



One-hour COVID-19 test approved

A test that detects coronavirus in just over an hour has been approved in Britain following trials in hospital settings. The Dna Nudge test has been piloted by the government since April and was this month approved by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) for widespread clinical use. The test, developed by a team at Imperial College London, detects the virus from a small swab of the nostril which is then inserted into a handheld reader that provides results within 75 minutes. The public will soon be able to buy the test to use at home for £40 after the inventors announced plans to increase production to one million tests a month by the end of the year.

Democratic processes

The Coronavirus Bill allows the Secretary of State to make regulations to change the way local authority meetings are held, which should open the way for councils to postpone meetings and undertake decision making meetings remotely, ie without anyone needing to be together in the same place. This applies to all tiers of local government and associated committees and includes fire and rescue authorities. We will continue to liaise closely with MHCLG regarding these regulations.

Ward surgeries and resident engagement

Clearly, the Government's advice makes it impossible for councillors' normal surgeries to continue in their current format. As noted, all councillors should follow the guidance in place at any given time. Councillors should consult with their authorities to consider the scope for running virtual surgeries and use other forms of communication to engage with local residents, while councils should put in place measures to enable councillors to continue to fulfil their role as far as is possible. The nature of engagement with, and the issues being raised by residents may change substantially in the coming months and the next section sets out the roles that councillors can and should play in an emergency response period.

Understanding the emergency response framework and your role

Councils are category one responders under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, 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 processes for leading the strategic (gold), tactical (silver) and operational (bronze) responses to emergencies under the 2004 Act. Each council will have its own arrangements for ensuring that the authority's political leadership is appropriately linked into this structure. 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. Councillors' role within this context is to provide vital local leadership, rather than to become involved in the operational response led by officers. Ward councillors will be among the people who know their areas best, and have an important role to play by:



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

In order to fulfil this role, councils should establish mechanisms for keeping councillors informed about developments and national and corporate messages. These mechanisms should make clear how regularly councillors can expect to be updated, recognising that the council's overall priority is to focus its efforts on supporting local communities. In some recent emergencies, councils have found it helpful to designate a senior councillor to provide a first point of contact and take the lead role in engaging with other councillors, enabling officers to direct their efforts towards community communications and support. Councillors may also wish to consider how they link into the local MP/MPs.

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. District councillors may also wish to clarify local approaches for disseminating information from the local Director of Public Health (DPH) as they do not always have a direct line of access. It is clear that in the coming months the burdens on councils will be increasing at a time when corporate capacity is reduced as officers may be required to self-isolate or look after family members. Councillors should consider how they minimise the usual requirements on officers as resources are focused on supporting the vulnerable, while also ensuring that their own efforts are focused on this overwhelming priority

Community leadership

It is vital that councillors demonstrate community leadership by taking a responsible approach to the information they share and the messages they give, and by following the guidance they receive from their council. Any information provided should be based on confirmed messages from the council, local DPH and Government, which will ensure that councillors are speaking with one voice. Given the prevalence of unhelpful unverified information, interpretation and speculation on this issue, it will be critical for councillors to show leadership by signposting to information and advice from assured sources and links to the latest guidance provided by the Government. 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 that a consistent and collaborative approach in difficult circumstances is a more effective approach which will not undermine the council's work.



Using social media

The advent of social media has increased opportunities for rapid and effective communication with local residents and will be vital in a period where local residents (including councillors) are encouraged to limit unnecessary physical contact with other people. However, social media can create challenges for councils and councillors and lead to mixed messaging. Councillors should bear in mind general guidance on using social media, work with their communications teams and follow the guidance above to 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 providing up-to-date, authoritative information, most likely from the Government website, having checked this with their council and local DPH. There is a risk that a prolonged emergency response will lead to heightened emotions and potentially unacceptable behaviour towards councillors, as the most accessible form of Government.

Councillor Christopher Akers-Belcher
Equalities Officer NAC