

COVID-19 outbreak

Councillor guidance

Note: this guidance is correct as at 19 March 2020

Overview

This guidance has been developed to assist elected councillors as councils grapple with the worst public health crisis we have experienced in a century. As we are in a fast-moving and unprecedented situation, the Local Government Association (LGA) will continue to update councillors as more information becomes available, through our website and further guidance documents as appropriate.

This guidance focuses on specific issues relevant to councillors' involvement in our work leading and protecting communities, as well as in delivering the full range of our normal services. Inevitably, there will be significant changes to how councils manage these responsibilities over the coming months.

This guidance highlights the role that individual ward councillors can play in supporting their communities through these difficult times. More than ever before, our role as civic and community leaders requires us to offer visible, responsible leadership that links community-led support with council structures to help build and sustain our overall resilience. Using social media and other means to link with the neighbourhood support groups that have developed in recent days will be an important part of this.

In developing this note, we have built on the LGA's councillor guidance to civil emergencies¹ which sets out the important political, civic and community leadership roles that councillors have to play in preparing for, responding to and recovering from an emergency. You may find it helpful to review the full document alongside this note.

The LGA is doing all that it can to support and represent our member councils during this crisis, including highlighting your concerns, seeking clarity from Government on key issues and providing guidance as quickly as possible. Information on a wider range of issues impacting the work of councils but not covered in this briefing is available on our website hub and via daily briefings being sent to chief executives and council leaders.

We will update our guidance for councillors as further information becomes available, as well as sharing examples of good practice that you may find useful. In the meantime, if you have any questions or concerns that you do not feel have been addressed, please contact us at coronavirus.enquiries@local.gov.uk

Yours sincerely,

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LGA Chairman

Councillor Nick Forbes CBE

Leader, LGA Labour Group

Councillor Izzi Seccombe OBE

Leader, LGA Conservative Group

Councillor Marianne Overton MBE

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¹ www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Publications%20-%2010.26%20A%20councillor%27s%20guide%20to%20civil%20emergencies_05.1.pdf

Current position and key impacts on councillors as at 19 March

This is a fast-moving situation and the Government is regularly updating its guidance to UK residents on measures to limit the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak. The gov.uk² website provides the most up-to-date guidance on current measures. Additionally, the NHS111 website³ gives the most up-to-date health guidance while the LGA has also developed an information hub⁴ on its website providing information specifically targeted at councils.

Along with the rest of the population, all councillors should be following the Government guidance in place at any given time. This includes avoiding unnecessary social contact and self-isolating if you are in a group identified as being particularly vulnerable.

Elections

As you will know, the local elections, mayoral elections and police and crime commissioner elections have been postponed until 2021. No other elections, by-elections or referenda should be held. It is the intention of the associated emergency legislation to make this happen to include by-elections where notice of election has been posted. This also applies to town and parish councils. The Government has made a statement to the effect that it will support decisions where by-elections and other referenda are postponed immediately.

We expect more legal advice on local elections, and on handling casual vacancies on councils, in the next few days, and will share this on our website and via bulletins.

Democratic processes

We have raised with the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) a number of questions regarding councils' normal democratic processes, and how these can operate when councillors are unable to meet in person. Specific issues raised include:

- the running of council meetings and other processes (for example, licensing committees)
- whether these can be held virtually
- schemes of delegation, which may need to be temporarily amended, and maintaining scrutiny.

We expect these issues to be covered in the emergency legislation being implemented to enact a range of emergency powers to protect the public and facilitate the emergency response to COVID-19. This was introduced to Parliament this week and is expected to become law very shortly. The LGA's legal team is engaging with monitoring officers and will share further advice with councils as and when it becomes available.

2 www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/coronavirus-covid-19-uk-government-response

3 www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/nhs-services/urgent-and-emergency-care/nhs-111

4 www.local.gov.uk/coronavirus-information-councils

Ward surgeries and resident engagement

Clearly, the Government's advice makes it difficult for councillors' normal surgeries to continue in their current format. As noted, all councillors should follow the guidance in place at any given time on avoiding unnecessary contact. Councillors should consult with their authorities to consider the scope for running virtual surgeries and use other forms of communication to engage with local residents, while councils should put in place measures to enable councillors to continue to fulfil their role as far as is possible. The nature of engagement with, and the issues being raised by residents may change substantially in the coming months and the next section sets out the roles that councillors can and should play in an emergency response period.

Councillor leadership role

If they are well and able to, all councillors can play a helpful and strong part in leading our communities through the COVID-19 crisis. The notes below highlight how councillors can support this in their ward councillor role; further guidance on the political leadership role is highlighted in the full LGA councillor's guide to civil emergencies.

Understanding the emergency response framework and your role

Councils are category one responders under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, which sets out the legislative framework for responding to emergencies such as the COVID-19 outbreak. As part of the local resilience forum (LRF), councils work with local partner organisations to plan and activate their emergency responses, and there are established officer-led processes for leading the strategic (gold), tactical (silver) and operational (bronze) responses to emergencies under the 2004 Act. Each council will have its own arrangements for ensuring that the authority's political leadership is appropriately linked into this structure.

Given the nature of this emergency there will be a greater focus on the work of council and health partners than on the blue light services that typically lead the immediate response to an emergency. Councillors' role within this context is to provide vital local leadership, rather than to become involved in the operational response led by officers.

Ward councillors will be among the people who know their areas best, and have an important role to play by:

- acting as a bridge between councils and communities
- amplifying consistent messaging through disseminating council and government information
- identifying local vulnerabilities, particularly local residents, but also businesses, and feeding this intelligence back into councils
- working with local voluntary sector groups to provide support and advice for local communities
- providing reassurance and facilitating support for local residents.

In order to fulfil this role, councils should establish mechanisms for keeping councillors informed about developments and national and corporate messages. These mechanisms should make clear how regularly councillors can expect to be updated, recognising that the council's overall priority is to focus its efforts on supporting local communities. In some recent emergencies, councils have found it helpful to designate a senior councillor to provide a first point of contact and take the lead role in engaging with other councillors, enabling officers to direct their efforts towards community communications and support. Councillors may also wish to consider how they link into the local MP/MPs.

If you are not yet clear on your council's processes for how it will keep you informed during the emergency response, you may wish to seek clarity on this. District councillors may also wish to clarify local approaches for disseminating information from the local Director of Public Health (DPH) as they do not always have a direct line of access.

It is clear that in the coming months the burdens on councils will be increasing at a time when corporate capacity is reduced as officers may be required to self-isolate or look after family members. Councillors should consider how they minimise the usual requirements on officers as resources are focused on supporting the vulnerable, while also ensuring that their own efforts are focused on this overwhelming priority.

Community leadership

It is vital that councillors demonstrate community leadership by taking a responsible approach to the information they share and the messages they give, and by following the guidance they receive from their council. Any information provided should be based on confirmed messages from the council, local DPH and Government, which will ensure that councillors are speaking with one voice. Given the prevalence of unhelpful unverified information, interpretation and speculation on this issue, it will be critical for councillors to show leadership by signposting to information and advice from assured sources and links to the latest guidance provided by the Government. Finally, while not shutting down legitimate debate or scrutiny, councillors should also consider their approach to making political statements regarding the current crisis; experience from previous emergency responses suggests that a consistent and collaborative approach in difficult circumstances is a more effective approach which will not undermine the council's work.

Using social media

The advent of social media has increased opportunities for rapid and effective communication with local residents and will be vital in a period where local residents (including councillors) are encouraged to limit unnecessary physical contact with other people. However, social media can create challenges for councils and councillors and lead to mixed messaging. Councillors should bear in mind general guidance on using social media, work with their communications teams and follow the guidance above to ensure that they are using social media appropriately. Where councillors are aware of misinformation being circulated on local social media groups, they can seek to counteract this by providing up-to-date, authoritative information, most likely from the Government website, having checked this with their council and local DPH.

There is a risk that a prolonged emergency response will lead to heightened emotions and potentially unacceptable behaviour towards councillors, as the most accessible form of Government. In these circumstances, councillors can refer to the LGA's guidance for councillors on handling intimidation.⁵

Community mapping

As local councillors, you will have valuable insight that can be used to help shape the support councils will be providing to those who need it within their communities. For example, this will include an awareness of existing community groups, knowledge of vulnerable residents, and scope to link into some of the new community forums, including online forums using social media, being established in response to the emergency. It will be helpful for councils to build on ward councillors' knowledge of the local voluntary and community sectors; councillors could consider collating their local knowledge and ward contacts and seek advice from officers about how this intelligence can be shared.

⁵ www.local.gov.uk/councillors-guide-handling-intimidation

As the emergency response period continues, councillors can continue to feed in developing information from local residents and businesses with concerns. Councillors also have a very useful role to play in identifying local issues within their wards, which might get overlooked on a council-wide or regional view.

Enabling community resilience

The unprecedented scale of this emergency response and the rapid rate at which the situation is evolving means that many neighbourhood groups have been rapidly established to support local residents, many on social media, others through leafletting. It will be helpful for councillors to engage with these groups, particularly using social media, to share messages from the council and Government and receive intelligence about any particular local vulnerabilities or concerns. It may not be possible to fully map these groups, but where possible councillors can seek to build local awareness and an overall picture of the networks that are developing and which parts of their ward these cover, which will help to identify particular gaps in community resilience. For areas with parish and town councils, these may form an important part of this work.

While the vast majority of people becoming involved in neighbourhood groups do so for the best of motives, it is also the case that the self-isolation of people who are older or more vulnerable will provide opportunities for criminals involved in various types of scams. It is important that councils and councillors are alert to these risks, and councillors may find it helpful to speak to their local trading standards or public protection teams to consider any guidance and evidence of emerging risks or intelligence.

Councillors may also find it helpful to highlight the threat of scams among residents involved in establishing local networks, so that they are also aware of the risks and can think about how their networks can address these concerns and look out for suspicious activity. They should also highlight the need to consider broader safeguarding issues relating to vulnerable people, including the need to avoid unwittingly spreading COVID-19.

Facilitating support for residents

In their normal day-to-day role, councillors will be involved in helping local residents who need to, to access support, and the key objective of work on community mapping and resilience will be to ensure support is available for those who are in need of it. In the coming months, once it becomes clear how various hardship funds and reliefs can be accessed, part of councillors' role may also include signposting and supporting residents and businesses to access financial support.

Empathy and reassurance

An important part of the local leadership role is simply to offer empathy, moral support and as much reassurance as possible – both to residents and local officers who will be working extremely hard in challenging circumstances. Insofar as possible given the restrictions, providing a visible presence through social media, telephone, or printed materials will help to keep residents informed and may provide reassurance. Councillors should consider how they can work collaboratively with other elected members to help share the burden of this over what is likely to be an extended and difficult period.

Community cohesion and monitoring

A prolonged period of challenging circumstances could undermine community cohesion and potentially lead to an increase in community tensions. The impact of the emergency response could have a disproportionate impact on specific minority groups or communities, in most cases through the isolation of small and under-represented groups, but potentially through intimidation and hate crime if tensions increase. Building on their existing local knowledge, and as the eyes and ears of their communities, councillors have an important role to try to monitor this and feedback any specific concerns or issues arising.

Your own wellbeing

Finally, it is undoubtedly the case that the coming months will make huge demands of all of us connected with councils, as well as a great many other people in our communities. Many councillors are themselves in a caring position or have local responsibilities for others which means that they, themselves, need support. Please take the time to balance your hard work with the need to maintain your own health and wellbeing. The NHS 111 website⁶ is a source of further information, and the mental health charity Mind has developed guidance⁷ on dealing with the response to COVID-19.

6 www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/nhs-services/urgent-and-emergency-care/nhs-111

7 www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing



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REF 50.1