



Councillor Guidance: Coronavirus

Overview

This guidance has been developed to assist elected members as councils confront the worst public health crisis we have ever experienced – with exams that survived two World wars cancelled this year. As we are in a fast-moving situation, it is intended that this will be a living document that may need to be revised as the situation unfolds.

The guidance sets out the high level position, as it currently stands, in regard to councils' work in leading and protecting our communities, as well as in continuing to deliver the full range of our normal services. Inevitably, there will be significant changes to how we manage these responsibilities over the coming weeks and months.

More importantly, 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.

Clearly, at this time, chief officers will be dealing with this crisis and while members will absolutely be using their judgement in terms of their scrutiny role, balance is needed to allow staff to get on with the emergency response.

COSLA is doing all that it can to support our members at this time and hope that members find this guidance helpful. Further information can be found on the Knowledge Hub website which we have established jointly with our partners at the Improvement Service (<https://khub.net/web/scottish-elected-members-coronavirus-network>¹).

COSLA will issue a weekly briefing to all members to keep them up to date; these can be found [here](#). If there are any further questions or concerns in the meantime please email us at membersupport@cosla.gov.uk.

Current position and key impacts on councillors

This is a fast moving situation and the UK and Scottish Governments are regularly updating their guidance to residents on measures to limit the spread of the Covid-19 outbreak. The gov.uk website provides the most up to date guidance on current measures and can be viewed [here](#). The current position in relation to key issues impacting councillors is set out in the following sections.

Ward surgeries and resident engagement

Clearly, the Government's advice makes it difficult for councillors' normal surgeries to continue in their current format, and councillors should therefore explore the scope for running virtual surgeries and using other forms of communication to engage with local residents. However, the nature of engagement with and the issues being raised by residents will change substantially in the coming months, and the section below sets out the roles that councillors can and should play in an emergency response period.

¹ Requires registration with the Knowledge Hub.

Councillor leadership role

If well and able, all councillors can play their part in leading our communities through the Covid-19 crisis: the notes below highlight how.

Understanding the emergency response framework and your role

Councils are category one responders under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (Contingency Planning) (Scotland) Regulations 2005, 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 structures for leading the strategic (gold), tactical (silver) and operational (bronze) responses to emergencies under the 2004 Act. However, 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.

It is important that councillors understand their primary role in responding to an emergency. This is not to become involved in the operational responses referenced above, which are led by officers, but instead to provide vital local leadership. Ward councillors will be among the people who know their areas best, and have an important role to play by:

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

In order to fulfil this role, councils will establish clear mechanisms for keeping councillors informed about developments and national and corporate messages. 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.

Taking a responsible approach

It is vital that councillors demonstrate community leadership by taking a responsible approach to the information they share and the messages they give. This should be based on confirmed messages provided by the council and Government. Councillors should avoid pitfalls such as providing unverified information, interpreting information or speculation, and instead should focus on signposting. Any advice given should be linked back to the latest advice provided by the Government on its website. 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 this can be unhelpful as councils try to manage their way through the immediate emergency response phase.

Using social media

The advent of social media has increased opportunities for effective communication, on with local residents and will be vital in a period where local residents (including councillors) are encouraged to limit unnecessary contact with other people. However,

social media can create challenges for councils and councillors. Councillors should bear in mind general guidance on social media and 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 signposting to up to date, authoritative information.

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 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 contacts and seek advice from officers about how this intelligence can most usefully be shared. As the emergency response period continues, councillors will continue to feed in developing information from local residents and businesses with concerns.

Enabling community resilience

The unprecedented scale of this emergency response means that many neighbourhood groups have been rapidly established to support local residents, many on social media, others through leafletting. 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 include, which will help to identify particular gaps in community resilience. 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.

While the vast, 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 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.

Empathy and reassurance

Finally, 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 to 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.

Tackling scams

If councillors hear about anyone exploiting the current crisis in order to scam local residents then please ensure that you report this to your local trading standards service. It would also

be extremely helpful if you could report it to the Trading Standards Scotland Intelligence Team as this will allow us to build a complete picture across Scotland of these type of scams and ensure that appropriate advice is issued to consumers and consumer groups. We are already exploring ways to get information and advice out to the many existing and new volunteer organisations which are seeking to help people through this difficult time. You can email information directly to the Intelligence Team at tssintel@eastrenfrewhsire.gov.uk. Please see the TSS website for further details on the types of scams we are already hearing about <https://www.tsscot.co.uk/coronavirus-covid-19-scams/>.

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