



Co-operative Councils

Innovation Network

COVID-19

Hillingdon Borough Council Labour Group

Cross-Party Collaboration

The community leadership role of Councillors working across political boundaries with the ruling group

Context

Hillingdon is one of one of 32 London Borough Councils and has been held by the Conservatives since 2006. Hillingdon Labour, in opposition, is an associate member of CCIN. The area is very multicultural, particularly in the south of the Borough, and there is a large elderly and vulnerable population. There is also a high incidence of asthma and other respiratory illnesses due to poor air quality; Hillingdon covers Heathrow Airport and a number of motorway links out of West London. As the Covid-19 situation developed, the Council entered emergency mode and the Leader of the Council (Sir Raymond Puddifoot MBE, Conservative) and the Leader of the opposition Labour Group (Peter Curling) began speaking regularly. The conversations took place so that parties were kept up to date with activities, could share points of view on the situation and could exchange knowledge that would directly impact the Council's priorities. For example, local geographical knowledge held by different Councillors was used to prioritise road repairs while routes were quieter due to lockdown.

Development

As the situation developed, conversations between the Leader and opposition Leader continued, at one point becoming daily, focusing on general updates and what the Council was doing around the Covid-19 situation. Hillingdon Council as a whole was concerned that, among the many people trying to help out, less well-meaning people could use the situation as an opportunity to scam vulnerable residents, and it was agreed that collaboration was needed to provide a controlled, coordinated response. Hillingdon For All (H4ALL) is a charitable incorporated organisation (CIO) comprising five third sector charities: Age UK Hillingdon Harrow & Brent; DASH; Hillingdon Carers; Harlington Hospice; and Hillingdon Mind. The Council worked with H4ALL to set up a Community Hub. Volunteers (either individuals or organisations) were directed to the Community Hub, where H4ALL worked collaboratively with the Council to deliver food parcels and check on elderly and vulnerable

residents, for example. Councillors got directly involved by helping volunteers, shopping for residents, delivering food parcels and using every different avenue they could. Several Councillors are trustees of the Fassnidge Memorial Trust Charity, which was established in 1994 to benefit people in Hillingdon. The Trust used the halls they would usually hire out for events to store the food and supplies being received by H4ALL.

Implementation

The Council's deputy CEO oversaw much of the activity, while other officers volunteered and staff (for example from the libraries, which had been closed) were redeployed to the Community Hub. People from across the Council all wanted to help. The pandemic brought to the fore and put into action the co-operative values and principles as a natural response – even if people aren't aware that's what they are. Everyone wanted to help each other through the pandemic, and activities undertaken (such as the Community Hub) were ones that the opposition Labour Group could support. The areas of cross-cooperation were practical in nature (such as immediate safety measures) and there was broad agreement on general Covid-19 activity. However there were still differences of opinion on local issues, such as the question of whether or not to keep Ruislip Lido open when the easing of lockdown coincided with good weather, meaning large visitor numbers and difficulty enforcing social distancing.



Review

The feedback from residents in the Borough was that the Council's joined-up working was appreciated. In emergency situations such as this, people can and do work together and it is possible to put politics aside and co-operate to achieve things. The experience has built up better understanding and a mutual respect between Conservative and Labour Councillors, but the Labour Group is conscious that the continuation of this depends on all those involved keeping an open mind. There is acknowledgement that some attitudes will revert to how they were before the pandemic. What worked best was keeping conversations and collaborations non-political; co-operating for a 'greater good' by being logical and sensible; and putting forward arguments that are difficult to disagree with and are fundamentally points of common sense.

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