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Good governance during COVID-19: learning from the experience of Scottish Local Authorities



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On that tension, one chief executive offered the following perspective:

“We were getting no advance insight from the Scottish Government around what was going to happen next in terms of public health measures to be put in place, so we couldn’t brief our members in advance of the public announcements. This created a suspicion amongst members, that its own staff were not keeping them briefed – when in reality, their own staff had no advance notice either. As a staff base, and a delivery partner of Scottish Government being informed at the same as the public, was hugely frustrating and unhelpful.”



One chief executive was directly critical of what was felt to be an unnecessarily centralised approach by the Scottish Government:

“The public face of the pandemic for both governments, was their respective political leader. In Scotland’s case, that was the First Minister. It was clear from a delivery partner perspective, that the political involvement in all the decision-making associated with the response was all pervading and on some occasions, the political “optics” seemed the guiding force. And of course, because of the 24/7 media world we now live in, the respective national political leaders were centre stage of that 24/7 media world. In the gold command structures put in place by the Scottish Government, there was no scope for any departure from the nationally set approach, which was an unrelenting single focus on health harm rather than the 4 harms approach that was claimed. There was no real local decision-making and no real opportunity to influence the response actions to be taken. It was a here it is and it’s to be implemented. Since devolution in Scotland, there has been a growing tension between Scottish Government and local government and the pandemic has exacerbated that tension not only between respective politicians but also across officials. Local political leaders were being held to account for decisions they had no locus in and privately were being criticised by the Government for not doing enough to support the response, when they were not being treated as a partner in the response.”



Indeed another chief executive commented:

“I think there was a tendency from the government to act as though local authorities were the same as NHS boards and they could just say, “We want you to do this and we want it by Friday,” rather than the way they would normally engage with local authorities.”



There is a longstanding and well-developed academic literature analysing the tendency of central governments to regard local authorities as delivery agents for national policies. Perhaps it is not surprising that, for some participants, the pandemic seemed to give that tendency a further push.

One council leader whose area was placed in a local lockdown is also critical of the relationship with central government:

“We got involved in the decision-making process very late in the day. It was frustrating for us that we felt that our voices weren’t really being heard. I feel that although a lot was said about partnership working between Scottish Government and local authorities, that didn’t really happen on the ground. We were given the opportunity to meet with people, but we didn’t really feel that we were able to get the opportunity to influence those decisions. We were just being paid lip service.”

