Coalition Administrations and COVID-19

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Format & Approach

- LGA have produced this **pre-recorded webinar** on the work of councils led by coalition administrations during the COVID-19 response & recovery:

- **Purpose**
  - to support councils run by coalition administrations in their work on COVID-19 & the recovery
  - to identify how to ensure robust, stable coalition working

- **Format**

Coalition Administrations in Local Government

- This webinar is looking at COVID-19 and 'coalition administrations'. **What does 'coalition administration' mean?**

- Prior to the May 2019 elections there were just over 30 'No Overall Control' (NOC) councils in England

- NOC can be defined as where no one single party holds 50% + 1 of the seats

- After May 2019, LGIU identified 77 NOC English authorities – Chris Game in Democratic audit identifies 79. There are currently 86 NOC councils (Grace Collins, LGA)

Coalition Administrations in Local Government

- Of the current 86 NOC councils (Grace Collins, LGA), there are:

- 35 single party minority administrations
- 51 coalition administrations, of which...
  - 32 involve 2 parties
  - 12 involve 3 parties
  - 6 involve 4 parties
  - 1 involves 5+ parties

- Wide range of language used in coalitions – 'alliance', 'pact', 'coalition', 'rainbow coalition'

Coalition Administrations in Local Government...okay but what does that mean?

- Number of English local authorities with NOC has more than doubled since May 2019

- Now almost 1 in 4 councils is NOC

- New NOC councils had less than a year to 'settle in' before the pandemic led to widespread changes from March onwards

- Very many 'NOCs' work in some sort of coalition administration where effective working across the ruling groups is essential

Coalition administrations & COVID-19: Key Questions

1. Are coalition administrations as effective as majority administrations in responding to emergencies and providing leadership?

2. What impact has COVID-19 had on relationships between coalition groups?

3. What are the lessons learnt about ensuring cohesion during the response & recovery?

4. What factors in general are important in shaping effective coalitions?

Reflection exercise: the coalition group/s

Consider the following questions:

1. How has your coalition group/s been impacted by COVID-19 response and recovery?

2. How has your group/s responded?

3. What challenges has your group/s faced?

4. What opportunities have presented themselves?

5. Is your coalition more cohesive or less cohesive than pre COVID-19? Why?

6. What has your group learnt about effective coalition working during COVID-19?

Reflection exercise: the coalition leader/councillor

Consider the following questions:

1. How has your role as coalition group leader/councillor been impacted by the COVID-19 response and recovery?

2. How have you responded?

3. What challenges have you faced?

4. What opportunities have presented themselves?

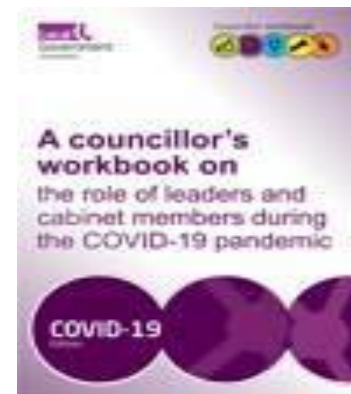5. What have you learnt as a coalition group leader/councillor?

Coalition administrations providing effective leadership?

- There is no simple correlation between majority versus coalition working and effectiveness – far more complex

- Many coalition administrations provide stable, effective leadership

- Some would argue that the cross-party nature of coalitions is suited to collaborative approach often adopted in emergencies

Political leadership in an emergency:

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

A councillor's workbook on the role of leaders and cabinet members during the COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19

Impact of COVID-19 on Coalition Administrations

- Diversity in response & impact

- Many coalitions report closer working during the COVID-19 response – bringing people together to focus on initial actions & response

- Some coalitions have struggled to maintain their partnership

- An imbalance between coalition groups can occur due to differences in impact on members of groups e.g. differences in number of councillors shielding or key workers

- Lack of face to face can be challenging where maintaining relationships is key – coalitions usually responded by increasing frequency of virtual meetings

Lessons from Coalition working during COVID-19

- Value of strong foundations set in early days of coalition

- Written agreement

- Active & inclusive communication

- Need some common ground/common purpose

- Setting realistic expectations

- Getting people in the right jobs – reflecting their experience, skills & passion

- Managing personalities

- Developing resilience

- Willingness to compromise

Recovery

- Recovery period may challenge the assumptions and priorities underlying original coalition agreements

- Re-visiting shared priorities can be a difficult time for coalitions – needs careful management

- Financial impact of COVID-19 on this years budget & MTFS is becoming more obvious – could be some very difficult decisions to negotiate

- In councils with elections in May 2021 some are noticing increasing politicisation – again, negotiating behaviour approaching elections may need attention

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Components of Effective Coalitions

1. Build strong foundations
2. Seek the common ground
3. Always have a written agreement
4. Build intentional relationships across the groups
5. Right people in the right jobs
6. No public surprises
7. Keep the groups involved
8. Invest in active communication
9. Learn, improve, adapt
10. Use political nous & soft skills

Honouring the Deal: Transactional Leadership

- Coalition administrations are based on transactional political leadership

- Very common type of political leadership which can be highly effective

- Based on a self-interested exchange – we work together and we get 'x' out of our partnership

- **Trust is built by honouring the original transactional agreement**

- Always take time to explore common interests

- Always, always get the agreement in writing

- And always honour the deal…

- And be careful when re-visiting the original deal…

Case study: Cornwall Council

Nature of the Coalition administration:

- Coalition administration of the Independents & Liberal Democrats

- Mature coalition - joint administration over the last two administrations (almost 8 years)

- Current political control: Lib Dems 34 Inds 30 Cons 45 Lab 4 Mebyon Kernow 4, other parties/vac 6

- Shared leadership – rotates every 2 years. Currently Leader is Julian German (Ind) & Deputy is Adam Paynter (Lib Dem)

- Spent time during early days getting to know each other & establishing single set of priorities

Cornwall Council & COVID-19

- More 'command & control' during the emergency period

- Greater emphasis on active communication

  - Daily briefings for members

  - Moved to weekly group meetings for both groups

  - Weekly informal cabinet meetings

  - Daily contact Leader, DL and chief executive

  - Lib Dem cabinet members available to Ind group meetings & vice versa

- Refocusing energy & effort on the emergency response priorities/cells – meetings focussed on these cells involved all e.g. cabinet member, shadow cabinet member & scrutiny chair & vice

- Involvement of all – including opposition in emergency stage

Recovery planning

- Next elections due May 2021

- The coalition were planning to 'shift' the agreed joint priorities because of climate change but COVID-19 reinforces examining priorities

- Launched a large scale listening exercise on 'the Cornwall we want'

- Financial impact of COVID-19 means there is a 'fundamentally different financial situation'

- Will feed into business plan in February & medium term financial strategy

Cornwall: Lessons for successful coalitions

- Leaders of the two groups have known each other a long time – good personal relationship

- Early time spent by the groups on getting to know each other

- Away days in early days to develop shared priorities

- Shared, rotated council leadership – spending time to get the 'hand over' period right

- Diverse, rich range of styles & experience within the cabinet

- Taking time to keep the groups involved

- Investing in member development

- Lot of hard work!

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Final reflection

As part of the final reflection consider:

- What have I learnt through the course of the webinar?

- What action/s will I take to improve coalition working?