and shops. Panic buying and hoarding threaten the ability of the most vulnerable to secure basic essentials; it is unnecessary, it is dangerous and it is wrong.

Please, more than ever, practise the life-saving advice on health, travel and work. Do not put yourselves or others at risk. Be kind to one another. Working together we can make a real difference and help to get this pandemic under control.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rokhsana Fiaz', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Rokhsana Fiaz
Mayor of Newham