

Response to COVID-19: support to councils on governance and scrutiny

Plan 26/03/2020

Introduction

This is the first version of our and the LGA's plans to support local authority governance and scrutiny during the period of the COVID-19 outbreak. We expect that this plan will need to be refined as the needs of councils become clearer and, particularly, once Government Regulations on remote meeting arrangements are laid.

Scope

CfPS will offer a comprehensive offer to local authorities to manage the governance challenges associated with their response to COVID-19. This will be divided into short and medium term responses; the short term response will evolve into the medium term response and offer in early April 2020.

Immediate (beginning now and moving through April)

- Crisis response. Putting out key messages to councils and councillors to:
 - Provide practical solutions for councils making the transition to working under emergency conditions. **At time of publication of the plan, this is our overriding priority;**
 - A series of recorded webinars, targeted at councillors, setting out emerging practice on different ways of working on governance and scrutiny;
 - Providing support in organising and managing virtual meetings (with the assistance of partners in and around the sector with civic tech experience, and feeding into wider LGA activity and guidance in this area);
 - Starting to provide support to councils encountering challenges;
 - Starting to provide direct practical support to councillors on remote working, supporting the activity of individual councils.
 - Initial, focused conversations with councils and membership bodies to consider the possible design of longer-term governance systems;
 - Practical support for members – eg remote working for members
- Identifying relationships and responsibilities between key sector bodies. We are having initial conversations with ADSO and LLG to identify where and how joint working on medium term activity can best be managed;
- Ramping up capacity and expertise to deliver medium term support as identified below in a way that is resilient in the light of likely further restrictions on movement, and likely capacity issues due to staff sickness.

Short to medium term (beginning April 2020)

Priority issues: general

Our five priority issues where we will be able to provide support will be:

- Robust decision-making. Supporting councils to develop consistent arrangements for member and officer decision-making which are proportionate, transparent and which are facilitated by remote working;
- Robust scrutiny. Helping councils to understand how emergency powers, and how delegated decisions, will be properly scrutinised. This may involve suggestions on streamlining and restructure for overview and scrutiny operations, and will involve assistance on the role of audit especially in light of the financial pressures;
- Information management and distribution (primarily to councillors, but also considering councillors' interface with the wider community, engaging with LGA plans in this area);
- Councils, accountability and the community. Helping councils to support the work of "mutual aid" groups, and other voluntary sector activity, with a permissive approach to governance which still takes account of risk and the need to safeguard the interests of vulnerable people;
- Councillors and the community. With LGA colleagues, supporting councillors to:
 - Support local community voluntary activity;
 - Pass insight and intelligence from community activity back to the council;
 - Use community insight to support ongoing scrutiny work.

Priority issues: national offer

In each of these areas we would:

- Produce an initial guide setting out possible approaches that councils could take on these issues;
- Produce periodic material, using notable practice identify how councils are developing solutions on these matters;
- Produce short toolkits based on the above helping councils to navigate routes through. This will be informed by initial headline outcomes from the CfPS/Localis "Governance risk and resilience" project.

These would be designed in flight – we would produce initial rough versions which will be continually refined and developed as practice around England emerges. They will not be conventional publications.

Depending on need we may convene short remote workshops, directed at support for councillors, to address some of the skills and development matters which arise from changes in ways of working.

Priority issues: helpdesk and local offer

In order to deal with queries arising, CfPS will operate an **enhanced helpdesk service**. We propose to carry out this work in the following way:

- CfPS helpline contact details to be prominently advertised by LGA and other partners;
- Calls and queries to the LGA and CfPS will be triaged to identify:
 - Where queries are common or straightforward. In this case, enquiries will be logged and Councils will be signposted to publicly-available information;

- Where queries require a bespoke response, but where that response can be straightforward or limited. We will use a Slack/MS Teams channel (see below) to notify partners of emerging issues, and to invite insights, through a “support panel”. We will encourage partners to manage enquiries to them in a similar way. The panel will not be used to “clear” or “agree” a consistent “line” on any governance or scrutiny matter;
- Where longer-term support to a council is needed, and where a question or challenge is more open-ended. Depending on the nature of each issue CfPS may take a leading role in providing this support, or may support another partner. This support may include:
 - Support in designing new governance and decision-making systems / new scrutiny systems;
 - Support in designing new information management systems to support the above;
 - Support in temporarily backfilling core business responsibilities during peaks of staff sickness (by CfPS core staff or consultants);
 - Support to councillors – training, development and assistance to engage productively with new temporary measures on governance;
 - Any other practical support that relates to the five priority areas identified above.

The number of days allocated to longer-term support is, at the moment, open-ended and will be led by demand.

All of the above would be delivered in the context of a better understanding of the implications of the delay of the 2020 local elections and associated local polls, and in particular the resilience of authorities who may, in consequence, find themselves with vacancies in the member corps.

Drawing together a “support panel” on Slack/MS Teams

A support panel to triage and respond to more complex queries (see above) may be made up of a range of professionals, councillors and others with relevant expertise. It may be comprised of those operating at both local and national level. We will continue to think about how this might operate so as to contribute directly to problem-solving.

Matters relating to combined authorities

CfPS provides ongoing support to the Combined Authorities Governance Network. We will take forward a proposal for the support for this network in light of the above.

Ed Hammond
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