

How should you approach public sector engagement during Covid-19?

The current COVID-19 crisis is changing the world at a relentless pace; nowhere is this more apparent than in the public sector. Political figures across the globe are racing to address the challenges of the current pandemic, so, inevitably and understandably, other issues are dropping down the agenda.

In a lot of cases, stakeholders will simply not have the head space to engage with your issues, when they are, quite rightly, focusing on the most significant global challenge in recent history. However, there will naturally remain issues around which you feel compelled to make contact with stakeholders, and policy areas which will continue to develop regardless. If this is the case, it is crucial that any engagement is carried out with sensitivity and awareness.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF BEFORE YOU ENGAGE

We'd recommend asking the following questions before embarking on engagement or advocacy.

1. How critical is the issue I want to raise? Crucially, can it wait?

Perhaps most importantly, will it be seen as critical by your stakeholder at such a challenging time? It is more important than ever to take a step back and consider your issue from an outsider's perspective, before deciding just how important it really is.

2. Will the issue have an impact across your sector? Is it critical to the nation?

While you are understandably concerned about the challenges facing your business, if a particular issue will have an impact beyond your organisation, on the wider sector, allowing others in the business community to support you, your audience is likely to be more receptive at such a fraught time. If it's just about your business, there is the potential risk of looking self-serving.

3. Will the stakeholder be focused on other, more important things?

Choose the stakeholders you want to engage wisely. Those working directly to respond to COVID-19 will have other, more important issues on their mind. Even those not directly involved in the day to day crisis management may have seen an increase in the volume and scope of their workload, as the public sector attempts to tackle a once in a generation challenge.

4. What's the best method of communication?

If you do engage, how can you do so in a way that lightens, rather than adds to, the demands on those you are contacting? Can you pare back what you share, or the requests you make, to focus just on the absolutely critical? Engagement needs to be personal and focused, demonstrating empathy and consideration for the pressures others feel. Wherever possible, present a suggestion for a solution to any problems or concerns you are raising.

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OFFERING HELP TO THE PUBLIC SECTOR

For many companies, their daily business will not be critical to initial efforts to tackle COVID-19. However, it is worth exploring whether your business could offer support tangentially or at a later stage.

Think outside the box; can you offer help in making working from home safer or more efficient? Does your technology promote a more efficient supply chain or help ensure the elderly get the support they need? Can you help develop digital skills for vulnerable groups who will potentially be isolated for a longer period?

For those businesses that can help, consider the following before moving to action:

- **Pick the right target:** make sure that your offer is relayed early to whichever body you believe it can support. Identify the most appropriate contact point within an organisation, whether that's a government department, a local authority, or even your constituency MP.
- **Clarity:** be clear and concise about what you are offering, and the problem it will solve.
- **Timelines:** when can this offer be delivered, and for how long?
- **People and skills:** if you're offering manpower and skills, be clear on what initiatives they can support, as well as the legal, insurance or regulatory challenges that might need to be overcome to make it work.
- **Geography:** where in the country can your offer be delivered?

ASKING FOR HELP

This is a challenging time for all businesses, and while sensitivity is the watch word, everyone wants to limit the economic damage as far as possible.

The Chancellor has repeatedly said that the Government is prepared to 'do whatever it takes' to protect the economy. However, don't assume that the Government knows your sector as well as you, or has anticipated future problems.

So, if there is a real challenge facing your business, don't be afraid to speak up.

Think carefully about the issues that your sector may face, and how these challenges could be alleviated by government intervention. Communication between the business community and government will be critical in the months ahead. Politicians and policy makers will look to those closest to business – the people running them – to provide advice and help, as well as asking for help where needed.

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And before you ask for help, remember to consider the questions posed earlier:

- How critical is the issue I want to raise? Can it wait?
- Will the issue have an impact across your sector? Is it critical to the nation?
- Will the stakeholder be focused on other, more important things?
- What's the best method of communication?

FINAL THOUGHTS

All communications are tricky in these unprecedented times. But engagement with the public sector is perhaps one of the hardest areas of all, considering the huge challenges with which the government, local authorities, charities, NGOs and politicians are grappling.