

COVID-19 Outbreak - Guide for Opposition Councillors

Introduction

The aim of this short guide is to provide some practical advice to Conservative councillors who are in opposition on how to fulfil their vital role effectively during this unprecedented crisis.

Usually, the role of all opposition members is to scrutinise and question the work of an administration. However, these are not normal times and during an emergency such as COVID-19, all members, regardless of party affiliation, should aim to work collaboratively to support their communities.

Of course, that does not mean that an administration should not be properly and effectively scrutinised where you believe that it is not acting appropriately, or indeed failing to act.

However, even more than usual, any criticism should be evidence-based and expressed in an appropriate tone.

The Role of the Councillor During a Crisis

During the current pandemic, councils and councillors are acting as the fourth emergency service by supporting the national effort to minimise the spread of infection, protecting the most vulnerable, supporting local businesses, and bringing communities together.

Councillors, as local political and community leaders, have a key role to play in ensuring that their council is responding effectively to the crisis and planning ahead to the recovery phase.

They are also in a unique position to work with the voluntary sector and other key partners to provide and coordinate help to those who most need it.

Practical Tips for an Opposition Councillor

The following are some practical tips for you in your role as an opposition councillor:

- Keep in regular contact with residents, local community groups, charities, care homes and hospices to ensure that you have a full understanding of issues that need to be raised.
- Take an active role in COVID-19 local Task Force Response Groups that have been set up by the Council, local partners or residents. You can find out more about these Groups via the council or your local community Facebook page.
- Taking into account your own individual circumstances and risk factors, consider helping volunteers providing local support such as delivering food parcels or medicines to vulnerable people.
- Where applicable, work with all other tiers of local government in your area to ensure that information is shared and action taken.
- Where applicable, work closely with your local Conservative MP(s) and Association(s) and share resources (for example, if possible, co-ordinate your casework with the MP's caseworker).
- Stay in touch with any officers that may connect to your ward e.g. if there is an officer champion for your ward.
- Do not hesitate to raise non-coronavirus issues with the council that residents have brought up with you. While during the current situation the council will mainly focus on COVID-19 issues, remember you are elected to represent your residents.

Helpful Links

If you are looking for more information or would like to know how other councils are creatively responding to current circumstances, please visit the [LGA's Covid-19 good council practice webpage](#).

The Conservative Councillors' Association has also recently launched it's [COVID-19 Heroes page](#) which provides some good ideas.

When undertaking any of the above tasks, please make sure you do not have any symptoms of coronavirus, as you need to prioritise your health and those who rely on you personally.

Cross-party Working during the Pandemic

You should consider reaching out to councillors from other political groups who are involved in emergency response tasks and offer any necessary assistance.

If the council proposes an initiative or consultation that you are not comfortable with, instead of simply objecting to the changes or accepting it without question, request time-based sunset clause or make positive alternative suggestions.

Please also do not be afraid to ask for information that you have a right to know from your council officers. They have a responsibility to support and work for all members and not only the administration.

Keeping in Touch with Residents

Lockdown obviously means you cannot campaign or stay in touch with residents via traditional methods, but you can still communicate effectively.

Here are some practical suggestions:

- As a ward councillor, write a thank you letter to COVID-19 community volunteers in your area to show them your appreciation.
- Regularly post stories and updates on your personal Facebook page about the things you are doing.
- Update your residents via Twitter.
- Share local news and official announcements via social media platforms.
- Work closely with the local media and, if requested, provide comment.
- Proactively raise issues highlighted by residents, businesses, etc, with the council.
- Use social media to link residents to voluntary and community groups as well as highlighting how they can receive assistance from the council.

LGA Conservative Group Support

We do hope that this short guide provides some useful information.

If you have any further question, please do not hesitate to [email us](#).

[Cllr Robert Alden](#), LGA Deputy Chairman and Leader of the Conservative Opposition Group on Birmingham City Council, supported us in the writing of this guide and is also available to provide more guidance if necessary.