COVID-19 OUTBREAK
A Guide for Councillors

Correct as of 23rd March 2020
Some sections are reproduced from the LGA’s Guide for Councillors
This short guidance has been developed for councillors as we face the biggest public health crisis in living memory. It remains a fluid and dynamic situation which is still unfolding at a rapid pace. The WLGA will update councillors regularly on the current situation as more clarity emerges and more information becomes available.

Here, you’ll find helpful advice relating to our role as councillors in representing and leading our communities. You will be aware that these are far from ‘normal times’, and our councils have already been significantly affected by the outbreak. It is certainly the case that there will be many further changes to council business as this unprecedented situation continues to develop.

Through the WLGA, all Welsh local authorities are keeping in close contact – at political and officer levels – to coordinate the national response. We are working closely with Welsh Government, UK Government and Public Health Wales, and are also raising issues and concerns from across the local government family as they emerge.

Whilst this national work continues, our role as leaders in our communities is just as important. Now more than ever, our communities need support. Our residents will turn to us as ward councillors for trusted advice, guidance and reassurance about the work their council is doing to protect and care for them during this period of great uncertainty. But we also know that, just like us, you are likely to have your own personal anxieties and concerns. We know that this can – and will – sometimes feel overwhelming. We hope that this note will help to offer some advice in how to discharge your duty as an elected member, whilst also maintaining your own health and wellbeing as we face the months to come.

The WLGA is committed to support and represent all local authorities in Wales during this period by representing any concerns, liaising with Welsh and UK Government and to provide advice and guidance as information becomes available. A dedicated page which collates all the latest updates on the Coronavirus crisis is available on www.wlga.wales/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-councils. On that page, you will find this up-to-date guidance for all councillors, which is being updated regularly to reflect any developments or implications for local government. Regular briefings will also be emailed to all councillors to update you on the WLGA’s work in this area on behalf of local government in Wales.

We very much hope that you will find this guidance useful to you in your work as a councillor.

Yours sincerely

Councillor Andrew Morgan, WLGA Labour Group Leader

Councillor Hugh Evans OBE, WLGA Independent Group Leader

Councillor Emlyn Dole, WLGA Plaid Cymru Group Leader

Councillor Peter Fox OBE, WLGA Conservative Group Leader
Councils, with partners in the health service and third sector, are providing a front-line response to the to the rapidly changing national emergency of COVID 19.

Councils have shown incredible resilience and responsiveness and council workers should be commended for their incredible efforts; many are working ‘24/7’ redesigning and reprioritising local services and many thousands of workers in other services across Wales’ 22 councils have volunteered to change roles overnight to help contribute to the emergency effort.

The WLGA is working closely with councils and the Welsh Government to coordinate the public service response to COVID 19. The WLGA Leader is in regular dialogue with the First Minister and other Cabinet Members, the WLGA Group Leaders participate in weekly teleconferences with the Minister for Housing and Local Government and, through the WLGA, the 22 leaders participate in daily teleconferences to receive updates, share local intelligence and pool their responses. Chief Executives, Directors of Education, Directors of Social Services Directors of Public Protection, and Monitoring Officers are also working with the WLGA to inform emergency legislation and shape the emergency response of council services across Wales’ communities.

Immediate priorities over the past fortnight have been:

- **Making the case for additional testing for care staff** (though testing kits are slowly increasing in supply)
- **Pressing for the prioritisation and supply of PPE (Personal Protection Equipment) for key staff such as social workers** (some deliveries are now being made)
- **Supporting your education teams and schools in responding to last week’s announcement of the closure of schools** and the need to repurpose them to provide childcare for key workers and continue to provide food for children who receive free school meals
- **Developing council-led support, including delivering grants and rate relief, to local businesses at risk**, including local bus companies where councils have committed to providing a significant percentage of their fees
- **calling for support for council taxpayers from the Welsh Government**
- **calling for maximum flexibility with council finances**, including front-loading of the revenue support grant to aid councils’ cash flow and highlighting the significant loss of income councils face
- **Pressing for changes to regulatory burden, relaxation of statutory duties and end of year flexibilities**, to allow councils to focus on the core emergency response
- **Clarifying the position regarding collections of household waste/recycling from self-isolating and infected households** and considering priorities for collection in the face of reducing staff numbers
This is a fast-moving situation and the WLGA plans to keep councils and councillors updated on developments.

The Welsh and UK Governments are regularly updating their guidance to the public and public bodies on measures to limit the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak.

The www.gov.wales/coronavirus website provides the most up-to-date guidance on current measures. Additionally, the Public Health Wales website gives the latest updates on the spread of the virus, while the WLGA has a dedicated page on its website to collate relevant information for local authorities.

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

**Meetings and decision-making**

It will be increasingly difficult for councils to hold normal meetings in the coming weeks and possibly months. Government 'social distancing' guidance, self-isolation or illness will mean many councillors and officers will not be able to attend council meetings in the traditional manner.

Any changes required to the usual democratic process are being addressed by the UK Government and Welsh Government with advice through WLGA and Monitoring Officers. It is hoped that many of these will be resolved through the Coronavirus Bill. Specific issues are around:

- Attendance at and the running of council meetings and other processes, including allowing remote attendance virtually and possibly via telephone, and
- schemes of delegation, which may need to be temporarily amended, and maintaining scrutiny.

WLGA officials are working closely with Monitoring Officers to raise these matters with Welsh Government and will share further guidance with councils as it becomes available.

**Elections**

As part of the provisions in the UK-wide Emergency Bill, by-elections in Wales and the rest of the UK have been postponed until they can be held safely for voters, election officials and candidates. No other elections, by-elections or referenda should be held during this time. The UK Government has introduced an emergency Coronavirus Bill which is due to achieve Royal Assent by the end of the week and it is the intention to include by-elections where notice of election has been posted. This also applies to community and town councils. The Government has made a statement to the effect that it will support decisions where by-elections and other referenda are postponed immediately.

**Ward surgeries and resident engagement**

The official advice clearly 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 contact and ensuring social distancing. 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.

**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.

Councils are playing a key role in terms of providing childcare support for key workers through schools or hubs. Schools were formally closed from Friday 20\(^{th}\) March and it is anticipated that they will remain closed for a considerable period of time. Teaching staff have however been proactive and responded brilliantly sending parents and students homework plans and tasks for the coming period. Councils and schools have rapidly put in place care arrangements for the children of key workers, the definition of whom can be found via your council’s website as well as guidance for parents.

Councils will also play a role in providing ‘shielding’ support to those with particular health issues or their carers. These individuals will be written to directly and advised to stay at home and isolate for 12 weeks. These people will need the support of family, neighbours or friends in the first instance to provide food or medical supplies, but those that do not have people who can help should call their local council. Councils have prepared local responses working with the third sector. Further information will be available in due course.

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, it’s important that mechanisms are established to keep councillors informed about developments. 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 with local AMs and MPs.

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 or 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, either from the Welsh Government or Public
Health Wales website, having checked this with their council. 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 WLGA’s guidance for councillors on handling intimidation.

**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.

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 community 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 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 underrepresented 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
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 website is a source of further information, and the mental health charity Mind has developed guidance on dealing with the response to COVID-19.