

A number of you have indicated that you are considering holding virtual meetings. Some of you are aware there are legal restrictions on the ability of councils to make decisions virtually because the law currently requires councillors to be physically present to meet quorum requirements and vote.

The Coronavirus Bill currently laid before Parliament does not contain any provisions to change this but following representations by local authorities and through the LGA it is understood that an amendment is to be laid to relax these requirements. I attach an email letter (below) from the LGA which gives the latest position on this and other matters.

I understand that Wiltshire Council is considering how we can support Parish and Town Councils by signposting to relevant information and guidance, which we expect will become available when the Bill has gone through Parliament. Ultimately it is for PCs (and TCs) as separate legal entities to determine your own governance arrangements in these times on advice from your clerk and advisory bodies such as NALC and WALC.

Kind regards  
Richard

**Richard Gamble**  
**Wiltshire Councillor for The Lavingtons & Erlestoke**  
**Vice Chairman of The Council**  
**07762 018209**

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## CommsNet

**For LGA member council communication teams**

**20 March 2020**



Dear colleague,

I know you are all working under huge pressure at the moment to support all the efforts to tackle COVID-19. Having spoken to some of you over the last few days I also know that getting you up-to-date, consistent information as quickly as we can is crucial. We are in regular contact with central government to

ensure they understand the need for councils to have information in a co-ordinated way.

To help ensure that we are getting you information that is up-to-date, clear and most importantly delivered in one place we will be sending you the daily bulletin at the end of each working day from the LGA's Chief Executive Mark Lloyd. These daily updates are also sent to council chief executives and outline the key developments, announcements and issues.

I will continue to send my weekly CommsNet bulletin on communications-specific updates and issues. Do please let us know if you need anything else from us. For now, please find today's update from Mark below.

Kind regards,

**David Holdstock**  
Director of Communications  
Local Government Association  
[@Davidhold](#)



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Dear colleague,

At the end of an unprecedented week, I have been reflecting on the efforts of councils in stepping up to the challenge we face as a nation. Across the country, councils and their staff – whether it be social workers, transport drivers, community coordinators, public health officials or refuse collectors – have been on the frontline in the battle against this virus. Other staff have been refocused to support that work. Our efforts have been demonstrated today by local government staff rightly being recognised as critical workers. This is justification, at the very highest levels, of the vital local role we are playing. In sunnier times, I hope we will remember the sectors and workers the nation most needed.

Today I would usually send colleagues a note summarising the key announcements in the previous seven days of interest of local government, and an update on our work on your behalf. That summary – of some of the non-COVID related work – can be found at the bottom of this email. Instead, I am sending you another of these more regular communications as we seek to provide you with all the information your teams may need to carry out your work. Many of you will be receiving this email for the first time today, as we look to ensure the wider local government family has access to the latest information in one place. In the coming days we will be scaling back our more routine communications, as we join you in focusing all our capacity on this virus.

Looking towards the weekend, I'm thinking of all the councillors, officers and colleagues in the wider public sector who will be continuing to work around-the-

clock to support our communities. I know you will be doing everything you can, but equally I hope you get the chance to spend some down time with your loved ones. I expect that in the coming weeks council services like parks and green spaces will be enjoyed by even more people, as we seek to remain as social and active as we can at a safe distance.

We will, of course, be here to support you. We do not anticipate sending out a bulletin over the weekend, but if there is something major we will get this information to you. If you are a user of social media, you may wish to follow us on Twitter – [@LGAComms](#) and [@LGANews](#) – where we are regularly putting out information of interest to councils. We will be updating our [COVID-19 web hub](#) and MHCLG also has a [landing page for local government](#) that will be continually updated with useful information. Please do also continue to relay your local concerns and insights to your [Principal Adviser](#) or our email inbox: [coronavirus.enquiries@local.gov.uk](mailto:coronavirus.enquiries@local.gov.uk)

Below are some of the key developments since my note to you yesterday. Even though it's long, this is not an exhaustive list of the things affecting councils or that we're pressing on your behalf but does cover the most significant:

## Closures

At the daily COVID-19 press conference this evening, [the Prime Minister announced](#) that cafes, bars, pubs and restaurants were being told to close tonight and not to open tomorrow. He added that the measures also included nightclubs, gyms and leisure centres. He said that the closures would last for 14 days but would be reviewed on a monthly basis. DCMS has confirmed that libraries are not part of the announcement and their closure remains at a council's discretion. The Prime Minister was also clear that shops would not form part of the closures and said the Government would work with businesses to find new ways of trading, including ensuring takeaway and delivery services could continue.

These closures will clearly have implications on the loss of income for council business, as it will with all other sectors. We will be urging the Government to consider this as part of our engagement on the wider package of support for councils. With gyms and leisure centres closed, I know councils are working to support residents to remain as active as they can including in their own homes.

## Chancellor's speech

At the same press conference, the [Chancellor announced a series of additional measures](#) to support the economy, businesses and individuals. The Chancellor announced £7 billion of additional support to households through housing benefit, tax credits and Universal Credit (UC). This included Local Housing Allowance Rate (LHA) being restored to the 30<sup>th</sup> percentile of market rents. This is something we have consistently called for, with our recent [analysis](#) finding that restoring rates to cover at least the lowest third of market rents could protect more than 100,000 people from financial hardship and

homelessness. We will continue to work with Government departments including MHCLG and DWP, to finalise local discretionary funding that will complement the measures in the welfare system to ensure that councils have all the necessary tools at their disposal to support vulnerable and low-income households and prevent hardship.

The Chancellor also made a very important announcement on the creation of a Coronavirus Jobs Retention Scheme which will provide grants to employers to cover 80 per cent of employee salaries up to £2,500 per month for those who have been not working but kept on payroll, rather than being laid off. The scheme, open to any employer in the country and administered by HMRC, will cover the cost of wages backdated to 1 March and will be open before the end of April for at least three months. There's no limit on the funding available for the scheme. The Government has also announced that the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme will now be interest free for twelve months and that these loans will now be available on Monday. He said that the UC standard allowance would be increased by £1,000 for the next year and Working Tax Credit basic element as well. He added that self-employed individuals out of work would be able to access UC support. The Chancellor also promised to defer VAT for all businesses until the end of June.

## **Guidance for councillors**

Today we have launched our [COVID-19 outbreak councillor guidance](#) to assist elected councillors in their vital role leading the efforts to tackle the worst public health crisis we have experienced in a century. This guidance focuses on specific issues relevant to councillors' involvement in leading and protecting communities, as well as highlighting the role they can play in supporting their communities through these difficult times. More than ever before, councillors' role as civic and community leaders requires them to offer visible, responsible leadership that links community-led support with council structures to help build and sustain our overall resilience.

## **Coronavirus Bill**

The [Coronavirus Bill](#) has been developed to give public bodies across the UK the powers they need to carry out an effective response to the coronavirus emergency. The LGA has produced a [parliamentary briefing](#) to inform the debates on the Bill that are taking place next week. Following feedback from several council leaders, we have made the below omissions from the Bill central to our briefing of Parliamentarians. We will be working hard to get these changes made to enable councils to focus on responding to tackling COVID-19:

- Suspending the requirement for a council to hold an annual council meeting.
- Allowing councillors to hold meetings virtually so that they can continue to take decisions without having to meet in person.

- Suspending the requirement for councillors to turn up to vote in person every six months.

The Government have been receptive to our calls on these areas and we expect an amendment to be forthcoming in the coming days.

We are also pushing the following:

- Removing all the statutory timescales, targets and obligations around non-essential processes that are not critical to supporting the immediate wellbeing of our residents, such as the Right to Buy.
- Allowing councils to turn on the powers to relax their adult social care duties under the Care Act in their areas, rather than reserving this power to the Secretary of State.
- Creating a new duty of care for landlords of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) to ensure tenants can satisfactorily self-isolate. This should include a power to levy a significant fine for non-compliance and/or give the local council the power to revoke HMO licence for breach of this duty.

Government whips have brought the Bill forwards, so it will now receive its Second Reading and all stages in the House of Commons on Monday 23 and in the House of Lords on Tuesday 24 – Wednesday 25 March.

## **Schools and critical workers**

We are continuing to work with the Department for Education (DfE) and other partners to develop operational guidance in relation to the closure of schools that was announced on Wednesday. We expect that the first iteration of the guidance, which will continue to evolve over the coming weeks and months, will be published shortly. We have stressed the need for councils to have a degree of local flexibility in supporting schools and pupils to take account of local need. We are also seeking clarification on primary school and secondary school offers and appeals, as well as other issues raised with us by councils.

The Cabinet Office and DfE have also published [Critical Worker Guidance](#), which sets out expectations for schools and families around the provision to remain available after the school closure measures announced earlier this week. We have circulated [our own guidance](#) on what this means for local areas. We believe that all local government staff are likely to be critical to the delivery of the COVID-19 response irrespective of their formal role; in schools this may include teaching assistants and other support staff. The DfE guidance includes a signposting role for councils when parents need help to access an available school. MHCLG and the DfE will also be working with councils to ensure the successful implementation of these measures. We are pleased that the Government has heard our call to class local government staff as critical workers. This is justified recognition of the vital local role we are playing to try

and minimise the spread of infection, protect the most vulnerable, support our local businesses and support our communities.

DfE has also developed [information about the closure of schools for parents and carers](#) of children at registered childcare providers (including nurseries and childminders), primary and secondary schools and further education colleges.

Further information on [arrangements for exams which have been cancelled](#) to fight spread of coronavirus has also been published today.

## **Children's services**

We are aware that the announcement on school closures for most children has resulted in a significant number of enquiries from early years providers. The DfE has already hosted several teleconferences with councils and providers and is working to clarify a range of issues including around funding where eligible children need to attend a different setting to normal and flexibilities within the Early Years Foundation Stage. We are expecting additional guidance on vulnerable children to be published over the weekend – please keep an eye on our social media channels for links as soon as this is available.

The Government has already confirmed that councils will receive the [Early Years Block](#) of the Dedicated Schools Grant as normal, despite settings being closed or fewer children attending. They are clear that this should continue to be passed through to providers. A business rates holiday has been announced for early years providers for 2020/21, however this does not apply to council-run provision including maintained nursery schools. We are pressing for the same arrangements to apply across all settings.

We have been asked whether foster carers aged over 70 should continue working given the Government advice that they should be particularly stringent in following social distancing measures. Foster carers should continue to care for children who are in placement where they feel able to do so to provide children with stability at this difficult time, however we would encourage councils to check whether they require additional support.

## **Adult social care**

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care wrote to council chief executives and directors of adult services yesterday on the new £1.6 billion funding announced for local government. Following input from the LGA, the letter helpfully makes clear this funding is un-ringfenced and recognises the vital efforts of colleagues across local government in responding to COVID-19 and helping to keep people safe and well. Our discussions with Government are regular and ongoing and we will continue to make sure that councils get the resources they need to make the most effective contribution in tackling this crisis.

The funding allocations have been published this evening (at the time of writing these are not yet online) and funding to be transferred to councils on 3 April. There is a particular focus on supporting providers to deal with increased costs and support care workers. Councils will need to work closely with providers to try and ensure continuity of care and may have to consider making more frequent payments, paying in advance on commissioned service levels. Ministers are keen to hear of examples of councils and providers working together to problem solve.

Anticipating the publication of the hospital discharge guidance, we have set up some webinars for NHS organisations and local authorities about interpreting and implementing it, invitations are going out through the Better Care Fund route. We have also agreed to facilitate twice weekly discussions at a national level between social care provider umbrella organisations and the LGA with ADASS, DHSC, CQC and the NHS. This should provide a better channel for issues to be discussed nationally and actions agreed, and we hope make your local interactions easier.

As part of its regular communications with the adult social care sector on responding to the COVID-19 pandemic the CQC wrote to all providers outlining in more detail the support being offered in its regulatory approach and the intelligence gathering it is performing for the local and national Government, and the Regional Incident Response centres, amongst other things. The CQC also gave details of its interim targeted methodology, which will enable it to provide assurance of the safety and risk during the outbreak.

## **Vulnerable people**

We are working with the Government on the concerns we all share about the need for large numbers of people to be supported in the community to access medicines, food, and other support. For those who are self-isolating and do not have access to family, friends or a trusted neighbour to help them, there will be a crucial role for councils to provide advice, information and access to practical help. We expect the Government will direct local people who need support to a local council helpline which can act as a “hub” for support. We are asking the Government to allow as much local flexibility as possible, and to ensure this work is properly funded. But we agree with them that councils are best placed to work with their local voluntary sector partners to get people the support they need.

We are also discussing with central government councils' concerns regarding Emergency Voluntary Leave scheme, outlined in the Coronavirus Bill (see our parliamentary briefing above), where employees will be able to take unpaid leave to volunteer in healthcare and adult social care roles. Councils will be responsible for certifying that a volunteer is needed, check that their skills are appropriate and issue a certificate that confirms that a placement has been found, the duration of the placement, and the official start date of this placement.

## Resources

You will already have seen the [guidance from MHCLG](#) on Expanded Retail Discount for 2020/21 to include the leisure and hospitality sectors. This relief will apply to occupied retail, leisure and hospitality properties in the year 2020/21. There will be no rateable value limit on the relief.

In addition, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will send out guidance to councils on Monday (23 March) with details of the two grant schemes for businesses: the £10,000 Small Business Grant and the £25,000 Grant to businesses in Retail, Hospitality and Leisure. On receipt of the guidance, councils will need to work quickly to identify eligible businesses so that they can pay out the grants as soon as possible once the funding from government has been received in early April.

More widely, we are in close contact with council leaders and chief executives about the issues that are likely to affect council finances in the coming weeks and months. This includes those that will lead to additional costs, changes in income or cash flow impacts. Our officers are also in contact with your finance officers. As we continue our work with government, we are want to hear your ideas on what financial freedoms and flexibilities would help you at this time. Please send any insights or thoughts to [lgfinance@local.gov.uk](mailto:lgfinance@local.gov.uk)

## Supplier relief

The current outbreak of COVID-19 is unprecedented and will have a significant impact on businesses of all sizes. Many suppliers to public bodies will struggle to meet their contractual obligations and this will put their financial viability, ability to retain staff and their supply chains at risk. We have worked with the Cabinet Office who have developed a [Procurement Policy Note on Supplier Relief due to COVID-19](#). It advises that contracting authorities should act now to support suppliers at risk so they are able to resume normal service delivery and fulfil their contractual obligations when the outbreak is over.

It is vital that contracting authorities pay their suppliers as quickly as possible to maintain cash flow and protect jobs. Contracting authorities should also take action to continue to pay suppliers at risk due to COVID-19 on a continuity and retention basis.

Every day examples of this include day centre staff carrying out activities in the community to counter social isolation, care providers in general buddying up to provide mutual aid, taxis usually doing school runs redeploying to deliver shopping to vulnerable people.

## Culture, sport and heritage

Many of the conversations we are having with councils about changes in income have included concerns about the impact on councils' revenue from arts, culture, sport, heritage and tourism more widely. This is particularly relevant in

light of the announcements this evening. We continue to relay your concerns to central government, and push the powers, flexibilities and freedoms that will make a difference in the longer-term.

In response to the outbreak, a number of key funding bodies have made announcements about new flexibilities for their grants, including [Arts Council England](#), [Sport England](#), and the [National Lottery Heritage Fund](#). You will wish to consider whether you are able to extend similar flexibilities to the local organisations that you fund or commission.

## **DBS Checks**

The Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) has [announced](#) temporary changes to identification checking guidelines which enable ID documents to be viewed over video link, and scanned images to be used in advance of the DBS check being submitted, rather than having to see physical documents. The applicant will be required to present the original versions of these documents when they first attend their employment or volunteering role.

## **Translated documents**

If we are to minimise the spread of infection, it is important that everyone has access to the latest information. We have been pushing for translated documents for many weeks, and I know that in the absence of this guidance many councils have developed their own resources in languages spoken in their areas, at their own expense. The Government is now translating the 'Stay at Home guidance' and the 'Guidance on Social Distancing' into a range of languages. This currently includes: Polish, Welsh, Arabic (Modern), French, Simplified Chinese (Mandarin), Traditional Chinese (Cantonese), Punjabi, Urdu, Bengali, Gujarati, and Portuguese. These will be published on a rolling basis on the Government website.

## **'Look Out For Each Other' national campaign**

The Government is planning to launch its 'Look Out For Each Other' national campaign on Monday. Materials to support the campaign will be made available to councils and we will circulate further details to you in these communications.

## **Scams**

With all that councils have to contend with as COVID-19 continues to spread I'm always pleased, but not unsurprised, by the resilience of council services. We've seen plenty of examples of Trading Standards teams taking action against COVID-related scammers. Communities are coming together across the country like never before, offering to buy their neighbours shopping, or pick up their medicine, which is fantastic to see. But while the vast majority of concerned residents are genuine, we're making the case for well-wishers to link up with existing services in councils, the NHS or local charities, as well as helping neighbours they already know or making donations to food banks. These are the

ways volunteers can balance supporting their communities, while at the same time protecting our elderly and vulnerable, whether that be from coronavirus or scammers. Look out for our media activity over the weekend as we continue to make that case, as I'm aware many of you already have.

I hope this note has been helpful. Thank you again, to you and your teams, for everything you are doing to lead your community through this public health crisis. Below are some other items for your information as promised in my introduction.

## **Public Health Grant**

You should have received news of your council's public health allocation for the next year. [The Government confirmed a real-terms increase in public health funding](#), based on the 2019 Spending Round. The announcement includes an additional £60 million through the grant from Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) central budgets. [We responded that the long-awaited publication will help councils respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and continue other vital public health services](#). We will continue our calls for long-term, sustainable funding in public health, as part of our [#CouncilsCan](#) campaign and the Comprehensive Spending Review process.

## **Council tax**

[A new report by researchers at the Institute for Fiscal Studies looks at the impact reform of council tax](#) could have on different parts of the country and different types of households. The report is a helpful contribution to the debate on the balance of sources of funding for councils in the future, which we will need to come back to when the current crisis abates.

## **Homelessness**

Latest homelessness figures published this week for July to October 2019 showed that the number of households in temporary accommodation had increased by 4.8 per cent in the past year. [In our response](#), we said councils were leading local efforts to support people at risk of homelessness during the COVID-19 outbreak and are working closely with tenants experiencing financial difficulty as a result, to help them stay in their homes. We reiterated the need for councils to be given flexibility to ensure the hardship funding announced in the Budget is best-used to support economically vulnerable people and households to prevent homelessness.

## **Fire Safety Bill**

As councils lead local efforts to support communities through the crisis, the risk to residents in buildings with dangerous cladding systems remains. We were pleased to see the [Government publish the Fire Safety Bill](#) this week, an important step to ensure residents are safe in their homes. The Bill will empower fire and rescue services to take enforcement action and hold building owners to

account if they are not compliant. [As we say in our response](#), it needs to be backed up by further effective powers and sanctions, which we have been promised in the forthcoming Building Safety Bill, and sufficient funding to carry out the necessary inspections and enforcement activity.

## **Air pollution**

Councils across England have been granted more than £2.2 million in the latest round of [government funding to support innovative projects to improve air quality](#). This will help those councils successful in securing new money build on their local efforts. We continue to reiterate the need for local flexibility and sufficient funding to support councils' air quality plans.

## **Gigabit broadband**

Earlier this week the [Government announced that it will bring forward legislation](#) to ensure that all new homes are equipped with gigabit-speed broadband. This is something we have been campaigning for on councils' behalf. In our [media response](#), we welcomed the Government's move and made the case for councils' key role in improving digital connectivity. We said that councils are best-placed to understand the digital needs of their areas and ensure that local policy, such as planning and highways regulation, is streamlined. We also continued to call on Ofcom to ensure coverage is accurate, up-to-date and reflects consumer experience so that communities and businesses across the country are able to access high quality connectivity as part of their daily business. Given the COVID-19 outbreak, ensuring connectivity is up to scratch is more important now than ever.

## **E-Scooters**

The Government has launched a [consultation to make journeys easier, smarter and greener](#) through new technology as part of the Future of Transport regulatory review. The consultation will also identify ways of making e-scooters legal and safe. Under the proposals, the Government will consider if local authorities need extra powers to manage the impact of e-scooters on public spaces, including where they are parked. It is vital that any decision made ensures that councils have sufficient powers to regulate this new form of transport in a way that is safe, proportionate and complimentary to existing travel networks.

## **Carers leave**

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has [launched a consultation on giving unpaid carers a right to a week's leave](#). The consultation is seeking views from a range of organisations on giving employees a week of unpaid leave each year to provide care. It may be of interest to councils from a workforce perspective.

## Royal Garden Parties

Following the Government's advice regarding social interaction during the outbreak of COVID-19 the Garden Parties hosted by the Queen, due to be held at Buckingham Palace in May, will now not take place. Guests already invited to these Garden Parties will be asked to attend in 2021.

## Surveillance cameras

The Surveillance Camera Commissioner (SCC) and the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) have updated the SCC surveillance camera specific data protection impact assessment (DPIA) template. The new [template and guidance](#) reflect updated data protection requirements set out in the Data Protection Act 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) as well as comply with the requirements of the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012. If you would like any further information, please contact Rachel Phelps ([Rachel.Phelps@local.gov.uk](mailto:Rachel.Phelps@local.gov.uk))

## Funeral markets

You will have seen my note last week on the [Competition and Markets Authority \(CMA\)](#) working papers on Funeral Markets. The deadline has now been extended to 15 April so councils still have time to comment. The papers give an overview on the CMAs current findings and also suggest potential remedies including a requirement for local authorities to offer a defined funeral services package to strengthen competition using local authority procurement expertise; a licensing regime and regulator for funeral directors; a price cap for cremations, including local authority crematoria, using current price data.

## And finally...

To help those who are self-isolating or social distancing, some organisations have developed resources to help keep our brains and bodies active in and around your home.

- [64 Million Artists](#) are responding to the current coronavirus situation with Create to Connect: two weeks of fun, free creative challenges anyone can take part in if they're isolating, distancing, or working from home.
- Sport England has compiled [some of the most useful tips](#) on how you can get active when you're at home, if you're well enough.

The BBC is proposing an arts and culture service, Culture in Quarantine, which promises to keep the arts alive in people's homes. The plans are part of a wider BBC package, intended to keep the nation "informed, educated and entertained in unprecedented times". BBC will be working closely with Arts Council England to deliver these plans, as well as with other funders and national producing bodies. Other programming plans include exercise classes and food advice.

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