



## Covid-19 frontline series: how local authorities are responding to the pandemic crisis

**A conversation with Roger Wilson, Chief Executive, Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council.**



As part of our COVID-19 Frontlines series that focuses on the local government sector's response to COVID-19; we consider the response in Northern Ireland with Roger Wilson, Chief Executive of Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Council.

**Can you share how the council has approached the pandemic and the issues that have arisen for you in response to a unique set of circumstances?**

Local authorities regularly plan for emergencies and respond to them. However, the scale and the impact of the pandemic is nothing we have seen before; especially the personal, economic and social impact that we are now seeing. Given the potential duration of the current situation, we have concentrated on building in resilience and sustainability for our team members and for our local communities.

We are very fortunate to have a strong and competent team of senior officers who have stepped up to the plate in a way that has been incredible. We established a gold and silver response team to prepare for the shut down of facilities, cancelling of events, address continued service provision and enact our business continuity plans. It is probably one of the saddest moments in my career in local government, where we were closing down most of what we were doing, not providing what we'd normally provide to the public and moving to tier 1 services, but this was essential in order to provide necessary support to our local community and our local economy. One of the unique benefits of local government is our ability to work across boundaries and across sectors, so very much working in partnership with other organisations. Local government in Northern Ireland is considerably different than the rest of the UK, so the multi-agency response has been incredible.

**How hard has it been to coordinate your responses across all the relevant stakeholders and to keep them updated and informed?**

We already have well established forums and protocols. But as I was saying about the partnership working, a lot of people know each other in Northern Ireland, so there are very strong relationships and these have been extremely valuable and crucial in the initial response phase. Subsequently our reporting and communication channels have been developed to ensure that there is a flow of information - both upwards to central government, but also across the different channels. I think what we have come to learn very quickly is the importance of very clear, very concise and very timely communication. Getting good information out to people when they need it has been really important.

---

## Are there any unique issues in Northern Ireland that perhaps you face that others in England or Wales or Scotland have not?

Local government in Northern Ireland is a totally different set-up. The range of functions that we have are different, so that is one challenge. We are much smaller than the rest of the UK. The councils are relatively new; they were only established in 2015 following a reform. That might not sound like an awful lot in UK terms, but the last reform of local government was 40 plus years ago. We are still establishing and bedding in new processes and procedures, so this has come at a challenging time for that. We also have a land border with the Republic of Ireland so different governments may be looking at this in different ways. While we have our own differences politically, it is a national pandemic and all parties are working together in the interests of everyone in our society. So there is a clear focus on that, but our geography and our structures would probably be some of the key differences that we have.

## Do you think there are going to be any long term lessons that you will learn as a council from the pandemic that may perhaps alter your approach going forward?

There is a greater emphasis on technology going forward and how this will change the way that we work as an organisation to make further step changes. We would also look at job shadowing in a different way, so that people have a greater understanding across the organisation of other roles and responsibilities we have. As we are already redeploying people into different roles to help areas of high demand, work shadowing would provide a wider skill set and a more adaptable and agile workforce in the future. Finally, taking the time to reflect on what have been the lessons that we have learnt, to acknowledge what has worked really well and to embed these lessons in a more formal and structured way so we are stronger going forward – which I have no doubt we will be, as will the whole local government sector.

## We are here to support you

Trowers & Hamlins' team of specialist local government lawyers remain at your disposal and are working remotely to support you. We are here and available support by email / telephone / skype, should you wish to discuss any priorities in light of the pressures that your local authorities are facing due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Key Contacts

### Amardeep Gill

Partner

☎ +44 (0)121 214 8838

✉ [agill@trowers.com](mailto:agill@trowers.com)

### Scott Dorling

Partner

☎ +44 (0)20 7423 8391

✉ [sdorling@trowers.com](mailto:sdorling@trowers.com)



---

Trowers & Hamlins LLP is a limited liability partnership registered in England and Wales with registered number OC337852 whose registered office is at 3 Bunhill Row, London EC1Y 8YZ. Trowers & Hamlins LLP is authorised and regulated by the Solicitors Regulation Authority. The word "partner" is used to refer to a member of Trowers & Hamlins LLP or an employee or consultant with equivalent standing and qualifications or an individual with equivalent status in one of Trowers & Hamlins LLP's affiliated undertakings. A list of the members of Trowers & Hamlins LLP together with those non-members who are designated as partners is open to inspection at the registered office.

Trowers & Hamlins LLP has taken all reasonable precautions to ensure that information contained in this document is accurate, but stresses that the content is not intended to be legally comprehensive. Trowers & Hamlins LLP recommends that no action be taken on matters covered in this document without taking full legal advice.

© Copyright Trowers & Hamlins LLP 2020 – All Rights Reserved. This document remains the property of Trowers & Hamlins LLP. No part of this document may be reproduced in any format without the express written consent of Trowers & Hamlins LLP. Image credits to Fotolia, Istock and Shutterstock.