

Briefing note

Communicating in a crisis



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Key messages

- Effective communication requires advance planning to ensure messages are understood, especially in challenging, changing or uncertain times
- Understanding your stakeholders and the role they play is key as this will determine the specific communication requirements for each audience – we provide a framework to help you do this
- Remote meetings can be challenging to facilitate but can achieve great results if prepared for effectively – we provide some ‘top tips’

Communicating effectively during a period where things are very different to normal can be tricky. Different groups (be they colleagues, scheme members, scheme employers or Committee or Pension Board members) will be used to, and be comfortable with, established ways of working. An enforced and sudden change can pose challenges for some. Over the past few months, with the current lockdown measures, we have all had to adapt our ways of communicating with stakeholders.

As Project Managers, at the start of a new project (or if a project crisis occurs), we must consider the best way to engage with large and often geographically diverse groups to very quickly agree a communication plan to ensure we meet our objectives. For the projects we deliver, rarely can the team(s) all meet face to face - but we still must ensure that messages are heard, decisions are debated and made, and the participants feel engaged and involved.

In this briefing note, we will lay out some of our key methods to help plan communications and our ‘top tips’ for communicating with stakeholders in this current period of uncertainty and change and beyond.

Communication planning

It's always good to take time to plan your communication strategy. This doesn't have to be detailed but should provide the framework of what you are seeking to achieve. This is especially true during the current situation, where individuals can be experiencing uncertainty, traditional channels are no longer available or you may be communicating a more difficult message.

We appreciate that things have been very busy and you may not have had time to undertake communication planning but as things progress and we become a little clearer on the way out of lockdown, this could be the time to think about your messaging.

The table below outlines some of the things you should consider before you dive in. We've also provided a couple of examples for an external and an internal communication. We appreciate some of these types of communications you will have issued already but these tips can be applied to a next wave of communications, such as updating staff on the office re-opening plan and providing further updates to members and employers about service levels.

Stakeholder / Stakeholder Group	Name of communication	Objective(s)	Key message(s)	Roles	Delivery mechanism	Timing & frequency
<i>Who do you want to communicate with?</i>	<i>Working or final name</i>	<i>What is the objective (i.e. to inform/educate, for a decision to be made etc)</i>	<i>What message(s) will you give to meet your objective(s)</i>	<i>Who will draft, review, sign off and issue/deliver?</i>	<i>How will this be issued? Email/post/verbally</i>	<i>The date the communication needs to take place to meet its objective(s)</i>
Example one						
Fund Pensioners	Pension payments update	To inform and allay concerns	No changes to payments of pensions (dates/amounts/method) Paying pensions is a key priority for the Fund Please be re-assured by this communication but if you do need to get in touch, you can by using the usual channels	Draft: Payroll Team Leader Review: Administration Team Leader Sign off: Head of Administration/Administration Manager Issue: Payroll Team	Email/website and post	31 May 2020 One-off, but may become regular dependent upon level of queries.
Example two						
Staff members	COVID-19 update: How the office will re-open	To inform staff members of plans for the gradual re-opening of the office	Consideration has been given to the steps to be taken to a return to the office Outline key points of the plan Possible actions required of staff members from now on	Draft review & sign off: Council HR Deliver: Head of Fund	Verbally, via skype call/Teams/Zoom	31 June 2020 One-off

Managing and categorising stakeholders - using 'RACI'

RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed) is model used by Project Managers to understand the roles and responsibilities across key tasks, deliverables and decisions on a project. This is a tool that can be easily adapted for day to day or one-off, crisis or change driven communications, or tasks and decisions. It allows you to consider the key populations and where you should focus your time for maximum impact.

	Responsible	Accountable	Consulted	Informed
Definition	These stakeholders are actively involved and make suggestions or proposals.	These stakeholders are “on the hook” and have ultimate responsibility. These people are key decision makers.	Consulted parties are typically the people who provide input based on their experience and skill. They may also be parties impacted by the change or decision that you wish to seek feedback from in advance.	These stakeholders need to be kept ‘in the loop’ and need light touch communications.

Example One: Decision and communication on the Impact of COVID-19 on the Fund’s service levels to members – temporary change to response times due to need to focus on essential activities

	Responsible	Accountable	Consulted	Informed
Stakeholder(s)	Administration Team Leader/Manager responsible for services to members	Head of Fund	Pension Committee/Board Administration Team	Members
Role(s)	Propose changes and provide rationale Issue communication	Accept and sign off changes Ensure communication is issued	Provide comment, feedback & challenge on the proposed changes	Read and understand message Can feedback or query (but ultimately don’t affect the decision made)

Example Two: Decision and communication of key Fund priorities for the next 3 months, highlighting changes as a result of COVID-19 and lockdown

	Responsible	Accountable	Consult	Inform
Stakeholder(s)	Management Team /Head of Fund	Head of Fund	Advisors Staff members Pension Committee	Pension Board Members
Role(s)	Discuss all options and propose new Fund priorities Issue communication	Sign off proposal and any changes Ensure communication is issued	Provide advice, comment and challenge on the proposed priorities	Read and understand the message Can feedback or query (but ultimately don’t affect the decision made)

Getting the delivery right - remotely

One of the biggest changes to how you communicate with stakeholders is that much of what was conducted face to face must now be conducted remotely – this could be using Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype or a combination of these and it could be via conference call or video call.

Communicating with staff members – maintaining engagement

At Hymans Robertson, we are undertaking lots of ways to maintain contact with our internal teams, from daily 'catch ups', quaran'tea' breaks, running regular team meetings as normal and taking the time to call someone when you may have gone to see them at their desk, or met face to face before.

Pension Committee meetings

In one of our 'Keeping the LGPS connected' webinars in April, we asked a poll question of all attendees to understand if Funds had yet decided on a process that would enable them to run Committee Meetings remotely, whilst still ensuring minimum criteria is met (for example, participants must be able to hear and be heard and public access must be possible). The overwhelming number of Funds have either found a solution or are actively working on this in time for their next meeting. Your Democratic Services Team can provide further advice on possible options.

Facilitating or chairing meetings

Facilitating or chairing meetings remotely can be tricky, but it can still be very effective if managed well. Some things to consider thinking about if you are chairing or facilitating may include:

- Housekeeping - individuals may not be familiar with this way of working so it may be worth explaining how the meeting will be run, how individuals can ask questions and comment and how you will facilitate comfort breaks etc. Usually, it works better for anyone who is not speaking to mute themselves, or you may be able to do this as meeting organiser depending on the software you are using.
- Allow a bit of informal discussion as people join the meeting – this will help people to relax. Remote meetings can feel a little bit awkward at the start, especially if being done with video.
- Set the scene of the meeting at the start - summarise agenda headings, list papers that have been distributed and state the time available at the outset. Set the purpose and objectives of the meeting – for example is this to inform, educate, make decisions, take comments on proposals or a combination?
- Signpost each agenda item in turn – as you move from one item to the next, a quick sense check to make sure everyone is keeping track may be useful.
- Give time for participants to comment and ask questions – ideally, manage the Q&A or comments using the features in the package you are using. For example, muting the audience or allowing them to 'raise their hand' to speak, or using the comments pane to allow questions to be raised. This is often better when managed by one person and ideally not the Chairperson as their focus will be on controlling the meeting.

We hope you have found this briefing note useful. Please do not hesitate to get in touch with any questions or comments.