



Briefing: Coronavirus: How local government communications can make a difference

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Summary

Coronavirus has presented local authorities with a duty to not just pass on essential information but help save lives.

Residents and business are increasingly looking to councils for advice and support, alongside information available from other sources, including the media.

Councils must be clear about what the public is likely to want to know and explain the assistance available to residents and employers as accurately and succinctly as possible. This means dedicated pages on the council's website as well as effective interactions on social media.

In addition to basic health tips about washing hands and social distancing, councils are providing information on a wide range of services, including schools, housing, waste collection and bereavement.

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They also need to tell residents which facilities are open or closed and where things have changed, such as parking charges or restrictions.

This briefing looks at the many aspects of the crisis council PR or communications teams can focus on and the best ways of getting their message across, including liaising with local media. It also points to some potential pitfalls.

Briefing in full

Introduction

The coronavirus crisis has placed local government in the spotlight more than ever before. Councils are charged with not just telling residents what is happening, but offering advice and guidance, including support to the most vulnerable.

Business too is looking for information beyond that available from government and normal media channels.

The crisis, therefore, presents councils with not just the opportunity to show their worth, but a responsibility to assist and protect people. But this will only be achieved if they get their message right and put it across in a way that is helpful and meaningful.

The role of the communications or public relations team is, of course, crucial. Only by using the skills of staff in comms teams effectively will local authorities ensure the correct message gets through to residents and business at a time when clarity and accuracy has never been more vital.

Part 1: The message

1. What do people want to know?

The top priority is to get the message right. Residents do not want to be bombarded with information as they have other things on their mind. In the first instance, they may wish to know what council services are still running and which are closed, disrupted or suspended.

A simple graphic, such as this posted by Liverpool Council on its website home page on March 26, may be the best starting point:

Covid19 is disrupting some of our services. Here's how it's affecting the city today...

 Childcare for key workers NORMAL	 Covid support request NORMAL	 Volunteer to help NORMAL	 Contacting us NORMAL	 Benefits advice and support NORMAL	 Liverpool in Work NORMAL	 Bins DISRUPTED	 Liverpool Register Office DISRUPTED
 Bulky Bob's CLOSED	 One Stop Shops CLOSED	 Libraries CLOSED	 Schools CLOSED	 Lifestyles CLOSED	 Museums and city halls CLOSED		

Source: Liverpool City Council

Services can probably be divided into two categories – those residents might wish to use and those they need, perhaps more than before the coronavirus.

By now, people should generally be aware that schools are closed to most children. It is also unlikely anyone is planning a trip to a leisure centre or museum.

Instead, focus on specifics:

1. Who is classed as a key worker?
2. How do families access free school meals?
3. Where can people get housing advice?
4. Is it possible to visit relatives in a care home?
5. How should people who are self-isolating dispose of waste?

Residents visiting the council's website or using social media will want to know what is different to normal. Not just which facilities are open or closed, but whether bins are being collected, including recycling. Are streets still being cleaned or litter bins emptied in public areas? Are parking restrictions in force? They will want to know if the situation relating to specific services may be subject to change.

Make it clear if, as at most local authorities, council offices are closed and face-to-face meetings with staff no longer taking place. If it is also unlikely that people will get through easily by phone, make that clear too. Emergency telephone numbers, including services such as child protection, should continue to be provided in the same way as before.

Also stress wherever possible that essential services are being maintained and the council is doing everything it can to help residents, vulnerable and otherwise.

2. What help is available for people in need?

Areas where residents are most likely to want support include benefits and paying council tax, rent and utility bills. In addition, there will be greater demand for food banks or vouchers to use at supermarkets, as well as homelessness services.

Assistance in all these areas can be flagged up on council websites and via social media. Where the local authority runs an umbrella service for people in need, such as [Croydon's Gateway Service](#), it is important that people are aware of the help on offer and how to access it.

Local authorities may wish to give details of charities and other local groups, some of which started in the wake of Covid-19 to help vulnerable people who cannot go out for food and other necessities. Councils can also direct potential volunteers towards such organisations.

If the council is itself seeking volunteers to backup staff and help delivery services, appeals can be placed on the web and through social media.

Some councils are also sending letters from leaders and chief executives – not everyone has access to the internet.

Some residents may be aware that councils are receiving government money for cases of hardship and wish to know how it is being spent. If the council is providing extra support for vulnerable people, or in the process of drawing up a scheme or programme, this should be mentioned too.

[Guidance on the hardship fund](#) was published on March 24 by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and suggests most money will be used for extra council tax relief.

3. What help is available to businesses?

Employers will be looking for information on business rates and statutory sick pay as well as guidance on which businesses can remain open and what services they are able to provide. Keeping employees safe will also be a top priority.

Much of this information, including schemes for paying and retaining workers, comes from national government. But local employers may, in addition, seek council advice. Relevant web links can be provided on council websites, along with details of local business groups, such as this one in Cornwall:

Coronavirus (COVID-19)

The government has released guidance and support measures specifically for businesses and employers related to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) and this will be updated regularly.

[Guidance for employers and businesses on coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)

The guidance will assist employers and businesses with advice on:

- the novel coronavirus, COVID-19
- how to help prevent spread of all respiratory infections including COVID-19
- what to do if someone in the workplace becomes ill
- advice on sick pay and certification of absence from work resulting from COVID-19

[Social distancing](#) - guidance and compliance advice for those businesses and other venues asked by the government to close as part of further social distancing measures.

[Information for businesses or individuals affected by COVID-19.](#)

[List of businesses and premises that must remain closed as part of further social distancing measures](#)

[Support available for businesses to deal with impacts of COVID-19](#)

A package of measures is available to support businesses including:

- a Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme
- deferring VAT and Income Tax payments
- a Statutory Sick Pay relief package for SMEs



Source: Cornwall and Isle of Scilly Growth Hub

Information about business grants and loans, specific to the coronavirus crisis and otherwise, can be highlighted by the council. Guidance on insurance and deferring VAT and tax payments will also be welcomed.

Remember, these pages are more likely to be accessed by smaller businesses and the self-employed that do not normally have the same range of expertise to hand.

4. Warnings on scams

During a crisis, people can easily become victims of a scam. To date, these have included encouraging people to send emails or submit postcodes for free school meals, tax rebates or even help with shopping.

Without wishing to scare residents, local authorities may use social media or their websites to highlight such scams. They should warn people not to divulge personal details to any organisation (particularly bank and credit card information) without checking for authenticity.

This includes private traders that may seek to charge inflated prices or use the crisis to gain access to people's homes.



Hampshire County Council @hantsconnect · 2h

Trading Standards @CTSI_UK have been made aware of opportunists trawling social media for individuals looking for emergency repair work at this increasingly vulnerable time for all Stay #scamaware #COVID19 tradingstandards.uk/news-policy/ne...



Trading Standards

Source: Hampshire County Council

Part 2: Getting the message across

Councils are using a range of media and technology to publicise the coronavirus crisis and highlight the advice and support available.

Local authorities are advised to make publicity material as clear and unambiguous as possible, bearing in mind that some people who come to the authority could be in distress as well as vulnerable.

Among issues council PR or communication teams should consider are:

Is it better to use social media or the website?

Never assume residents only use social media, or that a website is old fashioned. Individuals, as well as businesses, are more likely to go to the web for the answer to a question, or a contact phone number.

A website provides space for more detail (though don't make the message too long-winded or complicated), including links to government announcements and local organisations. Twitter and Facebook, meanwhile, mean councils can speak directly to residents (or at least some of them) and post salient tips and other information.

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Messages can also be shared through community hub and advice websites and social media pages. Many councils are working with voluntary groups and charities in Covid-19 support websites and will be publishing joint messages and information through these.

Councils are using Facebook to post messages such as this, though be prepared for less than complimentary comments from some residents.



Source: Southampton City Council

Should the council liaise with local media?

Absolutely. Local newspapers and other media have never been more important and may enjoy a rebirth as a result of the crisis.

To some extent, councils and journalists have a mutual interest in getting the

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Covid-19 message across to the general public. But that is not to say reporters won't seek to sensationalise occasionally or be keen to highlight different issues to the council.

Where your press team is used to working with selected journalists at a local paper or broadcaster, why not give them a call and offer them the opportunity to speak to your council leader or a senior officer? Ask them what they think readers are most interested in at this time and be ready to make suggestions.

A local or regional paper may be interested in carrying an interview with a key official, [such as this interview with Victoria Eaton](#), recently appointed director of public health in Leeds, which appeared in the Yorkshire Post.

Who should speak on behalf of the council?

People are used to seeing health experts and other practitioners on TV, so why not let the chief executive and other senior directors speak to reporters? In addition, if the opportunity arises, they can address the public directly, possibly via local media.

Video messages from the council leader expressing the local authority's concern can be effective but must get the tone right. Ideally, both councillors and senior officers should be free to speak to the media, but it is also vital the council puts across a consistent message and gets its facts straight beforehand.

How can residents and businesses keep in touch?

Many council websites give residents and businesses the opportunity to sign up for coronavirus updates by email. Users of social media can, of course, like or follow the local authority for more regular communication.

It might be worth flagging up Facebook and Twitter on the council's website for people less inclined to use social media, pointing out the advantages of keeping in touch with the council on a daily or more frequent basis.

Should the council say which information comes from national government?

Yes. While the council is expected to take responsibility for local services, many of the most important decisions are taken by the government. It makes perfect sense to be open about this in all communications, at the same time as passing on weblinks and other information.

Make it clear whenever possible that the local authority is working in partnership with the NHS and organisations such as Public Health England.

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Part 3: Avoiding communications pitfalls

During a crisis, it is easy to make mistakes. Here is just a selection of things that local authorities are advised to do, or avoid, during the coming weeks:

1. Ensure posts contain a date and are removed when no longer relevant

The coronavirus story changes daily, and sometimes by the hour. A video of the cabinet member for education explaining why schools are still open that was recorded in mid-March looks quite embarrassing now and could easily confuse parents and others.

Dates on press releases are also important and assist journalists. These should be archived on the web, not removed, when no longer relevant. If possible, place a warning to reporters on the press office page about the importance of quoting the council's most recent statement or announcement on Covid-19.

2. Make messages simple but don't sound patronising

There are only so many ways of advising people to wash their hands. And while you may be tempted to tell residents not to be stupid and stay at home, it is better not to adopt that tone.

Treat everyone as adults and offer empathy, not sympathy. Avoid gobbledegook or technical terms and get straight to the point. People are looking for quick, accurate advice, not a lecture.

3. Provide relevant links, but don't overdo them

This is not a marketing exercise but making the layout of your Covid-19 page as attractive as possible should mean that more people read it and benefit. Long lists of organisations to contact, plus phone numbers and web links, may be informative but can look overbearing for someone in a hurry.

Spending a little time on design and layout of the Covid-19 page could, ultimately, help a resident or business get information more quickly with knock-on results. It may also mean they return to the council for advice in future.

Comment

By adopting the right tone and putting across clear and concise messages, local authorities are playing a key role during the coronavirus crisis. Some residents and business may even be rediscovering the importance of local government or perhaps

appreciating it for the first time.

Communities need help, reassurance and support. They are becoming more used to listening to experts on TV and elsewhere, so there is no reason why councils cannot take on the same air of authority.

This will only come about, however, if comms team get the message right and work with the rest of the council to put across the information, advice and warnings that people require. It is clear that although the crisis affects all of us there are some groups and individuals that are more seriously affected – council communications should reflect our collective involvement but also be used to protect and communicate with the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.

It does not have to be all doom and gloom. A few councils have taken positive steps such as posting fitness videos and other tips on how to exercise. But it will be the guidance and assistance offered to vulnerable people that is valued most during the weeks and, maybe, months to come.

Council websites and social media can be used to present a range of information, putting residents and business in touch with key organisations, as well as steering volunteers to where they are most needed.

The government has just published the regulations allowing remote meetings to go ahead. This could be another way of communicating online and showing that local democracy is still alive.

Nobody knows how all this ends. But it may be, in future, we will look back on how precise and effective communication by councils helped communities through the present crisis and placed local government on a surer footing, especially in the eyes of the public.

Useful links:

[Crafting effective communications during a crisis](#) Cabinet Office April 2020

[Angus Council's online Corbra-19 measures council meeting](#)

Related Briefings:

[Local Government and Covid-19: The Coronavirus Act 2020](#)

[Coronavirus: five levels of volunteering and community action](#)

[Supporting the victims of domestic abuse during a pandemic](#)

[Members only briefing from https://lgiu.org](https://lgiu.org)

Local government and Covid-19: the lockdown

Covid-19

All LGIU [**Covid-19 resources are gathered in one place**](#) and you can also sign up to our *Global-Local pandemic bulletin*.

For more information about this, or any other LGiU member briefing, please contact Janet Sillett, Head of Briefings, on janet.sillett@lgiu.org.uk