COVID-19 OUTBREAK
A Guide for Councillors

Correct as of 15th May 2020
Some sections are reproduced from the LGA’s Guide for Councillors
This is the second version of the guide for councillors. It was first published in March to advise councillors of key issues as the biggest public health crisis in living memory took hold. It remains a fluid and dynamic situation which is still changing at a rapid pace. This updated guidance therefore seeks to reflect changes in policy and practice and the WLGA will continue to update councillors regularly on the current situation, through our website, further briefings as appropriate and daily email updates.

Here, you’ll find helpful advice relating to your role as councillors in representing and leading our communities. These are far from ‘normal times’, and our councils have been significantly affected by the outbreak. The changes to council business and the new ways of working that we’ve seen over the past couple of months will remain 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 co-ordinate 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 providing advice and guidance as information becomes available. A dedicated page which collates all the latest updates on the Coronavirus crisis is available at 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 are also emailed to all councillors to update you on the WLGA’s work in this area on behalf of local government in Wales. A daily coronavirus email update is sent by WLGA to all councillors.

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 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 across Wales’ 22 councils have volunteered to change roles overnight to help contribute to the emergency effort.

With the focus increasingly on how to ease restrictions, re-introduce some services and look towards recovery, the WLGA is working closely with councils and the Welsh Government to coordinate this. The WLGA Leader is in regular dialogue with the First Minister and other Cabinet Members, the 22 leaders participate in weekly virtual meetings with the Minister for Housing and Local Government and other Ministers and through the WLGA the 22 councils are sharing local intelligence and pooling their responses.

In planning for the easement of the restrictions and the re-introduction of some services, councils are considering a range of issues such as:

- **Welsh Government guidance and regulations**
- **local risk assessments**
- **PPE requirements for staff and public**
- **cleaning and hygiene arrangements**
- **managing social distancing**
- **health and safety requirements**
- **financial resources and staff capacity and redeployment**
- **liaising with unions and partners, including the police**
- **communications with the public**

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](http://www.gov.wales/coronavirus) website provides the most up-to-date guidance on current measures. Additionally, the [Public Health Wales](http://www.gov.wales/coronavirus) website gives the latest updates on the spread of the virus, while the WLGA has a dedicated page on its [website](http://www.gov.wales/coronavirus) 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.
Elections

As part of the provisions in the UK-wide emergency Coronavirus Act, 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.

Meetings and decision-making

Given current Welsh Government restrictions, it has not been possible for councils to conduct their decision making processes as normal.

The changes required to the usual democratic process have been addressed by the UK Government through the Coronavirus Act and Welsh Government regulations with advice through WLGA and Monitoring Officers. New meeting regulations have now been issued by the Welsh Government. The Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Meetings) (Wales) regulations 2020 came into force on the 22nd April 2020. The regulations and a statement from the Minister can be found here.

They apply to Principal Councils, Community Councils, National Park Authorities, Fire and Rescue Authorities and the Swansea Bay Port Health Authority.

Monitoring officers and Democratic Services leads will be able to provide members with more detailed information about these regulations and how these apply and are being implemented locally. Broadly however the regulations set out the following:

Remote attendance

All members can remotely participate in meetings. This applies to meetings held before 1st May 2021. Audio participation is all that will be required. Members should be able to speak and be heard by each other. Despite this welcome flexibility, it is unlikely that local authority meetings will return to normal for some months and authorities will need to continue to focus on urgent business relating to COVID-19.

AGMs

If a council has not held an AGM on or after the 1st of March or before the 22nd April 2020 then the AGM can be held on any date in 2020.

Other meetings

Other meetings that would normally be required to be held at specific times in the council calendar can now be held at any time before May 1st, 2021.

Attendance at meetings (The “Six Month Rule”)

The rule that disqualifies members for failing to attend a meeting in a six-month period is suspended as of April 22nd 2020. The time counted will restart from when a member would be expected to attend a meeting after the Covid impacted period.

Election of chairs

If a new council or committee chair (or similar position such as vice chair, representative on an outside body) has not been elected at an AGM held prior to the 22nd April 2020, then the existing chair can remain in office until 1st May 2021.

Summonses to meetings

Members can now be summoned to meetings through electronic communication.

Public attendance

The public will not need to see or hear the meeting. However, this should be arranged if possible. Where the public are to be invited this should happen electronically 3 clear days before the meeting is due to be held. Or, if the meeting is called at short notice, as soon as reasonably practicable.

Meeting papers
A note of meeting proceedings should be published electronically within 5 days of the meeting being held. This note should include a list of attendees, declarations of interest, any decisions taken (except exempt items) and the outcomes of any votes.

**Executive decisions**

When a decision is taken by the Executive or individual executive members, any written statements or reports relating to the decision should be published on the council website.

**Planning**

Members on planning committees can now be substituted.

The WLGA has issued guidance on how to effectively participate in remote meetings, [here](#).

The LGA has researched a variety of video and audio platforms that can be used for formal and informal meetings [here](#).

**Ward surgeries and resident engagement**

The official advice clearly makes it impossible 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.

Local Authorities have seven duties to carry out. These are:

1. Assess the risk of emergencies occurring and use this to inform contingency planning.

2. Put in place emergency plans.

3. Put in place business continuity management arrangements

4. Put in place arrangements to make information available to the public about civil protection matters and maintain arrangements to warn, inform and advise the public in the event of an emergency.

5. Share information with other local responders to enhance co-ordination.

6. Co-operate with other local responders to enhance co-ordination and efficiency.

7. Provide advice and assistance to businesses and voluntary organisations about business continuity management (local authorities only).

All Local authorities in Wales are currently in the midst of carrying out these collective duties in response to the pandemic, but are also continuing to coordinate and facilitate shared information, practice and learning across Wales. They are also following COVID19 legislation and guidance in specific areas such as excess deaths management. This is done principally via the established Strategic Coordinating Groups, and the many sub-groups which exist, including those on excess deaths management, transportation of bodies etc. Civil Contingencies managers are also connected across Wales via the Wales Local Authority Civil Contingencies Managers group, designed to provide a connected network of these key local government officers. Should you have any questions or need assurance about how any aspect of the coordinated approach is working on the ground, your senior leadership teams and civil contingencies officers would be pleased to discuss this with you.

As part of the Strategic Coordination Group, 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 20th 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, such as the [social media and online abuse](#) guidance from the WLGA and 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, 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.

Some councillors in Wales have worked with local volunteers to act as a hub for information and action, recruiting and coordinating teams of volunteers to communicate with allocated groups of people, check on the welfare of the vulnerable and relay any individual requirements back to the local councillor who acts as the main council liaison.

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.

Further Information
The Local Government Association has developed further information and webinars that councillors may find useful. Please note that whilst this information is not always entirely relevant to the policy and practice in Wales, it is useful for core principles and learning points.

Available on these links.

https://www.local.gov.uk/covid-19-leadership-workbook-cabinet-members