A councillor's workbook on

the role of leaders and cabinet members during the COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19

Edition

Foreword

The scale of the challenge that councils are currently facing requires strong, responsive and resilient leadership. To address this, the Local Government Association (LGA) is refocusing its leadership offer so that senior councillors can continue to access learning resources and share experiences with our peers. This includes ensuring that we have access to online leadership tools, like this workbook, to support us in our vital role in the national effort to respond to COVID-19.

We are clearly living through unprecedented times. Everything we currently do in local government to support our communities, work in new partnerships and keep our staff safe is in some way new and uncharted territory.

As cabinet members we have an extra responsibility to ensure that we build the best possible relationships with our senior officers, entire workforce and all councillors to ensure that they are kept fully informed and that we know about the personal challenges that they may be facing. We have a responsibility to make sure that those who are either self-isolating or are shielded are not excluded and isolated more than they need to be.

This new workbook contains transferable learning that we have all acquired from the experience of living through the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as new skills and ways of working which will resonate with whatever 'new normal' the country and local government finds itself in.

Councillor Judi Billing
Lead Member for Leadership, LGA Improvement and Innovation Board

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1. Introduction

This workbook examines the role of leading members in responding to the COVID-19 emergency. The intended audience for the workbook is council leaders, elected mayors, cabinet members and deputies. It is a learning and development aid to support work on the COVID-19 response and recovery.

The workbook has been designed to support leading members in working through a range of pivotal issues:

- exploring the **key issues facing local councils and councillors** in organising their ongoing response and working with partners
- reviewing **how local councils have responded to the COVID-19 emergency** and its far-reaching impact on all aspects of local government
- the **critical role played by local political leaders**, including considering appropriate political leadership styles
- considering the purpose and functioning of **the cabinet and individual cabinet members** in response to COVID-19
- examining changes to **governance arrangements**, decision-making and meetings
- exploring developments in **community leadership** and community resilience
- recognising the very 'personal' side of COVID-19 and **how councillors look after themselves and others during the initial emergency and beyond**.

Content is based on information gathered through interviews with council leaders, elected mayors and cabinet members. A questionnaire was also sent out to leaders and cabinet members who had recently attended LGA leadership programmes.

The workbook is designed to prompt reflection, insight and to identify actions to improve practice and support your work in responding to the crisis and beyond. The format will encourage you to consider your role as you work through key issues, case studies and exercises; to reflect on how the material relates to your own approach, your local situation, the officers you work with, the people you serve and the council you represent.

In practical terms, the workbook can be used as a standalone learning tool but additional information and links are provided. You need not complete it all in one session and you may prefer to work at your own pace. If you are 'dipping into' the workbook, the contents page provides a good guide to allow you to find the right section and sub-section. (Note that guidance for leaders and leadership is contained in Section 4 onwards).

In working through the material you will encounter a number of features designed to help you think about your role in the COVID-19 response. These features are represented by the symbols shown below:

Guidance – this is used to indicate guidance, research, quotations, explanations and definitions that you may find helpful.

Challenges – these are questions or queries raised in the text which ask you to reflect on your role or approach – in essence, they are designed to be thought-provokers.

Case studies – these are 'pen pictures' of approaches used by councils elsewhere.

Hints and tips– a selection of good practices that you may find useful.

Useful links – these are signposts to sources of further information that may help with principles, processes, methods and approaches.

2. Emerging key issues for leading members

Table 1 below summarises the key issues that leading members, engaged in the production of this workbook, have identified from their experience of the immediate response to COVID-19. The topics and questions raised by those members are examined in more detail as you go through the workbook.

Nature of the COVID-19 emergency and need for political oversight and leadership	The nature of the COVID-19 emergency – global, country-wide, contagious and long lasting, with uncertain recovery processes is not a typical emergency. The emergency powers have been traditionally seen as led by blue light services addressing more localised incidents. A number of interviewees commented that a long-lasting emergency required political oversight and leadership. Some argued that this might be a lesson for the future in designing emergency plans for such long term emergencies.
Reach of COVID-19 across wide range of services	COVID-19 has impacted all local government services to a greater or lesser extent, with wide-ranging repercussions for the council, community and partners. The scale of impact continues to raise questions of unintended consequences, capacity to respond and organisational resilience over the long term.
Balance between immediate response and longer-term planning and recovery	Emergency planning good practice encourages developing recovery plans from the start. Many councils have already started planning for recovery – while still responding to some of the immediate effects. But when is the right time to shift to an even greater emphasis on recovery?
Role of leading councillors	Although emergency planning powers see immediate decision-making formally resting with chief executives, political leadership is needed. Council leaders and elected mayors have a key role in shaping and communicating COVID-19 responses as part of their leadership of place and communities. Leading councillors raised that there is no 'off the shelf' blue print of how to lead in such exceptional circumstances.
The role of the cabinet and cabinet members	What role should the cabinet and cabinet members take as we move from immediate crisis to recovery? In many councils cabinets are continuing to meet informally – and increasingly formally – through online platforms. Cabinet members continue to work with their directorate officers through remote working.
Decision-making and meetings	Governance and decision-making have been temporarily changed. This has led to councils postponing annual general meetings. Some usual meetings have been cancelled in the short term and councils are increasingly moving to online meetings.

Member/officer relations	Effective partnership working between members and officers is critical to responding to COVID-19 and the recovery. But emergency powers have altered the dynamic of decision-making. How do you ensure effective relationships with clear roles and responsibilities?
Council finances and COVID-19	A significant concern across local government is the financial implications for local councils. Responding to COVID-19 has brought twin financial pressures: increased spending in some areas (eg housing rough sleepers and social care); and often marked reductions in income from fees and charges (eg closure of leisure centres, reduced or no income from car parking). In the short term this has produced cash flow issues for many councils; in the long term lack of certainty over finances might inhibit recovery. Being aware of the financial implications for their own councils, is crucial for leading members.
Two tier working – cross border working – shared services	There have been reports of varied experiences of working across two tier government – where emergency planning powers for the pandemic often reside largely with the county. This raises the issue of how to ensure effective collaboration in two tier working, in councils with shared management arrangements and in the range of shared services operating across local government.
Partnership working	Alongside local councils, many key partners have been affected significantly by COVID-19 including NHS, arms-length organisations, police and other emergency services, education partners, local businesses and the community and voluntary sector. This raises the issue of councils' responding flexibly and quickly to the changing circumstances affecting their partners.
Community response and resilience	A key area of partnership working has been how local councils, councillors, the voluntary sector and volunteers have been working together to respond to the emergency. This has in most cases forged very positive relationships and is something that councils and councillors will want to build on. What is the role of leading members in this? What role should non-executive councillors play?
Working with national government	Experiences during the immediate response stage suggest there are real learning opportunities for improving working between national and local government. For example, in providing financial surety and recognising councils' role in organising community responses. How can local councils help national government better understand the work that councils do?
Personal resilience and member welfare	The nature of the emergency – with all affected – means that leading members have a role in ensuring the welfare of other councillors. There is a key emphasis on 'looking after others' but also taking care of your own personal resilience. What challenges does this raise?

Challenge

Use Table 1 above to reflect upon your own council's response and the challenges and key issues that have emerged. Consider the questions below and respond in the space provided.

• What are the key challenges that your council has faced in addressing COVID-19?

• What is the key challenge that you face in your leadership role?

3. Response of local government to COVID-19

Immediate responsiveness of local councils

The immediate response of local councils has been incredibly quick, responsive and impressive. Councils have stepped up to support their communities and delivered at pace. For example:

- emergency powers and plans enacted
- government guidance implemented
- home working arrangements put in place
- governance arrangements amended – meetings postponed or transferred to virtual formats

- major service changes undertaken, with thousands of staff being redeployed
- the financial response was rapid – including swift implementation and delivery of the Government grants to support businesses.

Common initial council changes

Although there have been variations between councils on their responses to COVID-19, Table 2 sets out the initial common changes. (Variations will be due to differing local circumstances, contractual arrangements, finances and type of authority).

Table 2: Common initial council response

Emergency planning	• Emergency planning powers enacted • Adaptation of governance and decision-making processes
Protection of 'key' services	• Continuation of main refuse collection services (some councils have discontinued green waste services) • Keeping open parks and green spaces where possible
Closure of services	• Closure of leisure centres, libraries, museums, waste disposal sites • Car parking changes regarding charging and enforcement
Protecting vulnerable and community resilience	• Identification, protection and support to vulnerable – use of community hubs – working with community groups/community and voluntary sector
Home working	• 70-90 per cent of local council workers home working (varying from council to council) • Transferring and re-training staff to support key COVID-19 services
Supporting local businesses	• Distribution of information about new government grant schemes to local businesses and paying grants to businesses
Communication of key information	• Range of communication methods used to ensure key information is sent out quickly to residents, businesses, community and voluntary sector • Constantly updating relevant information

COVID-19: Leading the council's response

Andrew Day Leader, Warwick District Council

In this emergency as the council Leader I've focused on giving confidence to the team, making clear and timely decisions – driving for outcomes rather than political advantage. All our operations have been thrown into disarray with over 90 per cent of the officers moved to work from home and councillors being formally disengaged from decision-making/scrutiny roles. At the outset, it was vital for me to be calm, to listen and reflect. Then give clear direction on immediate tasks. While always scanning to try and identify where the next issue was on the horizon.

The hardest part initially was to fully embrace the new reality. To put to one side all the cherished projects we'd worked so hard on over the past year, to bring together and give full attention to the mundane routine services our residents rely on. (PS: Council unanimously passed resolution on 26 February to go for a climate action council tax referendum, only to let it fall because of the emergency – but, hopefully we'll revisit in 2021!)

I've spent most of my time communicating within and without the council. Residents are recognising afresh just how important the council is in leading a positive and constructive response to an emergency. My role is primarily as 'chief communicator', even when the messages haven't been popular, such as suspending the green bin service. As Leader, I've tried to avoid hyperventilation in all communications or sounding like I'm now 'Churchill'.

A collaborative, cross party approach is essential. I've invited the other group leaders to join all executive meetings. Our cross-party work on climate action has helped build a good level of trust and cooperation, so this is working well so far. This approach has thrown up real opportunities in planning for the recovery; examining what council projects can be advanced without political gameplay to create more business confidence, job creation, etc. I've also had to be firm and reinforce acceptable behaviour, ie chastening one member of my group for being politically mischievous and even standing down one of the portfolio holders for not playing as part of the team. Not easy, but essential to reinforce effective team work.

We've a very experienced chief executive, who I've also sought to proactively support. Our kick-off morning calls have been effective to clear key decisions, focusing on daily challenges and ensure a shared approach to priorities. I feel very fortunate to have been given first rate advice and clear guidance, even when I've not always wanted to hear it.

This is not for the faint hearted. All I do is council business, 16 hours a day, seven days a week. I'm not alone in this response, but I worry just how sustainable this is.

This crisis highlights the importance of effective local government. It begs the question why councils have been under resourced in recent years. I also believe that the Government will seek to re-organise local government on the back of this crisis, but doubt we'll get the financial investment needed to strengthen local services. But that is for tomorrow, just now I'm determined to demonstrate that this council can be trusted to 'roll the sleeves up' and get the job done.

Buckingham Council have produced a document which sets out the key aspects of the council's response to COVID-19, including best practice examples. It provides a good summary of the breadth of work that councils are undertaking. They are updating this document periodically.

www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/buckinghamshirereport.pdf

The far-reaching changes to local government services and organisation will throw up 'unintended consequences'. These are unforeseen results of change and innovation. They may be positive or negative, but they need to be identified and may require a response. For example, the low percentages of vulnerable children attending school was not predicted but raises a significant safeguarding issue.

When implementing widespread change find a way to capture these consequences.

- Ask members and volunteers to identify and to report back unexpected results.

- Ask frontline workers in the same way.

- Use corporate teams, processes and cabinet meetings to identify unexpected impacts in related services.

There is more information on the incredible work undertaken by councils and councillors during the COVID-19 emergency on our website: www.local.gov.uk/our-support/coronavirus-information-councils/covid-19-good-council-practice

The reach of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic is – at least temporarily – having a profound impact on many aspects of local government. Figure 1 provides an illustration of the 'long reach' of the pandemic into local government functioning. "There is no part of our work that is not affected" (cabinet member)

The Long Reach of Covid-19

Local Government & Covid-19

Democratic Services
- 'Pausing' formal meetings in short-term
- Working to move to online meetings in the medium-term
- Working through constitutional implications

Elections
- May elections in some authorities cancelled

Emergency Planning
- Emergency powers and plans enacted

Environment
- Protecting the key service of refuse collection
- Suspension of green waste service in some areas
- Closure of waste disposal sites
- Changes to street cleaning – some staff moved to refuse collection

Cemeteries, Crematoria & Registration Services
- Widespread changes – some services closed
- Reconfiguration of death services

Planning & Licensing
- Remote working for staff
- Planning and Licensing committees 'paused' in short-term
- Decrease in income from planning applications in short-term
- Identifying key planning applications to protect and prioritise to support business recovery

Transport & Highways
- Some schemes delayed

Climate Change
- Some evidence that lockdown is impacting the climate e.g. reductions in air pollution
- Some councils are putting on hold climate change actions due to finances

Human Resources & Workforce Planning
- Move to home-working
- Health and safety guidance and procedures
- Potential freeze in recruitment
- Staff moved to support key Covid-19 services (re-training)

Information Technology
- Supporting home working
- Working to support online meetings

Public Health
- Key service supporting Covid-19 response

Community Resilience & Volunteering
- Creation of networks and processes to protect the vulnerable
- Co-ordination and financing volunteering schemes
- Support to ensure food distribution to those in need
- Mutual aid

Mental Health
- Concerns about mental health impact
- Some councils working to strengthen local provision in this area

Domestic Violence
- Evidence of significant increase in rates of domestic violence
- Councils strengthening support

Social Care
- Boosting number of care workers
- Protecting vulnerable adults
- Working with care homes

Children's Services
- Supporting vulnerable children
- Supporting school closures and remote learning, particularly for SEND children and those with EHCPs

Libraries
- Libraries closed
- Some outreach services extended

Cultural & Leisure Services
- Leisure centres, museums, theatres closed
- Financial support provided to some cultural venues

Housing & Homelessness
- Some local housing schemes 'paused'
- Housing rough sleepers
- Supporting council tenants suffering financial hardship

Town Centres, High Streets & Markets
- Huge impact on town centres, highstreets & markets
- Income from commercial rent & fees & charges impacted
- Longer term impact on retail uncertain

Economic development & Business Support
- Impact on local businesses
- Re-shaping regeneration plans
- Work to support local businesses

Local Finances
- Processing central government business grants
- Impact on levels of income re fees and change (car parking, planning, leisure centres)
- Incurring additional unexpected costs e.g. housing rough sleepers
- Impact on investment portfolio

Source: Stephanie Snape, New Leadership Foundation 2020

Recovery and the 'new normal'

Recovery work is already taking place in many authorities. For example, councils are working on how to support local economies and business recovery through ensuring key planning decisions are not delayed; protecting progress where possible on regeneration projects; and providing support to businesses.

Councils are also considering how to maximise the opportunities which have developed from the emergency. For example, how to continue to capture the 'bottom up' volunteering energy and activity that has grown or emerged in many communities.

There is also the question of the 'new normal'. What will a post-COVID-19 authority look like? How will it organise and undertake its strategic leadership, community leadership and leadership of place role? What features of the COVID-19 period should councils plan to retain? For example, will the necessity of remote and agile working and virtual meetings accelerate this style of working post pandemic?

No one blueprint for COVID-19 response

Although there are common responses across local government, there is no one blueprint for councils and councillors to use. Each council has to develop its own response – using its emergency plans – but also adapting to the specific nature of the pandemic and to its own local context and circumstances. There are many factors shaping a response:

• Style and approach of local political leaders	• -Type of authority and powers
• Capacity and capabilities of officer-side to respond	• Socio-economic context of council area
• Nature of member/ officer relations	• Demographics
• Nature of local emergency plans	• History of partnership working and collaboration
• and processes	• Experience of emergency situations
• Financial capacity and resilience	• Level of community resilience and activity

Councils also had different starting points going into the emergency. Those with effective political leadership, trusting partnerships with senior officers and some experience of emergency situations could have an advantage. Good collaborative relations with local public agencies, businesses, the community and voluntary sector and communities provides a solid base for a 'joined-up' response. Councils with the financial capacity to respond in both the short and long term provides greater opportunities. Finance is covered in more detail on page 30.

Challenge

Consider the following questions
in terms of recovery planning.

Write brief notes in the space below.

1. What recovery plans and processes are in place in your council/portfolio area?

2. How flexible are these plans? Have your undertaken horizon scanning, taking into account different possible futures? For example, an extended post-peak stage with recurrent waves of disease activity?

3. Which elements of the COVID-19 local council response do you want to plan to retain post pandemic? How?

4. What have you already learnt and implemented during the COVID-19 emergency?

4. Role of leaders and elected mayors

Importance of political leadership

The response of local government to COVID-19 demonstrates the high currency of effective political leadership during emergencies. Local political leaders can add significant value through:

- providing elected, legitimate leadership to a council's response

- providing the public and partners with reassurance

- communicating important information and messages to a range of audiences

- using their wide networks and trusted relationships across their council areas to ensure effective coordination and collaboration

- using political skills and experience to understand the political implications of decisions and inform policy making

- leading the necessary re-prioritisation for recovery planning

- mobilising their political and governmental networks to raise issues with other agencies and national government.

Case study

The leader/chief executive partnership at Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council

Councillor Ken Rhatigan and **Mel Barrett**

Arguably the relationship between the leader and the chief executive is the most important relationship in a council in terms of translating policy priorities into delivery, and setting the tone for the rest of the organisation. The importance of this relationship is even greater in an extended emergency situation as with COVID-19.

Councillor Ken Rhatigan, the Leader of the council, is mindful that much of the emergency response related to COVID-19 is operational in nature and led by officers. At the same time Mel Barrett, the Chief Executive, is very mindful that the Leader is politically accountable for the actions of the council and that his administration must have sufficient time to properly prepare for necessary service changes, taking political ownership for those changes, and developing appropriate lines to take.

In addition to the regular scheduled meetings between the Leader and Chief Executive, if anything arises out of the Chief Executive's daily 30-minute COVID-19 'Sitrep' meeting, which provides an update on what is happening across the organisation and emerging pressures requiring rapid decision making, there is early and direct dialogue between the two. In addition, the Chief Executive and his team support the Leader in providing an informal weekly COVID-19 update to his cabinet where it is the first item on the agenda. An emphasis on open communication and high levels of trust between the Leader and Chief Executive has provided a high degree of confidence to officers which has facilitated rapid decision making and implementation of a number of urgent decisions required to be taken to support residents and businesses during the current crisis.

'Twin tracking'

Many councils have developed a system of 'twin tracking' when it comes to policy and decision-making. The emergency planning systems and processes are enacted and operating; empowering officers to take immediate actions. Politicians have needed to give space for officers to undertake their work effectively.

But alongside the emergency powers processes, elected mayors, council leaders and cabinet members are operating modified leadership and cabinet processes.

This testifies to the importance of political leadership during a prolonged emergency situation. Cabinets continue to operate although under different protocols, often with more informal meetings and through remote meeting platforms.

There has been a further concentration of decision-making within executive models in the immediate response to the pandemic. The mayor/leader and chief executive relationship is at the heart of COVID-19 responsiveness; and a trusting partnership provides a good platform for action. But even more now rests on that partnership.

Political leadership in an emergency

There is a lively debate about the appropriate approach and style for political leaders to adopt during emergencies. Figure 2 distils the components often considered to be key to successful political leadership through emergencies.

Figure 2 Political leadership in an emergency

Lead decisively	• Take public responsibility for response and be visible
	• Appreciating urgency and acting decisively
	• Take 'tough' or 'crunch' decisions
	• A bias for action
	• Recognising the difference between strategic and operational decisions
Re-frame and adapt	• Awareness of changes in the stages of an emergency
	• Being willing to re-frame and adapt strategies and actions
	• Re-align resources where necessary
Recognising complexity	• Recognising the complexities in addressing an emergency but not being paralysed by it
	• Understanding the connections between different parts of an emergency response and recovery
	• Using range of evidence/information to act
Effective team management	• Avoiding the trap of 'heroic single leader'
	• Constructing or re-shaping effective teams
	• Delegating roles and responsibilities
	• Empowering 'emergent' leaders
Collaborate	• Realise the collaborative advantage of working with established and emergent partners
	• Address blockages to collaboration
	• Use the emergency to insist on collaboration

Actively communicate	• Providing timely information to the public (and others) through range of methods
	• Working closely with communication professionals to shape effective strategies
	• Acting as 'sense-makers' and 'meaning-makers' – using familiar 'frames' to reassure public
	• Adopting a calm, reassuring and empathetic style
Build resilience	• Recognise the need to cope with stress potentially for a long period
	• Using peers, colleagues and the community for support
	• Take action to increase your own personal resilience

Source: Stephanie Snape, New Leadership Foundation 2020.

Challenge

Appendix 1 provides an opportunity to review your response to the emergency against the key components set out in Figure 2. Follow the instructions in Appendix 2 and complete the self-evaluation proforma.

Leadership roles

In talking to local government leaders in the immediate response phase, they have reflected an emphasis on a number of roles. (These align with the components identified in Figure 2).

• Leadership of place and of communities

• Communication

• Partnerships

• Addressing blockages

• Re-prioritisation and recovery planning

• Keeping a close eye on the money

• Lobbying upwards

• Providing 'political steers'

Case study
Leader profile 2

Leadership in a crisis

Bridget Smith, Leader, South Cambridgeshire District Council

It is always important that leaders have adaptive styles of leadership in order to be effective in a wide variety of environments, but never more so than in an emergency when an overtly strong leadership style becomes a necessity.

In a crisis our members, officers and residents want decisiveness and reassurance from their leaders. They want to know that they are in control, are well informed, know what they are doing and are making high quality decisions.

Throughout this crisis I have worked more closely than ever with my outstanding chief executive to support her strong leadership of the council. It is not my job to step on her toes, but it is my job to be a partner, a sounding board and to add my thanks and congratulations at every opportunity to her and to all my officers who have unfailingly stepped up to the mark.

With my group and members, I have done all I can to share the vast amount of information that comes to me daily through participation in meetings, emails and newsletters. I share everything other than the confidential and am always available to answer questions, help to solve problems or just give support. I have weekly daily COVID-19 group meetings, twice weekly cabinet meetings, weekly group leader meetings and weekly all member briefings. The workload is huge but desperate times need desperate measures.

I am more than fortunate to have a really committed cabinet and membership who have all willingly taken on significant new roles and responsibilities allowing me to delegate quite a lot of work.

I have been doing regular video blogs and blogs through multi-communication channels and write weekly to parish councils and volunteer groups. I have also recently started remote parish liaison forums with parish councillors able to ask any question of me or my cabinet.

I try hard to always lead by example and on a ward level I am the data controller for all the lists of vulnerable and shielded people. This allows me to support the volunteer groups and to ring all the people on the shielded list to find out if they are getting food, medicines and general support. I've also rung all my ward businesses which had failed to register for their government grant and supported quite a few to complete the registration.

This level of workload, pressure and stress is probably not sustainable in the long run, but my view is that at the end of this I need to know that I have done my very best.

5. Role of cabinets and cabinet members

Cabinets continue to function

Many cabinets in local government are continuing to function and provide political leadership in the immediate response to COVID-19. In many authorities they are 'twin tracking' alongside the emergency planning processes. Cabinets are meeting largely informally through online platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Skype, although by late April/early May some had undertaken formal, online cabinet meetings.

Cabinet members have also been using online platforms as well as email and phone to keep in contact and work with their respective senior officers. In some authorities and portfolios this involves frequent and wide-ranging discussions; in others cabinet members have stood back from regular contact to allow officers space to act and use their emergency powers.

Some cabinet members get daily 'situation reports' covering their portfolio areas; in other councils this might be reported weekly or through the chief executive. In some councils, there are formal processes to ensure that key decisions include discussion with portfolio holders.

Guidance

Cabinet working in councils – some examples

Brent's cabinet initially began meeting daily informally through conference calls, then moved to three times a week and by late April had moved to Zoom/Microsoft Teams on Monday and Thursday. The chief executive joins the meetings after one hour. The cabinet members update each other on developments and the leader will run issues past the whole cabinet. The chief executive tends to bring financial updates, social care issues and any other key issues. They also use a cabinet WhatsApp group to discuss issues and support each other.

Teignbridge is holding weekly informal cabinet meetings on Mondays via Zoom. It is used to discuss any key issues or concerns. Officers can use it to get a 'political steer' from members.

South Gloucestershire is holding a remote informal cabinet meeting on a weekly basis to discuss emerging new decisions and to review the decisions taken under the chief executive's emergency powers, as well as other issues of community importance.

Watford is holding two informal cabinet meetings a week. One takes place on Monday using 8x8 and there is another, member only, cabinet meeting on Thursday evening.

Welwyn Hatfield Borough's cabinet is meeting informally at least three times a week. The cabinet is described as working very closely together.

Guidance

The value of cabinet working

There is real value in bringing together portfolio holders in regular cabinet discussions as it provides:

- a place to 'connect-up' the different elements of the COVID-response – to identify areas of cross-over and unintended consequences

- a key body to ensure joined-up communication strategies

- a forum to discuss and initiate recovery planning

- a political sounding board for portfolio holders

- useful body to discuss community needs and support for community resilience

- a place to consider the authority-wide financial implications of the emergency

- political steer for senior officers

- a peer network to support personal resilience.

Challenge
Reviewing cabinet working

This exercise can be undertaken as a whole cabinet or by individual cabinet members.

Consider the following:

1. How well is the cabinet working together?

2. Are the portfolios working well currently? Should any changes be made?

3. How well is the cabinet undertaking the following roles?

Role	Score how the cabinet is performing this role From 1 (requires significant improvement) to 10 (high effective)	Suggestions for improvement
Working corporately to connect-up the different elements of COVID-19 response		
Developing joined-up and effective communication strategies		
Working on recovery planning		
Political sounding board for portfolio holders		
Discussing cross-authority community needs and support for community resilience		
Political steer for senior officers		
Working through the financial implications of the emergency		
A personal network to support individual resilience		

Impact on Portfolios

Given the 'long reach' of COVID-19 in all aspects of local government functioning, it is not surprising that many leaders and cabinet members report that all portfolio holders have been affected to a greater or lesser extent.

"There is not one portfolio holder that is having a holiday... It is genuinely all hands to the pumps" (cabinet member)

Councillors are reporting that some portfolios have particularly heavy workloads, including:

• public health

• adults

• childrens

• finance

• community and partnership.

Some councils have re-shaped their portfolios to provide more support to key COVID-19 areas. Others have moved key responsibilities between cabinet members. And some have brought non-cabinet members to support portfolio members with high workloads.

Case study

Buckinghamshire Council's cabinet structure aligned to emergency response cells

Buckinghamshire is a new unitary council which came into being on 1 April 2020. Initially the political response was led by the Leader Councillor Martin Tett and the Portfolio Lead for Health and Culture, Councillor Gareth Williams. However political oversight was quickly expanded across the new council's cabinet, with members aligned to the following eight cells within the emergency response model: housing and temporary accommodation; resources; children's social care and education (two cabinet members are responsible for this emergency response cell); mutual aid; local support hubs and volunteering; NHS

and adult social care; death management process: business and suppliers. Cabinet members have been actively involved in supporting the cells and ensuring these have political oversight. This has included:

• joining daily conference calls to review the latest position and emerging issues

• helping to develop solutions

• helping identify key information to be shared more widely amongst the councils elected members and partners

• linking through to local groups and communities to help join up the response

• bringing forward good practice examples of community responses or council-led localism engagement.

Cabinet role profile

Cabinet members undertake a wide range of roles including shaping political direction and vision for their portfolio areas, managing performance, taking a lead on partnerships and effective decision-making. The LGA uses the below 'Cabinet member role profile' in its Leadership Essentials course for cabinet members as it reflects the breadth of the role profile.

All of these nine roles will continue to be important through the response to COVID-19 and the recovery. However, they are being shaped by the emergency. For example:

• formal 'key decisions' may be taken by emergency planning structures or through other urgent processes in the pandemic stage

• greater priority may also be given to the 'communication' role during the immediate response

• cabinet members can use their excellent network of relationships with other local partners and community leaders to support key COVID-19 work (a good example is provided below –re-configuring death services in Rotherham)

• providing a re-shaped strategic direction will be a key element of a successful recovery.

Emma Hoddinott, Cabinet member, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council

Since taking on the portfolio for registrars, crematorium and burial grounds, we have been working to make the service more responsive to resident's with religious needs such as short-notice burials. This has involved working with our local council of mosques in particular, and we recently extended our burial services and produced a guide to Muslim burials. It is this work that has enabled us to respond quickly to the changes in death registration and funerals as a result of COVID-19.

While there is government guidance, it only goes so far, and multiple queries were coming in about what was permitted. As Cabinet Member I convened a meeting of our local mosques to talk through what we knew and seek their views about how we move forward. It's not an easy subject to talk through – we acknowledged that early on and you learn to appreciate not everyone will have the right language at times.

The meetings were held on Zoom, and had between 15-20 participants over three meetings, a week apart. I chaired them; council officers, the hospital and contractors provided information verbally; and our cabinet support wrote up the actions needed.

It did take time out of our emergency planning for the anticipated increase in deaths, but in the long-run it has given us a clear protocol so everyone understands the process and can give guidance around areas such as body-washing and personal protective equipment (www.rotherham. gov.uk/deaths/death-registration-funeral-protocol-covid-19/1 as well as Muslim specific advice (www.rotherham.gov.uk/deaths/muslim-funerals-burials-covid-19/1). We also repeated the Zoom meeting with our Faith Leader's Forum, which was an opportunity to talk through how we support other faiths and those with none. There are still important issues to work through such as bereavement support, and facilitating grieving when restrictions lift, such as memorial services.

Cabinet member role profile

Political vision and strategic direction	Leading change and innovation	Communicating your message
Effective decision-making	Performance monitoring and making a difference	Effective partnerships and systems leadership
Working in partnership with officers	Political skills	Governance and accountability

Developed by Stephanie Snape, New Leadership Foundation

Challenge

Appendix 2 contains an amended 'Cabinet member role profile' provided in a self-evaluation format. It has been adapted to reflect the needs of cabinet members during the COVID-19 emergency.

Review the profile in the Appendix and complete the self-evaluation element.

6. Governance arrangements and officer/member relationships

Governance arrangements

During March and April, local councils have made significant changes to their governance and decision-making processes. Emergency planning powers formalise decision-making within emergency planning structures. The majority of councils have postponed annual general meetings and a range of other meetings – formal cabinet, overview and scrutiny, quasi-judicial, and so on.

Work is being undertaken in many councils to re-start formal public meetings. A range of possible virtual platforms are being explored. By mid-April some councils had begun operating new remote approaches. Councils are often particularly keen to prioritise moving to virtual formal planning meetings, in order to support business recovery. Others have decided to take time to return to a more regular but online meeting schedule and to carefully trial different online platforms.

Useful links

Please see the link to our Remote Council Meetings Hub, which includes good practice, tips sharing, peer-to-peer support and case studies: www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/remote-council-meetings

As councils move out of the early immediate response phase (March/April), it is likely that greater priority will be given to returning to a 'new normal' in governance arrangements. The challenge is, 'how to ensure local democratic processes work effectively during the pandemic?' (See the case study below of how Barnsley is approaching this.)

**Case study
Leader profile 3
Stephen Houghton**, Leader, Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council

'It's business, but not as usual'

At the outset of the crisis it became clear to us that in order to deal with the pandemic and maintain key council services, officers would require greater freedom and flexibility to deliver services, and to work with partner agencies. Consequently, political decision making would have to be streamlined to facilitate this, and the maintenance of trust between officers and members would be crucial to success.

To facilitate those things two key issues would need to be addressed:

- cross party agreement on a new (temporary) decision making and scrutiny structure
- good, timely and frequent communication between officers and all members.

The council moved quickly with cross-party support to introduce the following:

- review officer delegations to allow swifter decision making
- create formal and informal virtual cabinet meetings every two weeks to take key political decisions and provide a framework work for wider discussion
- provide a facility for opposition group leaders to comment on cabinet agendas before decisions take place
- create a virtual planning committee to take

key or controversial applications (reduced in size by 50 per cent but politically proportionate – due to the technology constraints)

- create a virtual overview and scrutiny committee to give oversight to the new system and the response to the crisis (reduced in size by 50 per cent as above)

- daily contact between the Leader and Chief executive

- one-to-one meetings between cabinet members and executive directors as needed

- scheduled monthly meetings between Leader, Chief executive and opposition group leaders. (More frequently if required)

- daily updates by email from communications team to all members and MPs.

However, as Leader I believe the key to success is not simply structures but relationship management between members, members and officers, and between the political groups. Thus, much of my time has been spent alongside the Chief Executive communicating directly with each of those, encouraging positive participation, problem solving and building confidence in our approach.

Officer/member relations

Effective partnership working between members and officers is critical to responding to COVID-19 and the recovery. But emergency powers and altered decision-making have changed the nature of the relationship. How to ensure effective relationships, clear roles and responsibilities?

Although in many authorities the emergency powers outline a formal relationship between members and officers, relationships have always been a mix of formal and informal. The informal relationship during COVID-19 continues to be powerful. And it has to be negotiated to a certain extent.

Challenge

Work through the following questions, providing answers in the space below.

1. As a leading member how are you working with your senior officer/s?

2. Have you had a discussion with your officer/s about roles and responsibilities during COVID-19?

3. Have you discussed how the relationship will change as the emergency progresses?

4. Have you 'compared notes' with other leading members?

7. Other members

Non-executive members are often particularly affected by the changes to formal governance and decision-making processes. The normal rhythm of the council calendar has largely been paused.

Leaders we spoke to are adopting a cross-party approach, ensuring they are meeting remotely with opposition group leaders and that these leaders also have access to the chief executive on a weekly basis.

There has also been a great deal of emphasis across councils on ensuring members are kept well informed of the local situation and decisions. Member briefings are usually at least weekly, but in some authorities daily. Some groups are also holding meetings via virtual platforms.

Case study

Communication, communication, communication… COVID-19 Communications approach at Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council

The council's response to COVID-19 has had three pillars; seeking to maintain essential services whilst keeping staff safe, protecting and supporting our most vulnerable citizens in partnership with the voluntary and community sector, and supporting our business community as a delivery channel for government funding support and other measures. Our approach to communications has reflected this and recognises that the officer driven LRF (local resilience forum) emergency response approach when applied to an extended emergency situation, as in COVID-19, could result in back bench

councillors, in particular, feeling somewhat disconnected from events.

All councillors receive a very frequent, sometimes daily, Councillors' COVID-19 Briefing. This covers government announcements, service changes on the ground, together with progress updates on supporting residents and businesses. Initial feedback from councillors was positive and after a short period the circulation of the briefing was extended to 38 parish councils and all the boroughs MPs.

A Chief Executive COVID-19 Brief is sent to all staff twice a week (following a twice weekly Strategic Emergency Response meeting) and as well as providing general update information, includes significant content to acknowledge and thank staff rising to the challenge, and support staff wellbeing given that the vast majority of staff who can work from home are doing so. In addition, Business Briefings are circulated to businesses based in the borough, signposting to where additional help is available.

Leaders have often asked frontline councillors to focus on their ward work, supporting community activities and volunteering.

8. Community leadership and resilience

Leading members in local government hold two roles in providing community leadership: they work for their communities by working strategically across the local authority area, for example by orchestrating the work of a wide range of local partners; and they also work in their local communities and neighbourhoods supporting community vitality. During the COVID-19 response leading members have been active on both fronts.

Community leadership: working **for** communities

Leading members have talked about the importance of their wider leadership of place role in responding to COVID-19: they have worked to provide protection and support to vulnerable members of their community; to aid those struggling financially; and to support local businesses and the local economy.

Community leadership: working **in** communities

Leading members are often also working extremely hard within their own wards and local patches to support community resilience, facilitate and lead volunteering work; solve problems; and provide a reassuring local presence.

Case study
Leader profile 4
Sarah Rouse, Leader, Malvern Hills District Council

My immediate response to the COVID-19 crisis was to get the volunteer networks set up on the ground in my ward. Working with my fellow district councillor we contacted each parish council. Via different means we had posted a postcard, with a coordinators number on, through every one of the 1500 plus doors in the ward within a week. This asked for those in need of help and for volunteers. Each parish set up a system to manage and monitor. In my own area I stuck a list of local delivery suppliers to every lamppost in the village. Almost immediately requests for help stopped as residents could access help themselves and support the local economy.

I also asked all district councillors to become the community leaders they had been elected to be and to work across communities to set up support groups. Many did with a variety of innovative ways but all with a link to the parish and district councillors.

From the top down, Worcestershire County Council set up a 'here to help' contact hub. What we did at district level was to gather all the information about the local groups already up and running and link these contact details into here to help. Across the rural areas we had volunteer groups to help. Whilst in the town Age UK and Community Action were supported to look after the more urban residents.

The volunteer database was built up and shared across all charities and so any call for help could be directed to the most local coordinator.

We hope this quick response gave comfort at the outset and also made sure that everyone in our district had someone to help. This was all functioning well within the first couple of weeks and continues to develop now.

Case study
Work in the community
Emma Hoddinott, Cabinet Member, Rotherham

Within the first week of the closures and people staying at home, it was clear that practical action on the ground was needed to support our residents. Jobs lost, sudden changes in families and the pressure of being at home all came through as casework, and after many phone calls, I was acutely aware in our area the organisations we normally call on for help were being stretched. People needed food and they needed it now, so on the Thursday after the lockdown, we decided to set up a local foodbank and by chance was put in touch with a gentleman in my own ward, who ran one in the next town. By the Tuesday we had found a venue, found volunteers, found food and made our first deliveries to families, as Sunnyside Supplies: www.facebook.com/SunnysideSupplies Lots of councillors and councils do this work, but the COVID situation has accelerated the need; and the way people are pulling together has meant something that may take months in local government, happens in days.

This has all been supported by our council volunteer programme – Rotherham Heroes. In Rotherham we have a neighbourhood model, with a neighbourhood officer who is there to assist us in our work as councillors. This structure has moved over to be a dedicated community response; and councillors are key to that with their local knowledge and links to community groups.
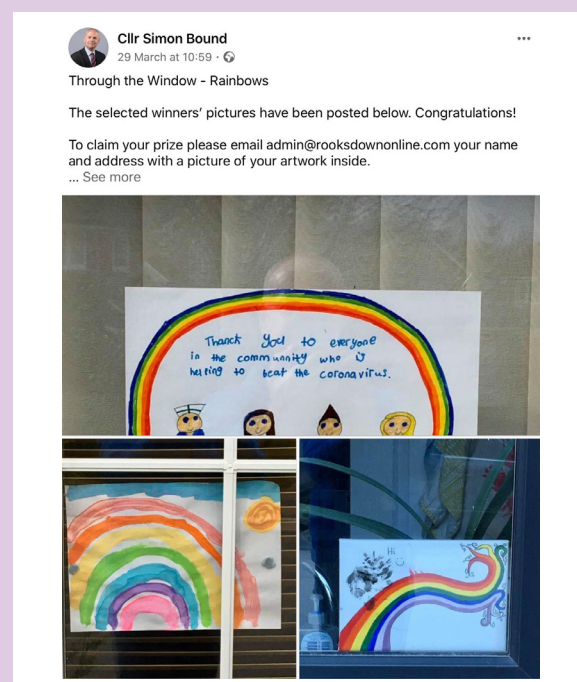
I have also been keen to keep in touch and I think it is important to still be visible. I have made regular short videos for residents on Facebook, do a weekly councillor surgery on Zoom and produced a local guide to shop opening times, pharmacies and deliveries, etc.

Case study
Simon Bound, Deputy Leader, Basingstoke and Deane

Over the last few weeks it has been important to keep the morale of the community positive. With a general hospital, psychiatric hospital and a hospice in my ward I have many front line workers as residents. The 'Through the window' community art project has been running with a different theme every week. Week one: rainbows; week two: fictional characters; and week three: – animals. Much discussed in community social media groups and a focus for everyone on their daily walks. Whilst it has been of real benefit to the community in these difficult "lockdown" days. Little did the community know, that walking around the ward photographing their pictures has been a personal tonic. After emergency planning meetings, partnership briefings and hairy worse case scenarios it has been an invaluable way for this particular Deputy Leader to relax, reflect and reconnect.

Cllr Simon Bound
29 March at 10:59

Through the Window - Rainbows

The selected winners' pictures have been posted below. Congratulations!

To claim your prize please email admin@rooksdownonline.com your name and address with a picture of your artwork inside.
... See more

9. Local finances

Introduction

There is a growing appreciation of the financial implications the pandemic is having at both the national and local level. Council leaders and cabinet members report significant concern over the impact on local finances both in the short and long term. Government is providing additional funding to assist councils during the lockdown phase and has also made a general undertaking to ensure that councils can recover the cost of the crisis. However, given the inevitable economic recession and increase in government borrowing caused by the pandemic, the crisis will continue to present financial challenges for councils for some years to come.

At the time of writing, the situation is very fluid. However, given their fiduciary responsibilities, it is important that members work with officers to understand the current financial position of the council, as well as planning for the future. Members will appreciate that whilst definitive answers are not possible at this stage, the skills the authority already has in terms of medium-term financial planning, together with scenario analysis, are useful in the current circumstances. At this stage, any financial analysis and planning will be largely driven by a series of assumptions, which should be informed by political as well as financial priorities.

Guidance

Five key finance questions for cabinet members

1. What is the current financial position against the 2020/21 budget for the council and my specific service area?

2. How is the budgetary position moving as the crisis continues?

3. How quickly are services likely to be able to recover once lockdown is eased? What will a new normal look like and what is the financial effect?

4. What is the effect of the crisis on the council's medium-term financial strategy?

5. What has been learned through this crisis that might be used as a transformational opportunity for the better into the future?

The following five questions will assist in a better understanding of the local position and will enable future financial planning to commence. It is suggested that cabinet members ensure that they are regularly appraised by officers of the local situation in response to these questions as the emergency unfolds:

1. What is the current financial position against the 2020/21 budget for the council and my specific service area?

There are two immediate financial concerns; first, the effect of the lockdown on the council's cashflow and its ability to keep paying its bills. Second, the effect on the council's ongoing budget position.

Every council is currently experiencing increased expenditure in terms of crisis response, together

with potentially significant reductions in income from fees and charges and wider commercial undertakings. Short-term cashflow problems can normally be solved because councils can borrow for cashflow purposes, but there is a cost to this, so the Government has also provided some flexibilities in relation to its own cash transactions with councils. Cashflow issues may continue to emerge as the crisis continues and councils will need to continue to monitor this aspect of their finance closely.

The second issue is the council's ability to maintain a balanced budget this year. Put simply, the crisis is causing councils to spend more whilst also suffering losses in income, leading to potentially significant budget overspends. It should be noted that the coronavirus crisis does not remove a council's duty to deliver best value so councils need to make sure they are continuing to spend public money wisely and not incurring overspends that can avoided. However, in current circumstances, budget deficits will be impossible to avoid. If additional government funding is not enough to cover overspends, they will need to be funded by the reserves. Should reserves be insufficient, councils may need to consider what further action they need to take.

Whilst all councils will be affected, councils with a heavier reliance on generated income will currently be experiencing severe budget shortfalls. Similarly, the effect of the budget for individual service and portfolio areas will vary, the obvious example being car parking, leisure and cultural services.

Finally, the COVID-19 crisis has disrupted councils' transformation and efficiency programmes and many councils are reporting that they can no longer deliver the savings they had plans for 2020/21. Members will want to be assured that such programmes are re-established as soon as it is practical to do so.

Government guidance is evolving throughout the crisis and so definitive answers are not yet available, but it is important that cabinet members should understand and explore the current budgetary position of both their own service area as well as the overall financial position of the council.

2. How is the budgetary position moving as the crisis continues?

It is commonplace for budget monitoring information to not only consider the present financial position but also to forecast the likely financial position to the end of the financial year. Whilst it is appreciated that this will require a series of assumptions, including the likely length of the current lockdown and what a phased relaxation of the lockdown will look like, cabinet members will wish to explore the likely future financial position of their service area as well as the council overall.

As part of this, members may need to revisit the assumptions made when drawing up the 2020/21 budget and review these in the light of current events. For example, the approved budget might have included anticipated savings as a result of transformation programmes which may now be either delayed or impossible to deliver.

Understanding the pattern of spending and income in a typical year will assist in forecasting the scale of the council's budget deficit in this most untypical of years. In a normal year the greatest pressure on health and social care is in the winter and the greatest demand for leisure facilities is in the spring and summer. The pattern of expenditure and income is likely to be very different this year, leading to the need to estimate not only the current, but also the likely future financial impact on council finances.

3. How quickly are services likely to be able to recover once lockdown is eased? What will a new normal look like and what is the financial effect?

Portfolio holders are likely to already be working with officers to understand the steps that need to be taken to respond to the end of the lockdown and the, potentially gradual, reopening of services and factor in any additional costs of bringing services back on stream as part of their wider planning. There may be one-off costs in reopening services, such as health and safety inspections of buildings that are currently closed, but also wider considerations as policies, such as social distancing, continue. For example, the potential financial effect on a leisure facility should social distancing protocols

need to be retained over a longer period of time or if tastes and behaviours change resulting in permanent alterations in service demand.

4. What is the effect of the crisis on the council's medium-term financial strategy?

The inability to deliver this year's budget, together with the potential negative effect of overall council reserves will have a knock-on effect in future years and so elected members will also need to reconsider their approved medium-term financial strategy (MTFS).

The timing and scale of central government's support to local councils is crucial to the ongoing financial health of all local councils, which remains unclear at the time of writing. However, on top of the financial implications of the crisis directly on local council budgets, the crisis on the general health of the economy and the state of the public finances is likely to affect future government spending and taxation plans and it is highly likely that local government will be asked to play its part in the recovery of overall public finances.

All of this makes future financial planning very difficult at this stage. All that elected members can realistically do is remain aware of developments as they are announced and continue the pressure on central government to recognise the contribution local government makes to their local community outside of, as well as during, the pandemic.

5. What has been learned through this crisis that might be used as a transformational opportunity for the better into the future?

Many councils have devised new ways of adapting or maintaining their services and it is possible that councils may wish to continue with some of these adaptations into the future. For example, the exponential use of social media and online meeting software during the crisis may result in further channel shift onto electronic platforms, potentially increasing the ability to make transformational savings. On the other hand, there may also be a permanently reduced demand for town-centre car parking.

There may also be changes in local and national political priorities that will have longer-term effects on the MTFS. For example, if the present enhanced support for the vulnerable and the homeless continues. All such factors will have financial implications running into the medium term.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 crisis is having a significant adverse impact on council finances and, given their fiduciary duties, all elected members, particular those on the cabinet must work with officers to understand the financial position of their service area and the council as a whole as best as they can.

The financial future has become significantly more uncertain for councils and it seems likely that there will be permanent, or certainly longer lasting changes in council services and past funding assumptions and elected members will need to continue to work with and support officers in understanding how such changes affect local priorities and plans as well as the ongoing financial resilience of the council.

Case study

Grants were not the financial defibrillator hoped for

Alan Connett, Cabinet member for Corporate Resources, Teignbridge District Council

We were self-assured by the then plump, for us, level of general reserves at our annual budget meeting in February. At just under £2 million, they represented around 12 per cent of net expenditure. Just six weeks later, as the social distancing restrictions was ordered, shops, offices, factories were closed and workers furloughed, that same £2 million felt totally inadequate for the demands we faced in the immediate effect of, and responding to, COVID-19.

For a 'Moor-to-Sea', mainly rural district council in South Devon, Teignbridge almost overnight saw car parking income drop like a stone. In the first two weeks of April last year, our parking income was £110,000. In the same two weeks this year, it was £7,000.

Leisure centres shut, another £40,000 a week in lost income with other fees, such as planning, also diving. Our net revenue budget is approximately £16 million.

By the end of April, our Chief Financial Officer was advising of a potential loss of income in the region of £10 million this financial year with a flashing amber light that a Section 114 Notice may be necessary. So many councils share the same boat.

Our first actions were to support and sustain the community.

• An immediate £60,000 in grants for our local foodbanks, the Council for Voluntary Services, another key local charity supporting a number of parishes and volunteering, Citizens Advice Bureau, and rent-holidays for three community support groups using council premises.

• Free car parking for NHS, social care and blue light staff as well as volunteers. Restrictions relaxed, working with Devon County Council, so residents on street parking passes could be used in our car parks.

We have also worked hard, and huge credit to all of the council's staff for their support in helping to achieve this.

• We have maintained our refuse and recycling services and the paid-for garden waste collection service.

• Government grants to businesses were given top priority with team members working over Easter to process payments. Within a working week, we had paid out 1,460 grants worth £17.1 million.

• Alongside that, we have prioritised housing benefit and been particularly pro-active in offering support through council tax reduction and the Exceptional Hardship Fund.

• Offered deferred rent payments to the council's commercial tenants.

But mindful of that possible £10 million lost income, we had furloughed just over 200 staff by the end of April and stripped down non-essential expenditure.

However, 'ordinary business' needs to carry on too. So even in the 'lockdown' we have pressed ahead with plans for two new hotels, a Premier Inn on a town centre regeneration site in Teignmouth, and a Travelodge in the centre of Newton Abbot. They should open in autumn next year. We're also continuing our consultation on the five-year update to the Teignbridge Local Plan and working on our recovery plans.

Close, but distant, working for councillors and officers has been the key ingredient. The executive councillors hold informal weekly virtual meetings which have been a strength in linking with the senior leadership team. Our Members Newsletter is now emailed twice weekly, and the communications team ensure we are promoting key messages across traditional and social media.

So far, we have two Government grants of £59,771 and £1,342,148. It's very welcome, but not the financial defibrillator we or the local economy hope for. If local councils are to be on the front line of the economic recovery, we will need more.

10. It's personal: looking after each other, member welfare and personal resilience

COVID-19 is almost a uniquely universal and 'personal' emergency. Everyone is affected. This has particular implications for considering the importance of looking after yourself, your fellow members and officers; making a point of asking after the welfare of others; and thanking them for their contributions.

Member welfare

As political leaders there is a clear role for ensuring there are processes in place to be assured that the members of your group and other groups are coping and do not need any particular help or assistance. Some members will be among the group of vulnerable and shielding. Others may be critical workers who need to pass over their councillor roles to colleagues.

The power of appreciative feedback

Appreciative feedback is a well-recognised approach to providing positive feedback. It is not 'constructive feedback' but wholly positive and must be authentic. Councillors have been using this approach during COVID-19 and it has a marked effect on morale. Although this may seem obvious to many it is not a natural approach for others.

Tip

A useful framework for appreciative feedback is to follow this approach:

"What I have really appreciated about you is... and the positive impact it has had on me is..."

Make it authentic. No qualifications or detractions from the positive message.

Case study

Bryony Rudkin, Deputy Leader, Ipswich Borough Council

My leader has asked me, along with our Group Whip and Secretary to compile a list of all our current councillors, along with retired (often elderly) group members and candidates who had been selected for the elections this year. This we have done as a spreadsheet which the four of us can edit. At the beginning of each week, we start making welfare calls and leave a note next to each name with our initials once we have made contact. This contact is best achieved by phone, but for some people text and messaging services are preferable. Of course, some of our group are working from home and others are front line workers. We have a nurse, a mortuary assistant, GP administrator, bus driver, shop workers and a 999 call operator. Some work in telecoms and are helping maintain this service. We are ensuing that these members are not burdened with casework and we are particularly mindful of the stress they are under. We have been delivering cooked food to some members and doing shopping for others. We have some members with particular health issues and some who are on their own. We have had one online group meeting and have also had a birthday drinks!

Personal resilience

Council leaders and cabinet members have spoken about working long hours in response to the emergency. There is a key issue here of ensuring your own personal resilience.

> "In my experience with emergencies, it is always a marathon and never a sprint... You need to pace yourself"

(cabinet member)

Resilience is your capacity to cope with stress and setbacks. When we talk about personal resilience we are talking about mental, emotional and physical resilience. They are different but connected. Together they contribute to our sense of wellbeing and 'equilibrium'. If we are pushed 'off balance' by stressful events we can return to a balanced state by paying attention to either our mental, emotional and/or physical state. We will all have preferred approaches to help us cope with stresses.

But everyone can build resilience by consciously practising strategies within the three elements of resilience. (See Figure 3 on next page.)
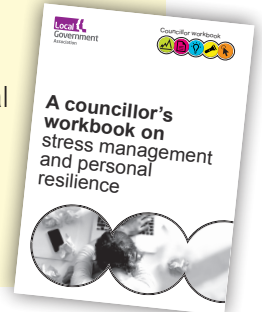
Some writers on personal resilience argue that resilience is more than coping with life's stresses and 'bouncing back' to normal but that a highly resilient person will look to grow through responding to stress and setbacks. An example of adapting this approach to COVID-19 is included, in the figure 'What do I want to be during COVID-19?'.

Personal resilience: good ways to cope

Head in the right place

Realistic optimism and being able to stop yourself catastrophising.

Believing you can change situations – not negative self talk – believing you can make a difference and no blame.

Finding ways to change or even get out of a situation

MENTAL

Securebase

Looking after physical wellbeing – food, exercise, sleep.

Social support, friends, fun times.

PHYSICAL

Emotional regulation

By getting on the balcony and stepping outside the situation.
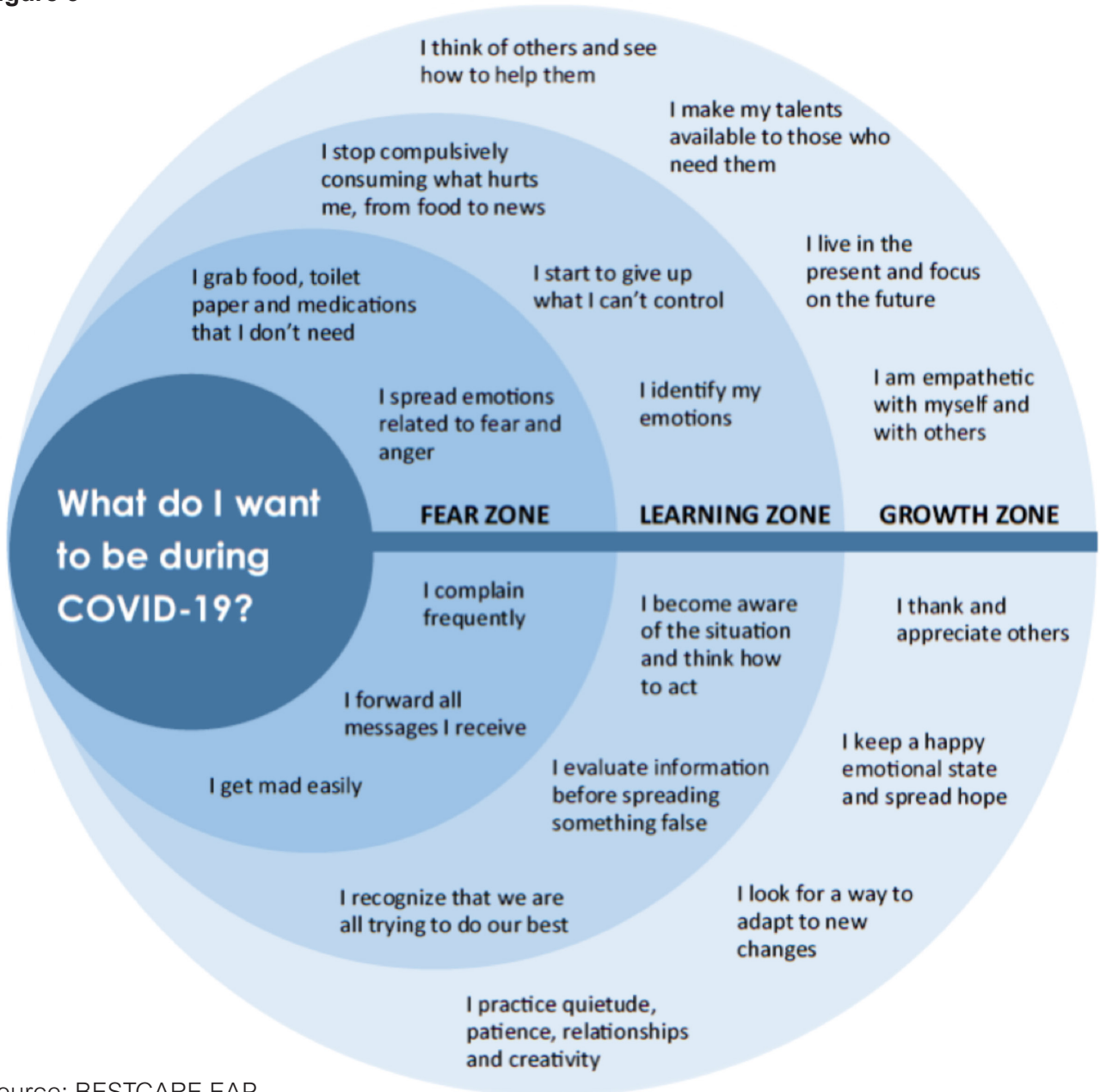
Choosing to contain or express your emotions

Sense of humour – laughing (at yourself).

EMOTIONAL

YOUR STATE

Source: Stephanie Snape, New Leadership Foundation 2020

Figure 3

What do I want to be during COVID-19?

FEAR ZONE

I grab food, toilet paper and medications that I don't need

I spread emotions related to fear and anger

I complain frequently

I forward all messages I receive

I get mad easily

I stop compulsively consuming what hurts me, from food to news

I think of others and see how to help them

I recognize that we are all trying to do our best

LEARNING ZONE

I start to give up what I can't control

I identify my emotions

I become aware of the situation and think how to act

I evaluate information before spreading something false

I practice quietude, patience, relationships and creativity

GROWTH ZONE

I make my talents available to those who need them

I live in the present and focus on the future

I am empathetic with myself and with others

I thank and appreciate others

I keep a happy emotional state and spread hope

I look for a way to adapt to new changes

Source: BESTCARE EAP

Challenge

What ONE action could you take within the next week to improve your own personal resilience?

Write your commitment in the space below.

Appendix 1: Political leadership in an emergency

Figure 2 in the main workbook distils the components often considered to be key to successful political leadership through emergencies. They are reproduced below in a self-evaluation format. Consider your leadership approach during the emergency and complete the third column. Use the space provided at the end to summarise your reflections.

Key component of political leadership in an emergency	Further details	Self-evaluation: how well have you performed in this area? what should you celebrate? what improvements could you make?
Lead decisively	• Taking public responsibility for response and be visible • Appreciating urgency and acting decisively • Taking 'tough' or 'crunch' decisions • A bias for action • Recognising the difference between strategic and operational decisions	
Re-frame and adapt	• Awareness of changes in the stages of an emergency • Being willing to re-frame and adapt strategies and actions • Re-aligning resources where necessary	
Recognising Complexity	• Recognising the complexities in addressing an emergency but not being paralysed by it • Understanding the connections between different parts of an emergency response and recovery • Using range of evidence/information to act	
Effective team management	• Avoiding the trap of 'heroic single leader' • Constructing or re-shaping effective teams • Delegating roles and responsibilities • Empowering 'emergent' leaders	

Key component of political leadership in an emergency	Further details	Self-evaluation: how well have you performed in this area? what should you celebrate? what improvements could you make?
Collaborate	• Realising the collaborative advantage of working with established and emergent partners • Addressing blockages to collaboration • Using the emergency to insist on collaboration	
Actively communicate	• Providing timely information to the public (and others) through range of methods • Working closely with communication professionals to shape effective strategies • Acting as 'sense-makers' and 'meaning-makers' - using familiar 'frames' to reassure public • Adopting a calm, reassuring and empathetic style	
Build resilience	• Recognising the need to cope with stress potentially for a long period • Using peers, colleagues and the community for support • Taking action to increase your own personal resilience	

Source: Stephanie Snape, New Leadership Foundation 2020

Use the space below to summarise your response, including how you have adjusted your leadership style and what you have learnt.

Appendix 2: Cabinet member role profile and COVID-19

Cabinet member role profile		
Political vision and strategic direction	Leading change and innovation	Communicating your message
Effective decision-making	Performance monitoring and making a difference	Effective partnerships and systems leadership
Working in partnership with officers	Political skills	Governance and accountability
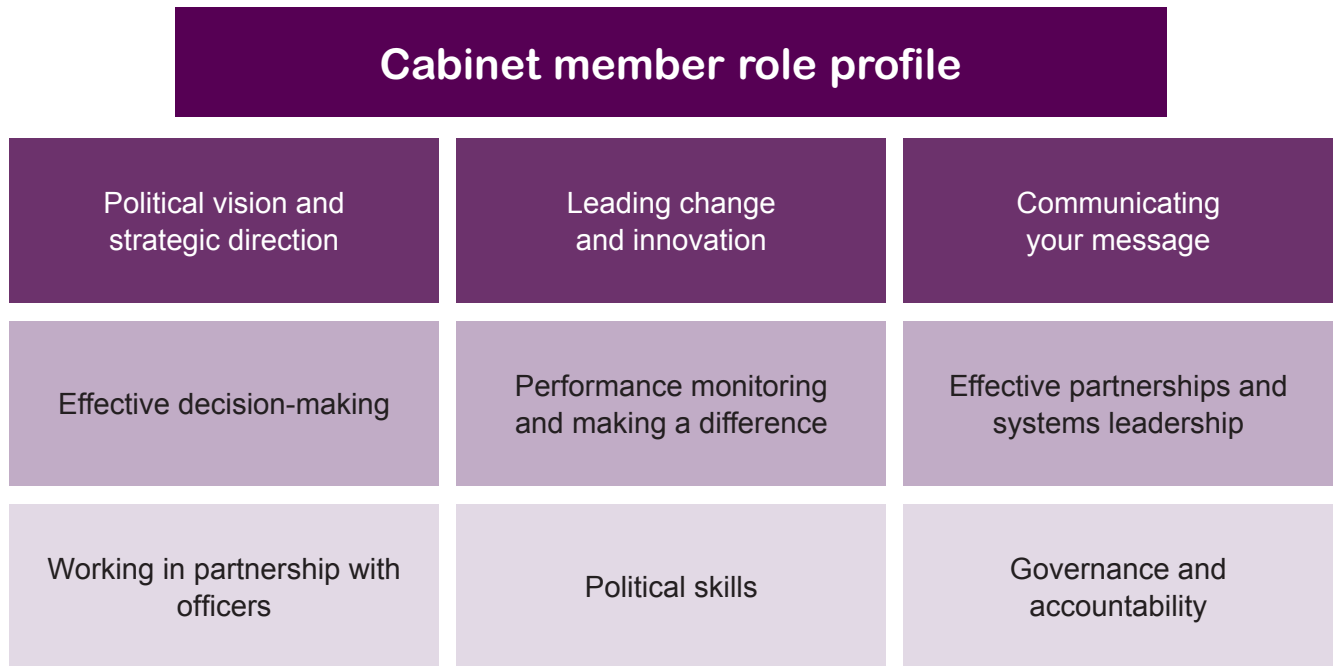
Developed by Stephanie Snape, New Leadership Foundation

The above cabinet member role profile is a self-evaluation tool to support cabinet members which is used in LGA's Leadership Essentials course, 'Being an effective cabinet member'.

While the nine roles remain largely appropriate supplementary roles have been added to reflect the priorities of the emergency.

Work through the role profile by:

1. Reviewing the text for each role

2. Reflecting on your own experiences during COVID-19

3. Completing the self-evaluation question

Role	Further information
Political vision and strategic direction	• Developing a 'manifesto' and vision for the portfolio • Ensuring the vision is translated into robust strategic direction • Having an assured grasp of the key strategic issues • Ensuring the political vision and direction for the portfolio is in line with overall corporate direction **COVID-19:** • In recovery planning considering how priorities need to be re-shaped for the portfolio area • Contributing to re-shaping whole council priorities and re-shaping medium term financial strategy in the recovery stage
Leading change and innovation	• Translating strategic direction into necessary change and innovation programmes • Providing political lead for change and motivating others • Encouraging a learning, reflective approach to change and innovation **COVID-19:** • Ensuring necessary urgent changes are made quickly and effectively in the pandemic stage • Supporting the development of appropriate change and innovation approaches for recovery during the post-peak and recovery stages
Communicating your message	• Being able to communicate your vision and strategic direction for the portfolio effectively to a variety of audiences • Using a wide range of strategies to communicate your message from social media to more traditional forms **COVID-19:** • Being an 'active communicator' during the emergency, using a range of methods • Using political narratives and sense-making approaches to reassure audiences
Effective decision-making	• Taking effective decisions • Tackling crunch issues & decisions- not avoiding **COVID-19:** • Supporting emergency decision-making processes • Keeping informed and aware of the decisions being made which affect your portfolio

Role	Further information
Performance monitoring and making a difference	• Ensuring effective performance management systems are in place for the portfolio • Ensuring effective financial management • Monitoring performance and budgets systematically • Addressing poor performance • Ensuring 'impact' in portfolio areas **COVID-19:** • Monitoring and reviewing changing performance data during the pandemic stage • Applying political influence to address blockages or poor performance
Effective partnerships and systems leadership	• Taking an outward focus on the work of your portfolio • Working effectively with a range of partners - public, private, voluntary and community • Understanding 'systems leadership' and leadership of place **COVID-19:** • Using wide network of trusted relationships to ensure effective collaboration • Addressing blockages in partnership working
Working in partnership with officers	• Working effectively and professionally with senior and less senior officers • Negotiating successfully the respective roles of members and officers **COVID-19:** • In the immediate response period, giving space for officers to undertake urgent actions • Having clarity over your role and relationship to senior officers during the pandemic • Openly negotiating with your senior officer/s the appropriate approach to roles and responsibilities as the emergency moves through its different stages
Political skills	• Demonstrating excellent political skills in being aware of the political terrain in the authority and developing political alliances and strategies • Working skilfully with the political group to ensure support and maintain group cohesion **COVID-19:** • Using your political skills to ensure an effective COVID-19 response and recovery

Role	Further information
Governance and accountability	• Be visibly accountable and answerable for portfolio • Support and develop good governance for portfolio areas • Respecting, valuing and responding to overview & scrutiny effectively **COVID-19:** • Supporting the development of re-modelled decision-making structures such as virtual formal cabinets, annual councils, overview and scrutiny and quasi-judicial meetings • Ensure there is a good audit trail of actions and decisions made in your portfolio area during the emergency

Self-Evaluation

Reviewing the above roles, and your own experience of executive working during the emergency, identify:

1. What has gone well? Which roles have you performed well?

2. What potential improvements could you make?

3. Identify actions to take and by when below.

Acknowledgements

Notes

Notes

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