

Caring in a Crisis: Shielding the Vulnerable in Oxfordshire – where to get help and support.....



On 23 March 2020 the Government announced: if you're clinically extremely vulnerable, you're strongly advised to stay at home, to protect your health and shield from the coronavirus. This includes organ transplant recipients, people living with cancer (or waiting for treatment) and people with severe respiratory conditions among others.

The aim of shielding is to strictly avoid any face-to-face contact with others, avoid someone who is displaying coronavirus symptoms and group gatherings for 12 weeks. More than 20,702 vulnerable people in Oxfordshire received a letter generated by GP surgeries, NHS records and health sources to identify them as high risk, advising them to stay home until 30 June.

From Monday 01 June 2020, vulnerable people will be allowed to go out with members of their household while maintaining social distancing. Those living alone can meet with someone from another household while maintaining social distancing.

The county council, in partnership with district councils, the NHS, the voluntary sector and friends, neighbours and family in every community are collaboratively working hard to support those who registered as shielded. This begun for the Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) customer service team in March 2020.

Calls from the Customer Service team

When the pandemic begun it was clear our residents would require support with immediate needs including social care, safety concerns, urgent food requests and help with collecting medication. A shielded phone line was created so inbound calls could be received by the Social and Health Care Customer Service team to answer questions from callers. The team receive between 50 and a 100 calls a day with over 11,000 pro-active outbound calls having been made, to date.

Myra Evans is the Operations Manager for the Customer Service Centre: *‘the shielded phone line is a clear route into the council for those identifying as ‘shielded’ and it allows vulnerable people to have their enquiry dealt with quickly. Helping people who identify as shielded has given the team a sense of doing something worthwhile that will make a positive difference in these unusual times.’*

Welfare calls are arranged with our most vulnerable residents to make sure people are safe and well and have everything they need. The inbound and outbound pro-active calls to people on the shielded list are made by a group of 15-20 Customer Service Advisers (CSAs) in the Customer Service Centre (CSC), supported by a group of trained library colleagues.

In some circumstances the team will seek support from other teams including hospitals, GPs, adult and children’s social care teams to ensure we contact everyone on the shielded list. This ensures the most vulnerable people in our county have any urgent needs identified and resolved as quickly as possible.

Here are some examples of how the shielded phone line and welfare calls make a difference:

- A customer service team member called a shielded resident who was identified as needing support. The only information we had was that this family had four young children, were under pressure and struggling to cope. We asked how they were coping and what they needed. Within 24 hours the resident had called us back to say they had received a parcel with food, sanitary items and everything else they needed and more. They were extremely grateful.
- A lady we contacted was extremely grateful for the welfare call. She didn't need anything at the time but couldn't thank our officer enough for checking on her. She was so impressed by the amount of support that had become available and she took the Shielding phone number in case she needed anything in the future.
- A lady was called, and she explained her fire alarms were not working and there was a risk as she is on oxygen. We immediately arranged for someone to call her back from our Social and Health Care Team to discuss this need and arranged a visit from our Fire and Rescue Service while observing social distancing.

Cllr. Ian Corkin is the Cabinet Member for Council Business & Partnerships said: *“As the impact of the pandemic became urgent, we were able to create this phone line to step up and respond to the needs of our residents. We are reassured people are safe because we are contacting them regularly. The council is working as a broker to support people with help from the City and District councils and we have a huge army of volunteers to help individuals in villages and towns. It’s been an incredible operation and effort and I would like to thank everyone involved!”*

An army of kind volunteers

The local voluntary and community sector is a simple point of contact for those who have different and important needs to ensure they are not isolated. Voluntary group Oxfordshire All In (OAI) has a team of 45 active members who are part-time volunteers (some are on secondment from other charities). The network of volunteers has a remit of assisting 500 volunteer-based Community Support Groups (CSGs) across the county with information and resources. This ranges from the large towns where groups can have 1000s of volunteers to small street-based neighbourhood groups, of three or four people.

Meanwhile, Oxford Hub staff are working in collaboration with Oxford City Council and OCC to deliver Oxford Together, their volunteer programme that provides support to people in Oxford City. With 5500+ volunteer sign-ups, Oxford Together volunteers provide support in a practical or social way.

Lizzie Shelmerdine is the Programmes Manager at Oxford Hub: *“Our volunteers are so enthusiastic when we contact them with referrals - they're always raring to go, to work out how we can provide the support needed, which is wonderful. We've delivered baby formula for new mums, lettuce for a man and his tortoise, collected books for a man who was missing his regular trips to the library, and have delivered thermometers for key workers who are monitoring their symptoms. We've had some lovely conversations with local people, and many people are so grateful for the support we're providing.”*

Where to get support:

- The dedicated shielded phone line is available to anyone who has been identified as clinically extremely vulnerable and is worried and needs support. The team will be able to offer advice on a range of issues when you contact them on 01865 89 78 20 or email shield@oxfordshire.gov.uk. Effective from Saturday (30th May) the opening hours will be 9am-6pm Monday to Friday and 10am-2pm on Saturday. Closed on Sunday.
- If you live in Oxford City, you can also phone 01865 24 98 11 between 8am and 5pm or visit www.oxford.gov.uk/CommunityAssistance
- For those residents who are not in a high-risk category but still in need of local community and voluntary support, there are several initiatives taking place across the county. Visit [Oxfordshire All In](#) or [Oxford Together](#) for more information on community support near you.

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