

# Communicating the death of a colleague, elected representative or volunteer from Coronavirus (COVID-19)

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## 1. Introduction

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**The death of an employee, volunteer or an elected representative can be a traumatic experience for those who are left to deal with the loss of a colleague and for the organisation.**

This CIPR Public Services Guide on Communicating the death of a colleague, elected representative or volunteer from Coronavirus (COVID-19) provides guidance to assist managers and others faced with the difficult situation of a colleague dying. It outlines steps an organisation, the communications service, and its employees should take following the death of a colleague.

Sadly, the current national emergency situation means the death of an employee(s), elected member / representative, volunteer or others supporting your organisation is more likely than usual. While we know organisations are doing their best to manage and mitigate the risks to those helping them deliver for their communities and stakeholders, we face lots of uncertainty.

It's vital we ensure our business continuity communication plans include consideration of what we would do should the need arise to communicate a death of a colleague(s) from Coronavirus (COVID-19).

Public services have already seen the deaths of healthcare staff, council employees, others delivering frontline services and elected members. There could be more to come.

As public service communication professionals, we're well practised in responding to incidents with the media and public; managing reputational issues; liaising with stakeholders and keeping our staff informed.

From the experience of those who've been involved in deaths of frontline colleagues, we know these skills are at the heart of an organisation's response and play a key role in ensuring deaths of colleagues of Coronavirus (COVID-19) are communicated appropriately, effectively and with compassion while protecting employees and the organisation .

Guidance can never be a completed works or prescriptive rule – every different situation needs a tailored response.

However, when emotions are high and stress levels at their peak, it can be difficult to find the right words or formulate a clear action plan quickly and this is particularly the case when the event involves a death of a colleague from Coronavirus (COVID-19).

Simple checklists and reference materials can help to get you started and that's the point of this guide: not to tell you what to do but to share the learning from others, in similar situations, which could give you the head-start if you need it.

Another reason this is not prescriptive and more a guide is, as covered in the planning section, this doesn't and cannot take into account the protocols your organisation has for employee deaths with / of Coronavirus (COVID-19). It requires reaching an understanding with other professions such as HR as to how best to communicate in your environment.

Our aim is to update this again to build on this work and add more useful guidance as the national emergency situation continues to develop.

CIPR Public Services Committee COVID-19 Advisory Group

April 2020

## 2. Planning and Preparation

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### Actions at this stage:

- Have a plan
- Know your audiences and prioritise them
- Be sure you would be notified
- Discuss your plan with your chief officers or appropriate equivalents
- Know what to expect
- Understand the timeline – the effects and demand are long-lasting
- Know and discuss with staff what will happen if there are multiple deaths, so you are preparing them for if the worst happens

### Have a plan

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The circumstances of having to communicate the death of a valued employee from Coronavirus (COVID-19) will be personal and a rigid or prescriptive communications plan prepared in advance won't help. However, it is useful to have an outline plan which can quickly be adapted and applied if you need it. Make sure your plan is integrated to your organisation's communication strategy or policy and forms a part of any overall policy or operating protocol that could be invoked in the event of a death of an employee. Discuss things like how you would articulate whether an employee has died of Coronavirus (COVID-19) or with Coronavirus (COVID-19) and how your communications complement official guidance on protocols and processes on dealing with employee deaths from the disease. Your plans also need to take account of official support and the channels to go through like that should be offered by ACAS.

### Priority audiences

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Your plan will need to address many audiences. Keeping it focused to family, colleagues, media, stakeholders in this order can help provide focus to decision making about how to communicate. Know how to contact people you would need to inform, particularly if you are given the news.

### Notification process

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Early notification is critical as it offers much needed time to prepare an initial cohesive response. Make sure trigger arrangements include death in the workplace but it would be preferable for you to be notified as soon as the organisation is notified. It is recommended you have a communication professional available part of the responding management team.

### Relationship with Chief Officer Team

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Knowing what your senior team would want to do and what they would require of you for communicating the death of an employee from Coronavirus (COVID-19) can make your plan work or fail. Your Chief Officer and their team will be under incredible organisational and personal stress. If you can, try to set some time aside to discuss the communication plan with chief officers as you are working on your plan or as a testing exercise. It is better to have mutual understanding of what role professional communications staff would have in advance of a death of an employee due to Coronavirus (COVID-19) than on the day itself.

### Know what to expect at each stage – ‘mayhem, mastermind, and manhunt’

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Due to the extensive media interest locally, regionally, nationally and potentially globally on deaths of employees from Coronavirus (COVID-19), the media and public response will generally follow three broad stages. With the advent of social media, the lifecycle of these phases have reduced and become less defined but an understanding of the themes can help you plan to prepare your response.

### Timeline and key milestones

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Your plan is probably only going to be enough to get you through the first few days. As facts emerge, any internal investigations are planned, start to take shape and significant milestones are reached you will need to create new plans that will help your organisation through difficult impacts. Whatever the specifics of the incident, events will follow a similar timeline. There is potential with Coronavirus (COVID-19) for there to be multiple deaths for an organisation in a short timescale, so silences or virtual memorial events may need to be done on a regular basis for groups of individuals. It may be you consider a face-to-face memorial event when the social distancing and stay at home restrictions are lifted.

### Know and discuss with staff what will happen if there are multiple deaths

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In the Coronavirus (COVID-19) setting our communities will be dealing with increased numbers of deaths and public services are already working to prepare more temporary mortuary space and burial spaces, and increase crematorium staff. This will be against the backdrop of trying to keep staff safe and well, dealing with staff sickness and even the deaths of employees. Plan to discuss these difficult issues with staff and your communities as they need to be prepared for unusually high numbers of deaths and funerals.

## Example timeline

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### Death



**Immediate actions** – notification, information controls, communication staffing



**First hours** – breaking news management, next of kin, immediate internal comms



**Investigations** – HSE, representative body, organisation's own investigations begin



**First week** – family, staff, stakeholders – less media



**One week on** – minute's silence



**Funeral preparation** – usual to consider media requirements but not during pandemic restrictions



### Funeral(s)



**Memorial events** – opening of statues/ gardens/ etc, special services once the social distancing and stay at home restrictions have been lifted and it is deemed safe to do so.



**Further landmarks** – one-year anniversary



**Outcomes of any investigations** (less likely during a pandemic but there could be internal investigations and any lessons learned)

## 3. Immediate actions

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### Actions at this stage:

- Establish the facts and become part of the response team
- Take control of communication outputs
- Think about immediate colleague welfare
- Start a decision and action log
- Identify your spokesperson/s
- Make contact with relevant partner agencies and reporting organisations

### **Establish facts**

What has happened? What have staff already communicated internally or externally? Is there anything on social media? Start monitoring. Make sure you are embedded as part of the organisation's response team.

### **Take control of communication**

If the death of a staff member occurs in their own work setting, ensure the person in charge has instructed staff not to communicate information about the death on social media immediately, either work or personal accounts, to other staff not engaged in the issue or to friends and family and that no media will be made aware. This is essential to ensure that the next of kin is informed in the right way. Colleagues should be made aware that they can pay tribute on their own social media channels, in line with the organisation's social media policy, once the next of kin have been made aware.

### **Think about immediate staff welfare**

Staff who were present, if the death occurs at work, if it is a health care setting will benefit from early relief but may welcome being kept together as a group in order that a senior officer can provide immediate direction or support. Colleagues involved in the death or connected to the deceased are more likely to prefer to have details confirmed personally. Check to see if your HR department has any immediately available suitable advisory information on coping with trauma. You may find this is freely available from the organisation's occupational health team. For communications staff who are CIPR members, there is a free mental health support line via the iProvision service. Most public sector organisations have employee assistance programmes that provide immediate telephone or online services. This is another reason to plan with your HR colleagues to ensure access details are ready to communicate.

### **Start a decision and action log**

Good practice is you record decisions that you make and the actions taken including the date/time and a brief description and the outcome. Record facts not opinions. This information records your contribution to the response which can assist in any debrief but may also be disclosed to authorities as part of any resulting investigations or it could also be called as part of any public inquiry going forward.

### **Identify your lead spokesperson/s**

In many cases, this should be the most senior person available but you may need to be flexible about this and consider who is most appropriate. Better to have someone available at the earliest opportunity who can do the job well who will capture the right mood and tone with colleagues, the community and media. As the media interest in your employee/s death/s may continue for some time, you should consider having a bank of spokespeople to utilise.

### **Make contact with relevant partner agencies and reporting organisations**

All deaths in service for NHS health and care staff should be reported up to the appropriate NHS body and regulators for your area and also to the Department of Health and Social Care or equivalent for your nation. It will be the same for councils, police, etc. This will enable all local agencies to be aware of what you put out to the media and communities just ahead of time or at least the same time. This is also important so all agencies can support your condolence messages as you will all serve the same communities on the ground.

## 4. First hours

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### Actions at this stage:

- Inform next of kin
- Support the family/partner/carer liaison role
- Start a corporate timeline/record
- Formulate your statement
- Inform staff
- Inform Authority/Organisation leader / Chairperson and Portfolio Holder /s and any Board members, and appropriate MPs
- Confirm death of the employee to Coronavirus (COVID-19) to media and public
- Inform other stakeholders
- Prepare to receive online condolences and respond as appropriate
- Understand the investigations
- Ask for help

### Informing next of kin

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It's not helpful to confirm the death of an employee with/of Coronavirus (COVID-19) to media, staff and stakeholders until the next of kin has been advised if, for example, it is a situation where they have passed away in a healthcare setting. If the next of kin is informing your organisation of the death, they may inform you it is okay to communicate the name and some details of the employee.

Sometimes though it is necessary to confirm there has been an employee death due to Coronavirus (COVID-19) to allay difficult or damaging speculation – if this is the case you must not name the individual until the next of kin gives you explicit permission, even if others are naming the person. The chief executive (or most senior person available) and person's manager should usually send personal condolences on behalf of everyone to the family as soon as possible.

### Family Liaison Officer

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Your organisation may wish to appoint single point of contact for ongoing liaison with the family.

The colleague responsible for family liaison will be a critical link between the comms office and the next of kin. It may be most likely or appropriate that this will be someone from the HR team. It would not usually be someone from the communications team.

In the first instance you should ask the colleague for family liaison to talk to the family about media considerations and try to obtain a photograph of the deceased that the family would like to issue. Offer support in helping them formulate their own statement and pen picture and help with interviews if you are able to offer this.

### Start a corporate timeline/record

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As the various potential internal investigations begin to take shape and the need to issue information internally and, potentially, to the media become more pressing, it can be helpful to start a corporate account of what happened – a narrative by which the organisation can present a clear picture and collective understanding of the timeline of events and the description of what is known at that time. This should be updated as more information becomes known

but should only be based on fact and must not pre-empt any subsequent investigation internally or externally. In itself, it is not for public release but serves to focus the responding team on a collective position. Factual objective recording of events is essential for our other accountabilities working for or on behalf of a public body – for example, this record may later be subject of a Freedom of Information (Fol) request.

### Formulate your initial statement

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The sooner you can begin to formulate a statement the better. This will form the basis of any information you give out to staff, on social media, in a media release, media interviews and information you give to other audiences. Focus on providing the who, what, when and where rather than the how – you must not prejudice possible investigations. **Content should cover the emotions of the sadness of employees and the organisation, condolences, praise for the employee and also thanks:**

- Sorrow for what has happened and compassion for those affected
- Praise the work of your staff / care staff and staff
- Promise to look after people in the aftermath, internally investigate and fully support any subsequent investigations.

There's no formula and prepared statements will lack factual accuracy and may come across as cold or insincere. A script isn't necessary but heartfelt honesty and condolences are. **Some of the phrases listed below may give you a head start when words are harder to find than usual.**

- Tragic day for XX Trust/Council/ Police / Fire and Rescue Service.
- Deep regret and huge sadness.
- We are devastated at the loss of our colleague and friend.
- Poignant reminder of the danger those who work on the frontline of our public services put themselves in to help others with Coronavirus (COVID-19).
- Commitment and courage to duty.
- Deeply saddened.
- Incredibly difficult time for their family / families/loved ones and we send our heartfelt condolences.
- Sympathy, thoughts and prayers are with the affected families.
- Thank communities for their kind words and praise ongoing support and remind of the key messages of 'Stay Home, Save Lives' or as appropriate at that time.

### Informing staff

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In many cases involving Coronavirus (COVID-19), it is likely that the family will inform the organisation that their family member has died. However, there may be times (particularly in a healthcare setting) where the organisation inform the family that their relative has died. It is worth considering an appropriate order for informing those connected to the person in those circumstances. As events unfold try to think the mantra "family, staff, stakeholder". Which means telling family and staff before others. Telling those who worked directly with the deceased (albeit virtually) may help provide the initial support in dealing with resulting trauma. A senior officer should personally contact close colleagues of the person who died and offer to contact next of kin.

### Your primary stakeholders

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You should tell your primary stakeholders before they see the news on the media. Primary stakeholders include your Authority Leader / Chair and Members/Portfolio Holder, Chief Executive of the health trust/provider, Chair of Health Trust/health provider and board members, Elected Mayor, Police and Crime Commissioner, Chief Fire and Rescue Advisor, groups such as senior officer associations and unions where relevant. These people may warrant/appreciate a direct telephone call. Secondary stakeholders can be sent an email addressed from your Chief Exec.

#### This may include:

- All local authority leaders and chief executives
- MPs/MEP, community leaders
- Church leaders and local dignitaries (e.g. Mayor)

Expect a flurry of return emails wishing your Chief Executive and the organisation well – an offer of helping collate these and providing a draft standard response may be welcomed. Consider using your social media channels to thank all those who send condolences and good wishes.

### Managing news and social media

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The pace at which you have to tell staff and confirm information to media will depend on whether the next of kin are aware and what their wishes are.

Be proactive with social media speculation – keep talking, but be honest and don't be afraid to say that you are unable to answer questions about named individuals if there are legitimate reasons you can't (for example, formal notification and family wishes have not yet been dealt with). If there is no media on the scene, social media comment is low or non-existent, if people cannot see what is going on, the chances are it will be in your gift to determine when you announce the news to media and social media proactively. Get your spokesperson to record a piece to camera expressing condolences which you can then share to media outlets and use on your own channels.

### Social media monitoring – online condolences

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Monitor and add comments where you can. Keep records of all that you post and all that is said on social. It will be a useful record of what you have done and at a later date may be of interest for the family. If your website can host it, set up an online book of condolence. If not, use your Facebook account to do this. Online memory walls may also be set up that can later be passed on to the family and work well on staff intranets.

### Commencement of any subsequent HSE, Rep Body and internal investigations

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*This section may not be applicable for Coronavirus (COVID-19) as it is likely to be registered by a medic as the or a cause of the death. However, it is still useful to be aware of the following:* Depending on your role in your organisation, you may be required to attend initial meetings with the organisations charged with carrying out any resultant investigations. Listening first hand to the complexity that the investigations will bring to the organisation can help you to frame what you say. However, if you're not privileged to attend these meetings make sure you are briefed on the different investigations; who is leading them; what they are looking at; their timelines and relative importance. This is crucial if you are to ensure that your communication output does not prejudice the investigations in any way.



### Ask for help

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If you need help from other communication teams, do not feel scared to ask for it. You may have mutual aid arrangements with neighbours or may want to approach CIPR Local Public Services Group, LGComms, APComm, FirePRO or health communication network committee members for assistance. The immediate response can be draining but you will be under increased pressure for a number of weeks following. Those that have sadly been through this process would also be willing to offer advice. Get some rest!

## 5. First week

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### Actions at this stage:

- Support the family
- Keep staff informed
- Be welfare aware
- Respectful events of condolence and remembrance, in line with any social distancing and stay at home restrictions
- Investigation weighs heavy
- Media interest will be steady but will wane

### Support the family

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Keep in touch with your family liaison lead and continue to offer help with media liaison if it is needed. If media interest is high you may need to be more encouraging with the family to issue a statement or be interviewed and explain how the message can be better managed by working with the media.

### Keep staff informed

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Set up a means of keeping your staff informed about what is going on using trusted methods. For example, if you have a weekly newsletter consider producing it on a daily basis. If staff use an intranet for self-briefing make sure this is frequently updated. Try to collate all information that needs to go to staff so that it can be coordinated and issued at the same time – too much at too many times can seem like you are bombarding people. If your Service is having a daily meeting – ask for staff communication to be a standing agenda item.

### Updates may include:

- Confirmation of what is known about the death of the colleague from Coronavirus (COVI(D-19)
- Tributes and comments received
- Information about trauma care or counselling services available to employees
- Details of any investigations
- Information about virtual books of condolences/collections
- Message from family members
- Instruction on any flag lowering, if have organisational flags

Dedicated internal communication arrangements will need to be in place for the duration of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. There may need to be a weekly update if there are a number of deaths of employees. Listen out for what staff want – they may want more or may want a break from constant messaging and we should use audience insight to inform what we do and how. Senior management team visibility will be important in reassuring people that the leaders of the organisation care and are in control. Circumstances may mean that this isn't possible in person but use virtual alternatives to achieve as close to a similar experience as possible.

At some point, following the initial communication on communicating the death of a colleague from Coronavirus (COVID-19) speculation and internal discussion may become concerning and it may be necessary to issue clear guidance about the importance of not compromising any subsequent investigations. Being clear on what will and won't be given out about the death of the employee/s and resulting investigation/s can help manage expectations. Differentiate between that and staff's ability to discuss and raise concerns about wider issues as there should be no attempt to gag staff from talking about immediate issues that need addressing in working arrangements.

### **Be welfare aware**

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You will need to work closely with your HR leads/ to make sure staff affected clearly know what support is on offer for them and how they can access this. Staff will expect the utmost care and compassion at this time. Failure to deliver this will be remembered at a later date.

### **Respectful events**

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You may have an online book of condolence. Hard copy books of condolence can and would usually be placed at key locations for people to sign if they wish. If hard copy condolence books are something that can be done, if restrictions are lifted and it is deemed appropriate, locations for placing them will include the usual base of the employee, headquarters and other locations for your staff and communities to access books easily. Arrangements need to be made to purchase these books, if this is appropriate and within any restrictions, and for people to be responsible for looking after them.

Your service may have a policy on flag flying (most likely local authorities, police and fire). Make sure you issue guidance on this as soon as you can and ensure all work locations act upon it, if they can. Let your communities know what you are doing with flags if you have them and are using them or not as a symbolic function in relation to the death of the employee/s.

People may wish to make a financial donation to the family and or the service which cared for them or which they worked for. The family liaison representative should discuss this with the family as it can be done via a charity or directly to the family. Online donations can be accepted by setting up a suitable fundraising or payment platform. A week after a single death, staff may wish to observe a minute silence. If there are a number of deaths, it may be appropriate to do a weekly minute's (or longer as appropriate) silence.

### **Ongoing media interest**

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Media interest, although likely to be steep in the first 24 hours will quickly wane, certainly from a national perspective, and particularly if deaths are not multiple. You should focus your efforts on maintaining information links with your usual key media – your local BBC station, commercial radio and daily/weekly newspapers and respective online media channels. They will be the channels more interested in the follow-up to the death of the employee from Coronavirus (COVID-19) and will welcome anything new you may be able to offer them. Having a plan to withdraw from media activity between the death and funeral will give you time to focus on internal communication which is more important than media at this stage.

## 6. Funeral arrangements

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The decision on what shape and form the funeral is to take is usually down to the deceased family/loved ones. However, a number of factors will limit this during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) situation including restrictions on numbers at gatherings and venue closures. The family liaison officer or single point of contact would usually discuss arrangements with the family. They may want to have a formal service funeral or an entirely private event or a private funeral with a memorial service at a later date when movement restrictions are lifted. Full ceremonial funerals are the norm for a number of public services but will not be possible in times of restricted movement and contact. Talk to colleagues / teams responsible for your organisation's ceremonial functions (if not part of the communications department) and discuss what usually happens and how these functions may take place in future times as memorial events rather than at the time of the funeral.

**Some of the areas communications can offer support if it would have been a ceremonial funeral, in liaison with the family, include:**

- Producing the Order of Service
- Helping to compile the Eulogy
- Communicating arrangements to any staff who have been invited by the family/loved ones to attend, in line with funeral attendance number laws, including seating arrangements and any protocol
- Drafting, issuing and managing invitations
- Profile of the deceased and written tributes from key individuals
- Creating a photographic record, which can be shared with employees on approval of the family/loved ones

## 7. Beginning recovery/investigation phases

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**Actions at this stage:**

- Sensitive handling of any further commemorative/memorial events, when restrictions have been lifted
- Careful handling of a 'return to business' state
- Be aware of any developing blame culture
- Keep up-to-date with any investigations

**Returning to business**

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Internally, the organisation will continue to function but your service/team area will need to be sensitive to the fact that your culture will change significantly.

**Potential key messages may include:**

- As we get over the initial shock and painful grief, the best way we can honour our dead colleagues is to continue to provide our very best service to keep the public safe.
- We are devastated by the deaths.
- We are carrying out our own internal investigation but are fully assisting HSE (if relevant to your circumstances). Need to find out what happened so all in the health / local government / police / fire communities can learn lessons.

### Memorial events

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As time goes on, there will be other events that crop up which will require communication consideration. These should always be focused on family first and then staff and unions/ appropriate other organisations before external promotion.

#### For example:

- Addition to any memorial board at HQ and/or service/team site
- Creation of a statue, memorial garden or other permanent feature, as deemed appropriate
- Closure and handover of any digital/hard copy books of remembrance and funds raised to family or charity etc.

### Be aware of any developing blame culture

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It's only natural that people will be looking for someone to blame but this can be really harmful to investigations and ongoing internal relationships. You may need to reiterate the message about not impeding an internal or other investigation/s.

#### Specifically look out for the types of blame emerging as you may need to counter them:

- Blame on the service for poor training, or PPE equipment
- Blame on staff themselves for their own actions
- Blame on senior colleagues for decision making
- Blame on those caring for the person or who came into contact with them in the working environment

### Keep up-to-date with investigations

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#### There may be a number of investigations:

- Health and Safety Executive – into whether the organisation has breached Health and Safety law.
- Internal investigation – possibly undertaken by another Service/area on your behalf into any internal failings.
- Trade Union investigation.

It is helpful to make sure that you are kept up-to-date with timelines and possible outcomes or developments in order for you to prepare dedicated communication strategies.

The Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) Public Services Group released this guidance April 2020 as part of its COVID-19 advisory group and draws on the FirePRO Death in Service toolkit released in 2014.