

COVID-19: The Importance of Opposition Leadership

**Dr Stephanie Snape, New Leadership Foundation
& LGA Associate**

Format & Approach

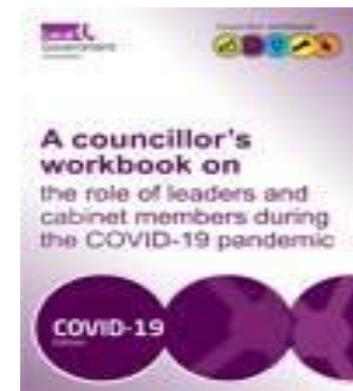
- LGA have produced two **pre-recorded webinars** on the role of opposition during the COVID-19 response & recovery:
 - The importance of opposition leadership
 - What effective opposition looks like
 - **Purpose**
 - to stimulate debate on the importance of the contribution opposition councillors & groups make
 - to support opposition groups in their work on COVID-19
 - **Format**
-

Leadership in an emergency

- Leadership is perceived as crucial to address & manage a crisis successfully
- The public look to political leaders for reassurance, quick decisions, excellent communication
- But what about opposition leaders and groups on councils? What roles should/are they playing?

Political leadership in an emergency:

- Lead decisively
- Re-frame & adapt
- Recognising complexity
- Effective team management
- Collaborate
- Actively communicate
- Build resilience



Central dilemma facing opposition leaders in emergencies

Adopt a co-operative, collaborative approach and lose 'clear blue water' between you & those in power?

Adopt a competitive, critical approach & be seen as undermining unity & resolve and 'playing politics' during a crisis?

...the opposition continuum...

Incorporation	Collaboration	Competition	Confrontation
<p>Opposition group/s relationship to the controlling group/s is one of partnership to the point of incorporation</p>	<p>Collaboration & co-operation set tone of opposition & controlling group relationship</p>	<p>Competitive relationship between opposition & controlling group/s</p>	<p>Adversarial & confrontational relationship between opposition & controlling group/s</p>
<p>Opposition groups partially or largely incorporated by controlling group/s</p> <p>Working as close partners. To outsiders it may be difficult to distinguish between the opposition party/s and controlling group/s</p> <p>These groups often achieve their goals through deals with the controlling group/s</p>	<p>Opposition group/s cooperate with controlling party/parties over key aspects of policy</p> <p>In other aspects – where there are policy differences – constructive opposition approaches are adopted</p> <p>Opposition party/parties may emphasise a value-set which is non-partisan</p>	<p>Opposition seek ‘clear blue water’ between their group & controlling groups on key issues</p> <p>Competition is not hostile or adversarial in style</p> <p>Production of alternative policies, budgets, manifestos</p> <p>Wide use of opposition strategies & platforms but scrutiny not used as opposition platform</p>	<p>Routine & vocal opposition to controlling group decisions & policies</p> <p>All internal & external platforms used to further opposition e.g. using scrutiny internally & the media externally</p> <p>Production of alternative policies, budgets, manifestos</p>

Source: Dr Stephanie Snape, New Leadership Foundation

Restrictions & new relationships during COVID-19

Restrictions to opposition role

- emergency powers in place
- many meetings in March-May cancelled/postponed
- changed officer-member relations e.g. one email ‘entry’ to officer side re case work & other queries

Diversity in initial experiences

- variation across authorities in opposition group experiences, access & involvement
-

Role of Opposition 1

***Democracy demands
an opposition party***

Ben Manski

***Democracy can only be measured
on the existence of an opposition***

Paul Henningsen

- Provide 'checks & balance' on executive powers – key element of local democracy
 - Provide challenge & contestability to the development & implementation of council policy
 - Asking powerful questions which probe controlling group/s policies & delivery
 - Hold controlling group/s to account publicly & visibly
 - Holding individual executive members/cabinet members to account
 - Monitor effective implementation of policy
 - Improving policy & decision-making
-

Role of Opposition 2

- Propose amendments to council policy
- Develop alternative policies & budgets
- Ensure controlling group/s work in the best interest of the residents and other communities
- Ensure controlling group/s work across the whole authority area
- Advocating for the communities the opposition represent
- Amplifying voices of parts of community not often heard
- Scrutinising the impact of national government policy on local councils

Which of these are appropriate or inappropriate for local opposition groups during the COVID-19 response?

COVID-19: Role of opposition

All of the opposition roles are relevant for example...

- Emergency powers concentrates decision-making powers further – could be argued that increases importance of active opposition
 - Monitoring implementation of policy is a key role during response to an emergency
 - Asking powerful, probing questions can be an effective opposition approach during an emergency
 - Given that political geography can be marked in local politics, advocating for opposition communities & groups could be critical
-

Reflection exercise: the opposition group

Consider the following questions:

1. How has your opposition group been impacted by your council's COVID-19 response?
 2. How has your opposition group responded?
 3. What challenges have the group faced?
 4. What opportunities have presented themselves?
 5. What resources can you call on as a group?
 6. What has your group learnt about opposition during COVID-19?
-

Reflection exercise: the opposition leader/councillor

Consider the following questions:

1. How has your role as opposition group leader/councillor been impacted by your council's COVID-19 response?
 2. How have you responded?
 3. What challenges have you faced?
 4. What opportunities have presented themselves?
 5. What have you learnt as an opposition group leader/councillor?
-