



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

### A conversation with Kieran Keane, Chief Executive, Lancaster City Council



Local government, along with their public sector partners, are at the frontline in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. They continue to protect the elderly and vulnerable, support their local economies and ensure that their residents feel safe and protected during these uncertain times.

Through our work with colleagues in the sector over recent weeks, we have seen various Councils undertake dynamic organisational changes, adopt new ways of working and contribute towards cohesive pan-regional response networks - all at breakneck speed.

Our COVID-19 Frontline series aims to share some of the stories, best practice and innovation that are emerging from the sector and highlight the tireless efforts of those unsung heroes in local government.

We are grateful to Kieran Keane, Chief Executive of Lancaster City Council for his contribution to the series.

### As the Chief Executive of the Council, how are you responding to the pandemic, and what strategies have you put in place?

The key is to remain calm and draw in all the expertise of the many wide ranging competences we have in our team. We have a wealth of resource and expertise including an experienced Director and Civil Contingencies Manager, the latter being an ex-senior police officer and that experience has proved so beneficial in the current climate. All of our local government colleagues are working through uncharted territory, so you need to build in flexibility, resilience and keep going through communication lines, but I think how we have responded is to be quick off the mark, thought things through, consulted and taken our councillors and key stakeholders with us as well as our local businesses.

We are actively engaging with our Local Resilience Forum, with our fellow tiers of local government and with our peers in local government across the whole of the country.

### What immediate steps have you taken?

One of the first things we did was the Council resolving to grant £1m to assist local businesses and £1m to assist the vulnerable people within our community.

We completely restructured our management organisation within the Council within two days to focus on three key areas, namely, providing vital services, supporting the vulnerable and supporting our businesses. If it doesn't come under those three, it is not a priority at present.

We then started to move people; we broke our services down into three tiers. Tier one, pretty obviously, is critical matters, and we have reduced or gradually wound down other services and transferred staff into other roles to support critical services.

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I think a key element of our success has been to accelerate our already fairly rapid transformation in terms of use of technology. We have quickly developed an etiquette for large scale virtual gatherings - simple things like having a meeting controller who controls questions through the chat box rather than everybody wanting to speak at once. It may sound minor, but you add those up over time in terms of how effective you can be and they are all pretty critical things. We've also enhanced our GIS mapping and re-deployed our premises to become part of the national hub arrangement.

### **Tell me more about the external partners that you are working on a pan-regional basis.**

One of the many things that the public sector is good at, is responding to contingencies, as that obligation already exists within local government. We already have established forums, groups and command structures for unforeseen circumstances. These are normally designed to react to floods, an air crash or a problem with a nuclear power station, but it is that same oversight force that comes into play in any emergency. Each of these areas is part of our Local Resilience Forum which comprises a Chair, usually a senior police representative and representatives from Public Health England, the NHS, ambulance service, utilities, local government, etc. which operate in unison across the whole area.

What I think works well is having a regional strength and regional instruction, but leaving people on the ground who know their own localities to then deliver and deploy what is needed to be done to suit the particular circumstances, whether it is urban country areas, specific age demographics or other considerations.

### **The national agenda is moving so quickly, how are you tapped into this?**

We have regular briefings from the Ministry of Housing, Communities, & Local Government (MCHLG), in particular from Robert Jenrick. This includes a combination of written briefings and also broadcasts that are regularly held to bring us all up to speed and what needs to happen next.. Whilst there are announcements, the support takes time to mobilise on a national level and we have to respond with measures in the interim to keep things afloat in our local economy.

### **Do you think that the pandemic will have a long lasting impact on the Council in terms of service provision?**

I think mainly in a positive sense. Crisis management often brings out far better practices and better engagement from your staff. Local government will evidence again the value that it adds to the country.

We have been able to re-organise quickly as we have low levels of outsourcing. Re-organisation would have been harder had we had to negotiate with various contractors providing our services. We don't need to renegotiate a service agreement, we just ask people to do different things because it is sensible to do it.

I think it is also about how good communication and good engagement for the greater good of the community works well when there a common goal in place. I think that will carry through beyond this period.

### **And if you were going to share some lessons with colleagues what would you be saying to them?**

I suppose it is too early to know what those more strategic or material lessons are just yet, as we are still in the build up phase. I think one thing is to plan early while maintaining a lot of flexibility and plan for A, B and C. This is real time risk management, and I think you have to appreciate that you may try a certain approach but then you have to have the courage to change that to respond again, because the world changes in front of you in a few hours and you mustn't take decisions that may limit future options. Sharing good practice is a key, it is really critical you share it with colleagues because the benefits are just so great if you do.

## **We are here to support you**

Trowers & Hamblins' 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.

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