

Emergency response structures during the COVID-19 pandemic

Councillor guidance

Note: this guidance is correct as of 14 May

Overview

This short note has been produced as a supplement to our earlier Local Government Association (LGA) councillor guidance on the COVID-19 outbreak¹ and sits alongside our new COVID-19 workbook for leaders and cabinet members.² It provides a short overview of the emergency response framework set out in the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (the Act), and councils' role within it: the LGA's full councillor guide to civil emergencies also provides guidance on this issue.³

Local Resilience Forums

The 2004 Act sets out the broad framework under which local areas and national government prepare for and respond to civil emergencies, which are defined as events or situations which threaten serious damage to human welfare or the environment of a place in the UK, or war or terrorism which threatens serious damage to the security of the UK.

Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) are the mechanism set out in the Act for coordinating local emergency preparedness, response and recovery activity, and provide a key interface between national government and local areas. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's (MHCLG) Resilience and Emergencies Division (RED) is the primary central government interface for LRFs and responsible for directly engaging with local areas, while the Cabinet Office's Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS) holds overall policy responsibility for civil emergencies.

LRFs cover police force areas (there are 38 in England) and are multi-agency partnerships made up of representatives of local category one and two responders. LRFs are not legal entities in their own right, nor are they separately resourced: they do not have access to capacity beyond that of individual LRF partners.

Under the Act, category one responders are organisations which are likely to be at the core of the response to most emergencies and are therefore subject to the full range of civil protection duties in the Act: councils, the emergency services, health services, and Environment Agency are all category one responders. Category two responders, such as utility firms, are cooperating responders which are less likely to be involved in the heart of multi-agency planning work but will be heavily involved in preparing for incidents affecting their sectors. The Act requires them to cooperate and share information with other category one and two responders.

Under the Act, each individual category one organisation is subject to a range of duties requiring them to plan for emergencies, ensure business continuity measures are in place and establish arrangements for communicating with the public on civil protection matters. Critically, they are also required to share information with other local responders to enhance coordination and cooperate with other local responders to enhance coordination and efficiency.

¹ <http://www.local.gov.uk/covid-19-outbreak-councillor-guidance>

² <https://www.local.gov.uk/covid19-leadership-workbook-cabinet-members>

³ https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Publications%20-%2010.26%20A%20councillor%27s%20guide%20to%20civil%20emergencies_05.1.pdf

Outside of an emergency response period, LRFs are focused on enhancing local preparedness and resilience, including regular assessment of risks through maintenance of a local risk register and undertaking regular exercises to test out emergency response plans. LRFs will typically be led at the strategic level by an LRF executive comprising senior representatives from its constituent parts, including an LRF Chair and Deputy Chair, which would meet several times a year. Additionally, the LRF may have other (standing or ad-hoc) groups comprising representatives from constituent organisations focused on operational or specific thematic matters. The secretariat function for LRFs varies from place to place but is often hosted by the relevant police force or council.

Council input to LRFs may cut across senior leadership, public health, and coroner services, as well as emergency planning functions. Since LRFs will include all the councils within the police force area, at the strategic level councils' engagement in LRFs is likely to be through one or more council representatives on the LRF/LRF executive: for example, a lead chief executive or other senior officer may represent all councils within the LRF area.

Emergency response framework

The Government's Concept of Operations (ConOps)⁴ sets out the framework for UK emergency responses, and notes that 'the local response is the building block of the response to any emergency based around the delivery of individual agencies' responsibilities coordinated, where appropriate, through a multi-agency Strategic Coordinating Group (SCG).' The overall priority for each SCG is to save lives.

SCG arrangements, colloquially referred to as Gold Command, are 'stood up' where the scale and nature of an emergency reaches a locally defined threshold requiring strategic, multi-agency coordination; they may choose to operate from a co-located Strategic Coordination Centre (SCC). Individual organisations may also convene their own internal Gold Command arrangements to help them respond to the emergency.⁵ All 38 LRFs in England have been stood up in relation to the COVID-19 outbreak for several weeks now. Their work will have built on pre-existing plans LRFs have for how and when SCGs will operate.

The SCG will comprise senior representatives from each of the key organisations involved in the local response to the emergency, as well as the military, and may look very similar to the LRF Executive. Its purpose is to provide strategic direction throughout the course of an emergency, in terms of agreeing strategic priorities and setting the direction for lower level tiers. An SCG does not have the collective authority to issue commands or executive orders to individual constituent organisations within the LRF but ensures coordination as each organisation exercises control of their own operations in the normal way.

⁴https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/192425/CON_OPs_incl_revised_chapter_24_Apr-13.pdf

⁵ They may also establish an internal Gold Command to respond to emergencies that do not all involve all partners.

Sitting beneath the SCG would normally be the 'silver' tactical coordination group (TCG) formed from senior operational officers from relevant agencies. Its role is to jointly conduct the overall multi-agency management of the incident. Finally, the operational or bronze level is the level at which the management of the immediate hands-on work is undertaken in relation to the emergency. While individual agencies retain command authority over their own resources and personnel deployed in response, each agency must liaise and coordinate with the other agencies involved, ensuring a coherent and integrated effort. It is the role of the operational commanders to implement the tactical commander's plan within their functional area of responsibility.

Given the unique nature of the COVID-19 response in terms of not responding to a single incident, some LRFs may have decided that the usual gold/silver/bronze structure is not as appropriate. However, the SCG will still be supported by specific tactical or operational 'cells' (working groups) focusing on particular issues of importance to the response: some of these groups will be standing groups, for example on mortality management, while others such as on personal protective equipment (PPE) may have been created specifically in relation to COVID-19. All these groups will report back into the SCG during its regular meetings, with discussions and decisions at meetings carefully recorded by trained loggists to ensure clarity and accountability.

During an emergency response, LRF areas will usually be required to submit reports into central government through 'situation reports' (sitreps) sent to MHCLG's RED providing an update on the state of play locally and the local response.⁶ The military phrase 'battle rhythm' is used in emergency management to describe the agreed timetable of events (eg TCG and SCG meetings, sitrep reporting etc) during the response period. Where an SCG has been stood up, a central Government Liaison Officer (GLO) will provide a specific liaison point for each area; for the COVID-19 outbreak, RED have committed to appointing a GLO for each LRF area, and seven LRF areas are being supported by a ministerial lead identified by the Government.

In large scale emergencies, consideration may be given to setting up Regional SCGs (RESCGs) to enhance situational awareness across multiple LRFs and to understand shared challenges across regional areas, although only one ResCG has been activated for COVID-19.

At national level, for the most significant emergencies, COBR⁷ meetings will be activated to provide national strategic oversight of the response. For the COVID-19 emergency, the Government has also established a daily COVID-19 meeting of key ministers and officials to monitor progress and discuss measures, alongside regular COBR meetings. The daily meeting is supported by four implementation committees focusing on health, public sector preparedness, the economy and the international response, chaired by the Health Secretary, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Chancellor and Foreign Secretary respectively, each of whom attends the daily meeting.

⁶ This may overlap with requests from other government departments (particularly if there is a lead government department for the emergency, such as the Department for Health and Social Care in relation to COVID-19); in previous emergencies one role the LGA has played is to encourage government to limit duplication to help allow local areas to focus on their response.

⁷ Standing for Cabinet Office Briefing Room A, where the meetings take place.

The Government is also being supported in its work by the Scientific Advisory Group on Emergencies (SAGE), which is responsible for providing scientific advice to support COBR decisions. SAGE is convened for all emergencies requiring scientific input, although the membership will change depending on the nature of the emergency.

Recovering from an emergency

Recovery is the process of rebuilding, restoring and rehabilitating a community following an emergency, and, even where the immediate response to an emergency is led by the blue light services, it is typically led by the local council. For emergencies with significant recovery implications, it would be normal to establish a recovery coordinating group (RCG), usually chaired by a council chief executive or strategic director. The RCG will take over the role of the SCG once the response phase of the emergency is over and there has been a formal handover between the two. However, recovery work, or at least preparations for it, should begin as early as possible during the response phase, and many LRF areas have already set up their RCGs, despite the fact that the response to COVID-19 seems likely to continue for many more months. LRFs will typically have an existing recovery plan from which to work in terms of establishing the structures needed to manage recovery, and developing a local recovery strategy that is specific to COVID-19.

Undertaking debriefs and understanding the lessons learnt from an emergency response to help feed these into future preparedness is a key feature of emergency planning, and something that may take place as organisations move towards recovery.

Council involvement in SCGs

Local areas will have different arrangements for which councils within the LRF are directly involved in the SCG. In some areas, this may be covered through a rota system; in others, all councils may be directly involved in the SCG.

Council involvement in SCGs will be through a senior officer representative with executive authority to take decisions, rather than through a political representative, because SCGs are based upon input from those tasked with exercising their trained professional judgement in directing an organisation's operational response to an emergency.

For any emergency there is a need to ensure that leading councillors are kept abreast of developments within an SCG, and each council will have its own arrangements for ensuring that the authority's political leadership is appropriately linked into this structure through close contact with senior officers. Beyond the arrangements between the council's political and managerial leadership, processes will also be needed to ensure that information is cascaded to the wider councillor cohort. As noted in our councillor guidance on COVID-19, in previous emergency responses, some councils have found it helpful to designate a senior councillor as a point of contact for questions and concerns about the response from other councillors.

As the worst public health crisis in a century, the COVID-19 emergency response is unprecedented in its scale. Its prolonged nature and health-led response will be substantially different to previous emergencies managed under the 2004 Act (or before it), which have tended to require a relatively short-lived blue light led response followed by a longer council

led recovery period. SCG arrangements during the COVID-19 response have already been stood up for considerably longer than normal, and this seems likely to continue for some time. This poses some challenges for local government, where decisions are typically taken at cabinet level with the involvement of other members through full council. Added to this, there is the specific challenge in this emergency of normal engagement between councillors and officers changing significantly given the stay at home and social isolation policies.

In this context, councils will already have thought about and put in place arrangements for ensuring links between officers and members, and for appropriately engaging politicians with the work of LRFs/SCGs over a protracted period. Each area will have its own processes, which may in part be determined by the number and types of councils within the LRF area (two-tier, mayoral arrangements etc) and political balance.

Again, these links will, for practical reasons, distinguish between political leadership and all councillors. While all councillors should be kept informed about the emergency response in line with agreed processes, it will not be feasible for all councillors in each council to be closely engaged with the local authority representative(s) on the SCG. However, while SCGs will continue to need to take decisions in quick time, there is now a degree of predictability about what some of the necessary discussions and decisions will be, providing scope for leading councillors to feed in through prior discussions with council representatives.

Given the pressures of time and events in an emergency response, regular dialogue may naturally be focused on councils' most senior political leadership, for example the council leader, deputy leader or designated lead on the emergency. The council leader, deputy leader or designated lead on the emergency may in turn wish to communicate relevant information to all councillors to keep them informed.

Examples of what councils, LRF partners, officers and elected members can collectively do to support the emergency response and planning for longer term recovery include:

Keeping elected members informed and engaged in the emergency response

- Establishing clear processes for council Cabinets (or equivalents) to 'meet' and make decisions that can help instruct council officers in their work on the response, including clarity about how decisions are captured and communicated. Alongside approaches to formal meetings, there will also be a need for proportionate processes for less formal dialogue.
- Ensuring this process is transparent and visible to all elected members.
- Implementing clear communication channels across all elected members.
- Providing regular briefings on the work of the SCG so that elected members and others are kept informed.

As set out in our full councillor guidance on COVID-19, councils can also consider including local MPs within these briefing structures.

Engaging elected members in discussions about recovery and lessons learnt

- As areas being to look beyond the immediate response, agreeing the role councillors can play as councils and wider LRFs plan for a future relaxation of the lockdown and longer-term recovery.
- Ensuring political input into organisational debriefs and lessons learnt at the appropriate time.

Working within the framework of the Civil Contingences Act 2004 and reviewing new guidance

- Respecting that the Act is based upon officer led structures to direct operational activities in the response phase, and that officers are acting in accordance with their professional responsibilities in participating in SCGs/LRFs and responding to Ministerial engagement with them etc.
- Following agreed processes on engagement, decision making and communications to help protect the wellbeing of people working under significant pressure.
- Reviewing the LGA's new workbook on the role of leaders and cabinet members during COVID-19⁸, which includes case studies of how councils are managing this interaction.

If you would like to share examples of how your councils are managing the emergency response, please email: coronavirus.enquiries@local.gov.uk

⁸ <https://www.local.gov.uk/covid19-leadership-workbook-cabinet-members>