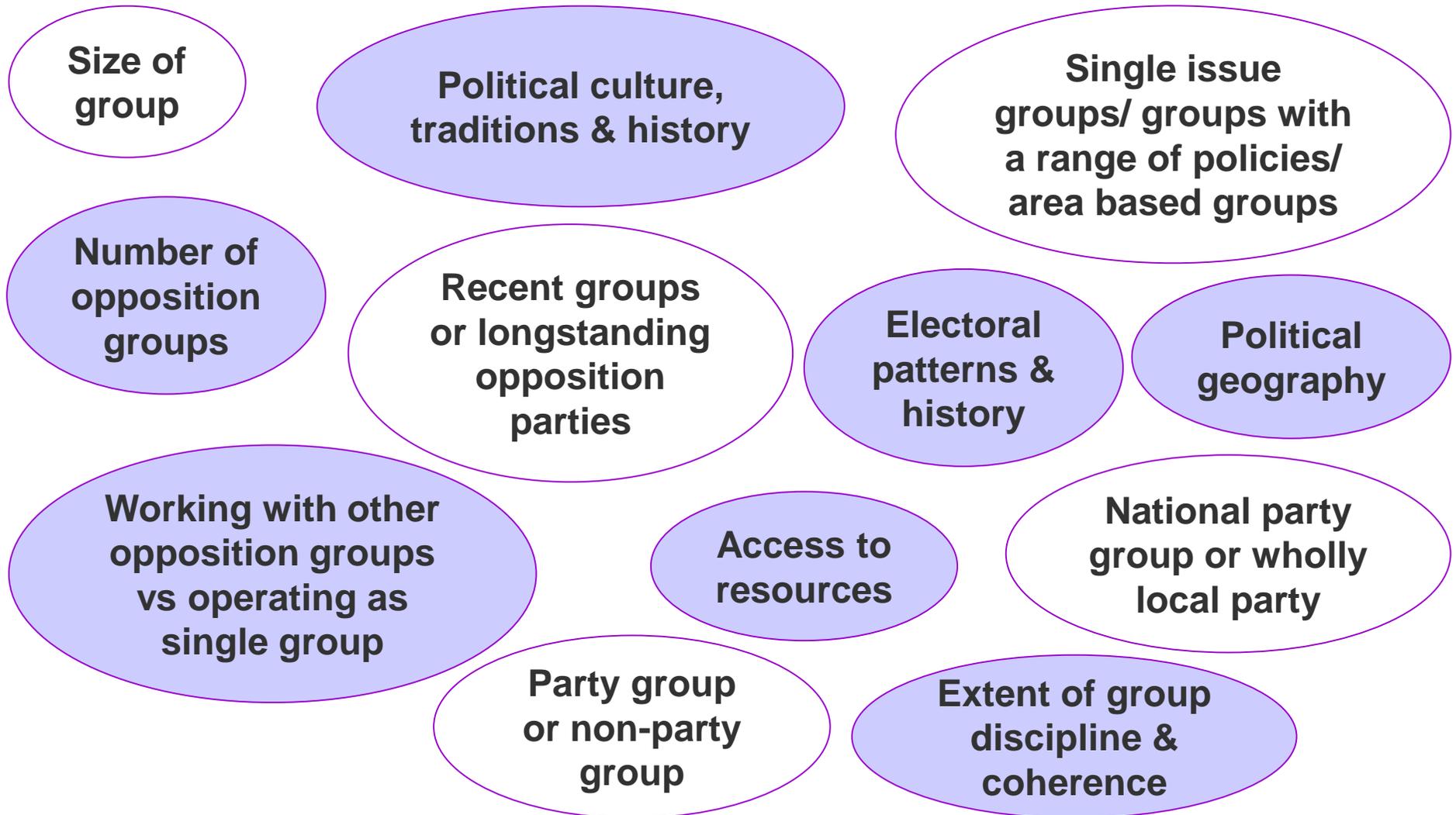# COVID-19: What Effective Opposition Looks Like

Dr Stephanie Snape, New Leadership Foundation & LGA Associate

Format & Approach

- LGA have produced two **pre-recorded webinars** on the role of opposition during the COVID-19 response & recovery:
  - The importance of opposition leadership
  - What effective opposition looks like

- **Purpose**
 - to stimulate debate on the importance of the contribution opposition councillors & groups make
 - to support opposition groups in their work on COVID-19

- **Format**

- **Recap on first webinar**

Factors shaping Opposition approach

Great variety in nature of opposition groups

Size of group

Political culture, traditions & history

Single issue groups/ groups with a range of policies/ area based groups

Number of opposition groups

Recent groups or longstanding opposition parties

Electoral patterns & history

Political geography

Working with other opposition groups vs operating as single group

Access to resources

National party group or wholly local party

Party group or non-party group

Extent of group discipline & coherence

The 10 Components of Effective Opposition

1 **Clarity on aims & priorities**

2 **Coherent opposition policy**

3 **Be a ruling group-in-waiting**

4 **Engaging outsiders & refreshing ideas periodically**

5 **Skilled use of opposition strategies & tactics**

6 **Use resources wisely**

7 **Understanding implementation**

8 **Cohesive, effective team**

9 **Effective group management**

10 **Positive, upbeat approach**

See separate downloadable exercise based on the 10 components

Source: Dr Stephanie Snape, New Leadership Foundation

...the opposition continuum...

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

Source: Dr Stephanie Snape, New Leadership Foundation

Opposition strategies: Reflection Exercise

- What is your current opposition strategy/strategies?

- What discussions have you had within your group about appropriate strategies?

- Have you adapted your strategy/ies for COVID-19?

- Have you considered adopting different strategies as the council moves from the immediate response phase to recovery?

- What are you learning about 'what works'?

Role of Opposition 1

Democracy demands an opposition party
Ben Manski

Democracy can only be measured on the existence of an opposition
Paul Henningsen

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

Role of Opposition 2

- Propose amendments to council policy

- Develop alternative policies & budgets

- Ensure controlling group/s work in the best interest of the residents and other communities

- Ensure controlling group/s work across the whole authority area

- Advocating for the communities the opposition represent

- Amplifying voices of parts of community not often heard

- Scrutinising the impact of national government policy on local councils

**Source: Dr Stephanie Snape,
New Leadership Foundation**

There is a reflection exercise based on these roles which can be downloaded separately.

Opposition Platforms

Internal – Formal

- Full council
- Policy groups
- Overview & scrutiny
- Working groups
- Area arrangements
- Cabinet
- Agreed briefing arrangements with officers

External – Formal

- Local media
- Opposition group local newsletters
- Social media
- Representation on outside bodies

Internal – Informal

- Informal relationships with officers
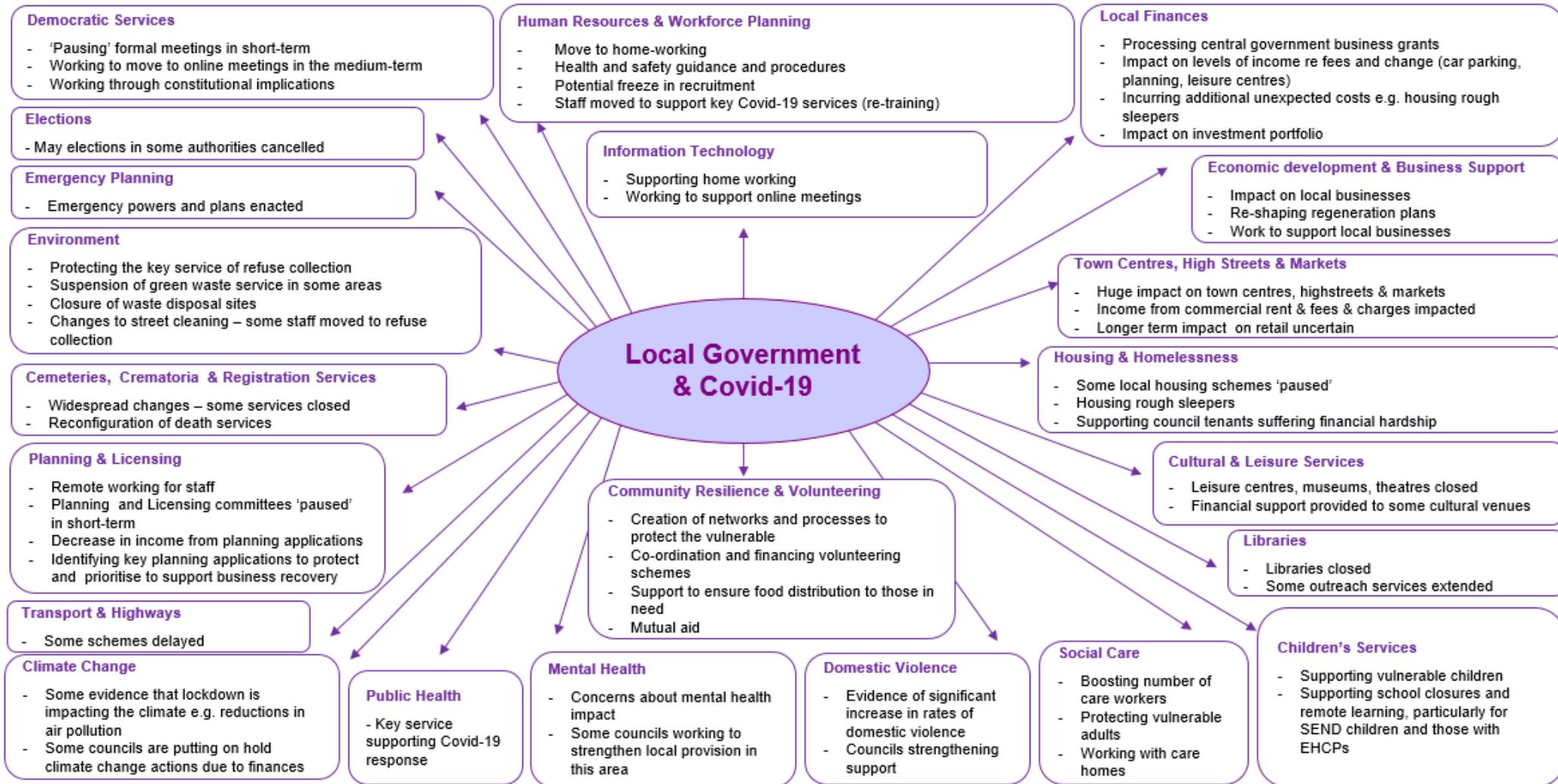- Informal networks in other political groups

External – Informal

- Relationships with community groups & interest groups
- Relationships with other local groups e.g. Other public agencies, businesses

What are your current opposition platforms during COVID-19?

Source: Dr Stephanie Snape, New Leadership Foundation

The 'Long Reach' of 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
- 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

Public Health

- Key service supporting Covid-19 response

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

Local Government & Covid-19

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

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

Economic development & Business Support

- Impact on local businesses
- Re-shaping regeneration plans
- Work to support local businesses

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

Housing & Homelessness

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

Cultural & Leisure Services

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

Libraries

- Libraries closed
- Some outreach services extended

Children's Services

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

Impact of COVID-19: Topic Areas

Member & Officer Impact

- Workforce practices
  e.g. home working
- Impact on governance
  arrangements
  e.g. virtual meetings
- Changes to member roles,
  relationships & behaviours

Council Priorities & Budget

- Re-shaping council priorities
- Short, medium & long term
  financial implications
  including impact on Medium
  Term Financial Strategy

Community impact

- Support to vulnerable & shielding
- Extent of community support
- Harnessing community endeavours over
  long term

Service Areas

- Social care impact
- Education, schooling & vulnerable children
- Reconfiguring death services
- Maintaining housing for rough sleepers
- Local COVID-19 statistics
- Impact on local plans, house building,
  infrastructure
- Impact on local economy & regeneration
- Recovery planning in service areas

Opposition Groups: Reasonable Expectations of Councils

During COVID-19 what are reasonable expectations for how councils can support an effective opposition?

- Separate meeting/s with chief executive & senior officers

- Access to timely information

- Format for virtual meetings to include a 'place' for the opposition to ask questions & provide challenge

- What does the council constitution state about the role of the opposition? Are there separate written established procedures/protocols? Is current practice in line with the spirit of these?