

COVID-19 support to councils

Guide 3: Councillors' access to information

The Centre for Public Scrutiny is supported by the Local Government Association to provide advice, guidance and support to councils on governance and scrutiny. At this time of crisis we are working closely with national partners, and local authorities, to develop practical solutions to the challenges that this situation poses. This includes a series of five guides on key governance responses to the crisis which will be periodically updated.

CfPS operates a helpdesk through which we can provide support to councils and councillors on matters relating to governance and scrutiny. This can include answering questions as well as problem-solving assistance and help with member training and development.

Contact: info@cfps.org.uk or ed.hammond@cfps.org.uk

We are working closely with other partners – particularly the Association of Democratic Services Officers and Lawyers in Local Government – to ensure that advice of consistent and accurate.

More information can be found at <https://www.cfps.org.uk/home-2/covid-19/>.

This is the third of five guides for councillors (and those supporting them) on managing some of the challenges associated with carrying out their governance roles during the COVID-19 crisis.

This guide covers councillors rights to access information, and the kind of information they might expect to see in order to support their roles (principally, their scrutiny roles) as this crisis continues. It focuses on councillors' information access under executive arrangements. We recognise that expectations may be different in committee system authorities.

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1. General principles

Scrutiny will still need access to information, at the right time and at the right way, in order to carry out its work. In a more general sense too, councillors will need information about the work the council is doing – to assure themselves about what is going on and to help them as they seek to support their residents.

Information sharing goes both ways. Councillors have always been an excellent source of information about what is going on in local communities. This is now even more the case. Councils will be able to learn a lot from close links with their members, who are likely to be active in supporting local voluntary activity as well as providing direct support to residents. Councils may therefore wish to establish mechanisms to gather and collate councillor insights for use by senior officers and members.

2. Ways for councillors to proportionately access and query information

Councils produce significant quantities of information all the time. The nature of this information, and its focus, will now be changing. Targets will have shifted, along with broader priorities. As a first step, councillors will need to understand what these changes involve in general terms – because it will help them to understand what this will mean for services on the ground in the coming months.

This is likely to involve information about staff redeployment.

Councils should be taking proactive steps to share information with councillors about these changes and shifts in emphasis.

Questions councillors might ask on shifting priorities

- What is happening with our children's services improvement plan (if we have one)?
- What are the impacts on our commissioning framework for adult social care, and similar services?
- What are our support arrangements for schools, and for children of school age, and for children looked after?
- What changes are we making to universal services like waste collection, and parks and open spaces?
- How are we supporting and protecting staff – especially where they are key workers?
- What steps are we taking to vire money between budgets to handle these shifts in priority?

The more that councillors can understand about these foundational issues, the better able they will be to:

- provide support and advice to residents;
- plan and carry out scrutiny work which is proportionate;
- direct requests for information to officers which do not take those officers away from business-critical activities.

There will continue to be regularly produced information covering issues like performance, finance, risk, complaints, project delivery plans and so on. Councillors should already have regular access to this information, but are likely to expect to be told when it is likely to change – either in substance or in format.

3. Finding out information about the emergency response itself

The council will have established emergency response arrangements for COVID-19 under the Civil Contingencies Act. “Gold” command arrangements will have been made to lead and direct this operational response, which is likely to involve a number of local partners.

Civil contingencies decision-making is evidence based and quick. Senior people will convene frequently and the decisions they make will be immediately implemented. Information is likely to include:

- Situation reports – prepared by the council (and individual departments) and by partners, covering various services;
- Public health updates – specific reports on the spread of the disease and mitigation and suppression measures;
- Action trackers – service by service, and corporately.

The opportunity for councillors to use this information to “scrutinise” what is happening is minimal. The situation will change day to day. But reviewing information when produced will give a sense of what the council and its partners are doing which will provide members with useful context as they carry out their duties. Emergency planners and other senior individuals should think about how some of this information might be safely shared with councillors. It will be useful for councillors to get an understanding of the tempo and rhythm of decision-making and to potentially identify systemic issues that they might want to feed into. It will help to avoid unnecessary member queries.

The provision of information could lead to the identification of matters where scrutiny could productively carry out work – if proportionate and designed to reflect the actual needs of the operational response.