

Lessons Learned During COVID-19

COSLA and Improvement Service



Introduction

Local Government in Scotland has a long history of standing up for communities and the ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic has only served to reinforce this role.

Local Government holds a unique leadership role with respect to community planning and is central to any public sector response to emergency situations. However, COVID-19 has created also challenges that could not have been planned for and Local Government has in kind responded in an unprecedented manner.

Indeed, the value of Local Government can be seen in the response to COVID-19, where Councils have taken decisive action to support communities, people, and businesses, and to maintain democratic accountability at the local level at a time when it is most vital. Whether delivering food or medicine, providing shelter for the homeless, supporting volunteers or keeping many essential services running, Councils have been the face of the response for many. Partnership working has been central throughout the response and we have seen important examples of communities and Councils working together.

However, COVID-19 has also presented significant challenges to Local Government, including substantial financial and operational pressures. It is important to reflect that many of the complexities brought about by the pandemic have been unprecedented and, as such, the approaches taken throughout the response have been developed specifically in light of the conditions and context brought about by COVID-19.

It is also important, as Councils continue to navigate the ever-changing landscape brought about by the pandemic, that we take stock of the lessons that can be learned from the response taken to date. This is essential, not only in the continued response, but as we continue to consider recovery and renewal and the capacity that Councils will require to lead this work.

The report is intended for a wide audience across Local Government, as well as for partners from outwith Local Government, and is aimed at progressing examples of lessons learned to date, with the aim of assisting and supporting ongoing and future work. It utilises cases studies throughout, as a means of building a supportive evidence and resource base to support this purpose. The report has been developed through engagement with partners across Local Government, including SOLACE. It also seeks to complement the recently published [Blueprint for Local Government](#), which sets out a forward looking vision for Local Government in Scotland.

The report recognises the importance of ensuring that lessons learned not only acknowledge the areas of success and progress that can be built from but also takes stock of the specific difficulties that have emerged and challenges emerging for the future. It is for this reason that this report not only sets out examples of areas that can be considered to have worked well to this point but also specific challenges moving forward.

The report also recognises that experience across Local Government on some of the areas and themes referenced may differ, and that there exists a diversity of experience and approach based on the needs and requirements of communities across Scotland. The report does not seek to suggest universality of experience or propose steps towards this moving forward, rather it provides an opportunity to reflect on common themes and the examples of shared experience that have emerged.

About COSLA and the Improvement Service

COSLA is the voice of Local Government in Scotland. COSLA is a Councillor-led, cross-party organisation who champions councils' vital work to secure the resources and powers they need. COSLA works on councils' behalf to focus on the challenges and opportunities they face, and to engage positively with governments and others on policy, funding and legislation.



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The Local Government Improvement Service is the 'go-to' organisation for Local Government improvement in Scotland. Being the national improvement organisation for Local Government in Scotland, our purpose is to help Councils and their partners to improve the health, quality of life and opportunities of all people in their geographic area, through community leadership, strong local governance and the delivery of high quality, efficient local services.



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Summary of Findings

Emerging Areas of Success	
Theme	Learning
Development of new services in response to COVID-19 – including Shielding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Local Government can successfully develop and implement programmes of support in response to emergency situations in challenging timeframes and is able to allocate available resources to that effect.• Partnership working is central to the success of rolling out new programmes. This includes with the Scottish Government, the third sector, volunteers and with communities throughout Scotland.• Developing new programmes at pace has longer-term implications for the person-centred nature of policy and for community engagement at the local level.
Adaptation and Innovation (including redistribution of staff)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Local Government workforce has demonstrated flexibility to adapt to new roles and responsibilities when required to redeploy as a result of COVID-19.• A willingness to volunteer to take on new roles in the response to COVID-19 has been central to the viability of redistribution of the workforce.
Democratic Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Councils have been able to maintain the core tenets of democratic governance within the challenging environment created by COVID-19.• This transition has been particularly important in the context of COVID-19 where decisions to support communities had to be taken at a rapid pace whilst maintaining transparency and accountability.

Support for Local Economies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local Government economic development services have responded rapidly to delivering support to local businesses. Local Government has not only provided support to the local economy but has been an important champion for businesses. A number of the recommendations from the Advisory Group on Economic Recovery and Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board can only be delivered through Local Government. Place based approaches are at the heart of many recommendations for economic recovery and Local Government is well placed to deliver at a local level.
Digital Advancement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> COVID-19 has increased reliance on digital and has increased the pace of digital advancement in Local Government. While many digital initiatives were introduced in response to COVID-19, there is significant scope to further embed them in practice and delivery in the longer term. Digital exclusion has emerged as a key barrier in the new landscape created by COVID-19 and continues to have implications on the delivery of services and support.
Role of Local Resilience Partnerships/ Community Planning Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local Resilience Partnerships and Community Planning Partnerships have been essential to the response to COVID-19. Experiences emerging from CPPs signify the importance of a place-based response to meet the needs and requirements in any given locality, and the importance of local flexibility in the implementation of support.
Partnership working with third sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The available evidence indicates that the delivery of local services and support in response to emergency situations is more effective when there is clear collaboration with third sector partners in place. This has been particularly important in meeting the increased demand in enquires and of support that have been brought about by COVID-19.
Areas of Challenge	
Impact on local economies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> COVID-19 has, and will continue to have, significant impacts on local economies with compounding impacts on Councils. When current support arrangements come to an end, the situation has the potential to further deteriorate, as many businesses are reliant on these for their sustainability. Resources in Council economic development services are limited in some areas, with rising expectations placing further stress on small teams.

Budget pressures facing Local Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COVID-19 has had a considerable impact on Local Government finances, which will have implications in the medium to long term. • In this context, this has the potential to create difficult decisions regarding the allocation of available resource.
Mental Health and Wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COVID-19 has had a significant impact on mental health and the wider determinants of mental health. • Councils must continue to consider this prevailing environment in the context of service design and delivery, and support which they provide.
Community Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The pandemic has affected traditional means and methods of community engagement, particularly those requiring in-person engagement. • Moving forward further consideration could be given as to how to meaningfully engage with seldom heard groups, who may be most in need of the services and support set up in response to COVID-19 but are less likely to be able to engage with them.
Sustainability of Third Sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnership working between Local Government and the third sector has been an important element of the response effort. However, many third sector organisations are facing financial challenges. This has the potential to create increased demand and challenges for maintaining current levels of support.
Environmental Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing the increased pressures that are facing Environmental Health Officers in the context of COVID-19, in what is an already pressed service.
Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cross-sector partnership working is essential to the co-ordination of an effective response to an emergency situation, such as COVID-19. Progress has been made to this effect as a result of COVID-19; this should be maintained and re-enforced moving forward. • There remains scope to further develop the clear link between available data and decision making locally.

Lessons Learned - Emerging Areas of Success

Councils have shown throughout the response to COVID-19 that they are well placed to meet the needs of local people and have invariably been a first port of call for people needing support and assistance.

Councils have undertaken a significant amount of work to address the issues brought about by COVID-19 and we have seen Local Government respond to unprecedented challenges and put in place innovative solutions to support communities across Scotland. However, Councils have not done it alone and we have seen many examples of partnership working and an overall increase in trust between communities, volunteers, the third sector and Local Government

The research undertaken in the development of this report indicates that there have been a wide range of areas of the Local Government response to COVID-19 that have worked well and could be reflected, promoted or indeed replicated in future work. Examples to this effect are outlined below.

Several case studies are utilised in this section as a means of not only illustrating examples of good practice emerging throughout this period, but with the intention of developing an evidence base to support future work. These examples serve to demonstrate how Councils have rapidly redesigned services, created innovative solutions to new problems, and collaborated with communities and other organisations throughout the crisis. However, it is fully recognised that experience may vary across Councils and the report does not seek to promote a one-size-fits-all approach.

A) Development of new services in response to COVID-19 – including Shielding

As well as the need to continue to deliver essential public services in challenging conditions, COVID-19 has required Local Government to be at the centre of the creation of entirely new services and for these to be delivered at an unprecedented pace. The conditions brought about by COVID-19 necessitated programmes that would traditionally require a significant amount of time dedicated to scoping, development and delivery to be rolled out at a rapid pace. This created resource challenges, as well as challenges with respect to the collation and use of data and evidence, however it also served to demonstrate the ability of Councils to respond at speed in challenging conditions.

As the crisis began, Councils quickly identified those in most need and reconfigured their services and resources into large scale emergency responses. All 32 Councils set up a range of communications channels, locally tailored in a way not possible at a national level. Befriending schemes and mental health support were offered to tackle loneliness and isolation, whilst many Councils provided additional financial support to people that they assessed as being in greatest need. Many Councils set up wellbeing lines and mobilised support and new volunteer-run food

and distribution centres were established. Whilst coordination between national announcements and local response delivery have been challenging at times, Councils have demonstrated flexibility and responsiveness.

A notable example of a new service created in the initial response to COVID-19 is Shielding. Shielding is the measure that was introduced to protect extremely clinically vulnerable people to lower the risk of them coming into contact with the COVID-19 virus. Local Government was at the centre of the Shielding programme – from development to implementation. Indeed, Councils across the country set up completely new services to support vulnerable people whilst they shielded at home in a matter of days. All of this was done while managing a range of operational challenges, including the level of resource entailed and the availability of the necessary data to make informed decisions.

However, the example of Shielding is also demonstrative of an underlying challenge inherent in the roll-out of entirely new programmes at pace, namely the implications on community engagement and person-centred policy making. Councils have been aware of the impact this can have on the support that exists for any programme, transparency, awareness and the wider implications for compliance and buy-in. This matter of community engagement is considered in greater detail later in this report.

Examples outlining the work conducted by Councils in relation to Shielding, which demonstrate the quick roll out of this programme, are set out below and are posited as a means of understanding responses taken and of highlighting measures that could be replicated in future if similar circumstances were again to arise. The specific examples highlighted below are reflective of wider approaches taken across Local Government in Scotland and many of the steps highlighted were widely replicated across Councils.

- **North Lanarkshire:** North Lanarkshire were one of many Councils who created a dedicated local Community Assistance helpline targeted at the most vulnerable people in its communities. While this helpline predominantly provided support for those residents who had to shield, call handlers also helped other vulnerable people with the provision of health-related information and advice and referrals for services (such as social work or financial assistance). In developing and maintaining the Community Assistance helpline, staff from across the Council (housing, enterprise and communities, and business solutions) worked together to very quickly set up the helpline with supporting database and referrals process.

North Lanarkshire Council introduced both inbound and outbound calls in this respect. North Lanarkshire also re-deployed staff from various Council services into a temporary Supporting People team to address the immediate shielding response. Operating the helpline, this team provided an inbound and outbound call service to people looking for help, personally calling residents on the shielding list. Utilising the experience of the DigitalNL systems integrator partner (Agilisys), the Council became the first in Scotland to stand up the Helping Hands system (on 27th April) to co-ordinate shielding support. This digital system tracked the outreach support provided to residents and the specific needs of each.

- **East Renfrewshire:** In East Renfrewshire, shielding residents represented were a notably diverse group, ranging from children and parents to elderly people. As part of its response, East Renfrewshire Council phoned all residents on the list in order to:

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- Ensure that they contacted the national SMS number, especially if they need food parcels or priority food delivery slots
 - Find out if they had any food or shopping requirements
 - Find out if they required any pharmacy deliveries/prescription collections
 - Enquire about any other assistance needed, such as financial support, dog walking, befriending, digital support or social work referral.

For each person requesting help, the Council assessed what support was already in place e.g. district nursing or home care, then worked with Voluntary Action East Renfrewshire to meet their additional needs.

As well as support for people Shielding, Councils have also been responsible for providing extra support to the most vulnerable people in society and to those who generally required extra assistance, support or information during this period. Much of this work was conducted in collaboration with the third sector and volunteers, demonstrating the central importance of partnership working at the community level. Again, much of the infrastructure to facilitate this support was developed and rolled out at pace. Examples, which illustrate the approach taken across Scotland's Councils are highlighted below:

- **Glasgow City** - Councils set up support hubs to assist and support their populations during lockdown. For example, hundreds of people were helped via a new Glasgow phonenumber and website launched for city residents who are struggling during the COVID-19 pandemic. [Glasgow Helps](#) hub outlines the range of support on offer to people across the city. This represented a partnership between Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector (GCVS), Volunteer Glasgow, Glasgow City Council and Glasgow's Health and Social Care Partnership. The hub was established by GCVS in response to the lockdown and growing number of people having to self-isolate during the crisis.
- **North Ayrshire** – North Ayrshire was quick to establish its Community Support Hubs which went live on 25th March. This was a joint effort with community planning partners working together with volunteers and staff redeployed from elsewhere. The hubs were aligned to the locality model which was already in place so each locality had its own community support hub. Also, they developed "Community Books" for each locality which are available on the Community Planning website. These are not just COVID-19 focussed, but contain links to information local communities may need in another crisis such as GP details, Money Advice, etc.
- **Fife** – At the outset of the response, over 2,000 people registered with the Fife Voluntary Action's [Helping Hands website](#) to volunteer in their local community. This included over 700 people from Fife who volunteered via the national 'Scotland Cares' volunteer programme. Fife Council established the role of volunteer coordinator in each of its seven area teams to work directly with Fife Voluntary Action to contact, assess and match volunteers. These coordinators identified volunteers to place with local community groups to increase their capacity to deliver much needed services, whilst enabling existing volunteers to take some well-deserved time out.

- **Edinburgh City** – Edinburgh City Council delivered essential supplies of nappies and baby milk to families with children under two-years-old in Edinburgh. Hundreds of parcels, which included baby food jars, cereals and skin care products, were distributed across the city. The families were all identified by the Council as being in urgent need of support.

Learning

- Local Government can successfully develop and implement programmes of support in response to emergency situations in challenging timeframes and is able to allocate available resources to that effect.
- Partnership working is central to the success of rolling out new programmes. This includes with the Scottish Government, the third sector, volunteers and with communities throughout Scotland.
- Developing new programmes at pace has longer-term implications for the person-centred nature of policy and for community engagement at the local level. This should be considered in the development of programmes of this nature moving forward.

B) Adaptation and Innovation (including redistribution of staff)

COVID-19 required a seismic shift in how Councils operate. For example, the response to COVID-19 has resulted in a rapid shift to remote working and the adoption of entirely new working practices for the Local Government workforce. This shift has occurred at an unprecedented pace and has required a significant degree of flexibility.

We have also seen evidence of the re-distribution of staff to roles either directly involved in the new services created in response to COVID-19 as outlined above, or to maintain critical services to vulnerable members of the community. This has often involved Local Government employees performing roles which are new to them. For example, Renfrewshire Council created what was described as a 'super service', staffed by people drafted in from other roles, to help with the humanitarian effort. There are also certain areas where redeployed staff have been required to engage with high-risk or vulnerable people which required specialist training.

The examples outlined below highlight the redistribution of staff that occurred during the pandemic response. They signal a willingness amongst the Local Government workforce to support key and newly developed services through volunteering for required roles and indicate an inherent flexibility that exists within the Local Government workforce. Indeed, Carnegie UK, in its recent report "[COVID-19 and Communities Listening Project: A Shared Response](#)", highlighted that it had "heard that many Council staff felt fulfilled by working at the frontline, with communities and the third sector. Several managers mentioned that staff who had been redeployed flourished, and they had noticed people's talents and skills not seen before". The evidence provided is demonstrative of the ability of the Local Government workforce to adapt to the most challenging of circumstances.

- **East Ayrshire:** Council staff across Scotland have been switching roles to help those who need support most. In the early stages of the response, forty Ayrshire Roads Alliance workers swapped road maintenance and traffic emergencies for delivering free school meals and helping out with refuse collection. Also, in East Ayrshire, administrative staff from Education worked with the Vibrant Communities team to make 'check in' phone calls to vulnerable people who were shielding. Education and transition teams packed and delivered food boxes for people needing food assistance as well as organising food for community pantries, while Human Resources staff worked in the customer contact centre dealing with a wide range of enquiries from the public every day.
- **South Lanarkshire:** More than 400 South Lanarkshire Leisure and Culture staff volunteered in a wide variety of roles during the early stages of the pandemic response. Among the tasks the 430 volunteers were involved with, were calling people in the community who are shielding or needed some extra support, delivering meals and medicines, managing queues at local pharmacies, helping out at care homes and school hubs, and much more.

Learning

- The Local Government workforce has demonstrated flexibility to adapt to new roles and responsibilities when required to redeploy as a result of COVID-19.
- A willingness to volunteer to take on new roles in the response to COVID-19 has been central to the viability of redistribution of the workforce.

C) Democratic Accountability

COVID-19 created challenges for Councils relating to democratic decision making and governance, and with respect to maintaining democratic accountability to the communities which they serve. The environment created by the pandemic required the decision-making process of Councils to be flexible enough to deliver decisions rapidly to support employees and communities and to overcome the practical issues brought about by the pandemic.

Councils rapidly introduced emergency arrangements to support the continuation of effective decision making and democratic oversight during the critical early stages of the pandemic. Online meetings were also rolled out by Councils across Scotland to ensure democratic accountability and transparency remained central to decision-making and made significant efforts to ensure that people were able to participate, as well as ensuring that all relevant documentation and decisions were clear and available. Councils also produced guidance for elected members, Chairs, Committee officers, Board members, and, members of the public to ensure democratic proceedings run as smoothly as possible.

Local Councillors have themselves also regularly been the first point of contact for people to raise concerns and have sought to ensure that appropriate action is taken in alignment with the key role they undertake in ensuring the maintenance of local democratic accountability. Indeed,

we have also seen several Councils create new posts and roles directly to address the COVID response or renewal. The efforts outlined have been essential to maintaining transparency and accountability in local decision making.

● **Aberdeenshire Council** has been recognised as a source of good practice advice in assisting the continuation of democratic input during the global pandemic. The Council has embraced the use of technology to move committee and other meetings online. The commitment of members and officers to sustain the democratic decision making of the Council by continuing to involve external partners and allow public participation has meant that business has been able to continue as inclusively as possible. Council meetings are continuing virtually using Skype for Business. These meetings include:

- Full Council
- IJB
- Area Committees
- Policy Committees
- Licencing Board / Licencing sub-committee

Learning

- Councils were able to maintain the core tenets of democratic governance within the challenging environment created by COVID-19.
- This transition has been particularly important in the context of COVID-19 where decisions to support communities had to be taken at a rapid pace whilst maintaining transparency and accountability.

D) Support for Local Economies

Councils have been central to the economic support that has been provided to residents and businesses. The economic shock from the national response to COVID-19 significantly changed the landscape for local economic development over an extremely short period of time. Resources were immediately redeployed to assist in the administration of support to people and businesses in most areas. This has had significant impacts across a range of economic development activity that Councils deliver, including support to businesses, City and Growth Deals, employability support and town centre regeneration. Focus has now begun to shift towards recovery, but with ongoing uncertainty in terms of current and future restrictions, the way forward remains unclear.

The Improvement Service published a dashboard showing the economic impact of Covid-19 on local authority areas. This dashboard summarises available data on the current uptake of government support including those furloughed through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, unemployment benefit claims, Business Support Grant Fund claims, and the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme. The dashboard will be updated regularly and is available [here](#).

The Scottish Local Authorities Economic Development (SLAED) Group have been at the centre of crucial engagement with the Scottish Government and national enterprise and skills agencies. At first, a weekly meeting was held to ensure that the concerns and challenges facing Local Government were communicated to Scottish Government largely focussed on Business Support and Employability, and as time has gone on the meetings were able to identify the priorities for each sector from the recommendations from the Advisory Group on Economic Recovery and the Enterprise and Strategic Skills Board.

Local Government Business Support Services responded rapidly when the various business support funds were launched and were instrumental in delivering the Business Support Grant Fund. Councils continue to provide support to business and those who have lost their jobs or are at risk of losing their jobs. Through previous engagement with business and dispersal of the grant funds Councils are in a good position to identify those businesses which require more help. Place based approaches to economic recovery, including Community Wealth Building approaches, have been recommended and Local Government represents a key delivery mechanism for this, having a focus on their local places and communities.

The Improvement Service also produced a [COVID-19 Supplement](#) to the SLAED Indicators Report for 2019-20. The report highlights the major impact that COVID-19 has had on local economies and the major role that Council economic development services have played in terms of responding to the initial crisis and ongoing recovery. The report discusses a range of data and evidence, as well as some case studies of good practice in responding to the challenge. The full report can be accessed on the Improvement Service website [here](#):

- A new job matching website (c19jobs) was launched by Edinburgh and South East Scotland City Region deal to help reduce unemployment caused by COVID-19. [C19jobs](#) aims to match live vacancies with jobseekers, helping to combat growing unemployment as a result of COVID-19. The site also provides information and guidance for both employers and employees.
- **North Lanarkshire** created a one-stop web page to provide information that enabled local businesses to reopen safely and start the recovery process for the local economy. This included a dedicated page to assist bars, cafes, and restaurants access the relevant temporary licences to open outdoor spaces.

Learning

- Local Government economic development services have responded rapidly to delivering support to local businesses.
- Local Government has not only provided support to the local economy but is also an important champion for businesses.
- A number of the recommendations from the Advisory Group on Economic Recovery and Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board can only be delivered through Local Government.
- Place based approaches are at the heart of many recommendations for economic recovery and Local Government is well placed to deliver at a local level.

E) Digital Advancement

Another example of adaptation and innovation in Councils has been the use and advances seen with respect to digital transformation. The COVID-19 crisis has been a catalyst of digital advancement and this has been the case for Local Government. From increases in remote working, to virtual meetings, to how services are being delivered, Councils are increasingly working digitally. Indeed, Audit Scotland in their review of [digital progress of Local Government](#) noted that *"Covid-19 has increased the pace at which Scotland's 32 councils are delivering services through digital technology."*

Microsoft Teams has now become the most used collaboration tool for staff in Councils, and the wider public sector, as O365 is rolled out. For communication with citizens in the health and social care sector, the Scottish Government has rolled out Near Me video consultation, which is now available for use across the public sector. Consultations undertaken using Near Me have increased from 300 a week prior to COVID-19 to average of 19,000 a week as of December 2020. Work is currently being undertaken, supported by the [Local Government Digital Office](#) and others, to explore how Near Me can be more widely used by Councils.

A number of Councils have indicated that they are looking to maintain the effective use of technology in recovery and renewal planning, with two main strands emerging from discussions. The first of these strands is a commitment to continue to make use of technology to support staff to work remotely, which has resulted in savings through closure of buildings and reduced travel costs. The second area referenced is to build on the success of delivering services digitally. Councils have had to deliver services online in challenging circumstances, but the services have been successfully delivered. Councils are now looking at how they can sustain this moving forward and can increase choice for people as to how they access and engage with Council operated services.

The role of data is considered further on in this report, and we have seen significant efforts to improve the access and utilisation of data, both at a Local Government level and on a cross-sector basis. Indeed, there has been a demonstrable shift in attitudes towards further recognising the importance of using of data to help meet challenges and a willingness to collaborate across the public sector to share data and maximise its value. Work to this effect has included the development of a Local Government data dashboard and the work undertaken by the Local Government Digital Office and partners to develop cross-sector working through the Data and Intelligence Network. Additionally, partners across Local Government have also worked closely with Public Health Scotland with respect to the use of data and intelligence in ensuring appropriate and targeted responses to the pandemic. It is expected that this partnership approach will continue to develop in the coming months.

Whilst important initiatives have been undertaken, the issue of digital exclusion has been increasingly prominent, particularly in our rural and island communities. Pre-existing digital exclusion, exacerbated by the landscape brought about by COVID-19, has meant that people across Scotland were excluded from accessing support services and that many of these services were compromised, reduced or couldn't be delivered due to lack of connectivity. This prevailing situation has implications for the delivery of services, community engagement and for wider transparency and accountability. It is also often compounded by the connectivity challenges that face many communities across Scotland, the consequences of which have been exacerbated by COVID-19.

Several initiatives have been formed to tackle the issue of digital exclusion. The Scottish Government initiated and funded [Connecting Scotland](#) in response to this prevailing issue.

The programme is co-ordinated by the Scottish Government, SCVO and Local Government and seeks to provide devices, connectivity solutions, and support to develop digital skills and confidence, with the aim of getting 50,000 people online by the end of 2021. We have also seen a significant programme of work undertaken by Councils to deliver Chromebooks and connectivity support to students, to ensure that they were able to continue their education in the context of the pandemic. Initiatives such as e-Sgoil (**Comhairle nan Eilean Siar**) also supported schools' remote learning and teaching plans by providing resources and live lessons to young people having to work from home due to COVID-19.

- **Aberdeen City** - Aberdeen City Libraries used digital technologies to adapt to the current COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that readers of all ages continue to have access to reading material and resources. The library service increased the number of digital resources available to members. These included BorrowBox, RB Digital UK and PressReader which provide free access to thousands of eBooks, eAudiobooks, eComics and digital copies of newspaper and magazines. Online registration to join the library has increased significantly on the previous year.
- **Perth and Kinross** - In response to COVID-19, Perth & Kinross Council introduced an option to allow families bidding their final farewell to loved ones to do so safely and while observing physical distancing. At what is already a difficult time for the bereaved, finding a way to enable other mourners to make their own personal dedication was identified as crucial. As a result, funeral services at Perth Crematorium can now be watched live via a private web stream, made accessible only to the bereaved. This practice has been replicated across Councils in Scotland.
- **Argyll and Bute** - Council-operated Oban Airport provided safety support to a trial delivering vital medical supplies between Lorn and Islands District General Hospital, in Oban, and Mull and Iona Community Hospital, Craignure, Isle of Mull. The team at the airport is providing back up to Skyports, a London-based drone delivery service. The project is designed to support NHS logistics operations to help provide front-line staff with the necessary equipment to do their jobs safely and to help keep hard-to-reach communities provisioned with essential medical care.

Learning

- COVID-19 has increased reliance on digital and has increased the pace of digital advancement in Local Government.
- While many digital initiatives were introduced in response to COVID-19, there is significant scope to further embed them in practice and delivery in the longer term.
- Digital exclusion has emerged as a key barrier in the new landscape created by COVID-19 and continues to have implications on the delivery of services and support.

F) Role of Local Resilience Partnerships/Community Planning Partnerships

Local Resilience Partnerships (LRPs) and Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) have played an integral role in the emergency response efforts, through partnership working, co-ordination, communication and mobilising volunteers.

LRPs have been at the centre of the frontline response to COVID-19. From Shielding, to Test and Protect, to emerging work surrounding vaccinations, LRPs have been a vital component in providing support for vulnerable people throughout and have been essential to many of the programmes set up in response to the pandemic. Council leaderships and LRPs have worked in partnership, and in collaboration with the Scottish Government and a wide range of partners throughout the response, with the aim of providing a sufficiently joined-up national and local response.

LRPs have also continued to act as a strategic forum for local partners to develop an overall view of demand and supply of support in each area of Scotland and to identify and address any issues arising from how the system is operating locally. In addition, LRPs have provided a forum for local authorities and other local partners to identify any gaps or issues local operations, and to help to coordinate the deployment of local community and voluntary services. It is also important to note that this body of work has been undertaken while LRPs (and Councils) faced several concurrent risks, such as Brexit, which served to increase the pressures on their capacity and resources. It is important to reinforce that joint working and community leadership were crucial to the work conducted by LRPs.

Similarly, CPPs have held a central role in the response to COVID-19. The evidence base for CPPs working with community groups and grassroots organisations during this period is substantial. In most cases this was to coordinate efforts in terms of emergency supplies, with the vast majority being food and prescription deliveries, sometimes wellbeing calls/visits too. From discussions with CPP members, the picture was slightly more complicated as it seems that there were more volunteers than jobs available, and similarly the number, and enthusiasm of, community groups coming forward for support was sometimes more than the CPPs had capacity to support. However, the overall picture was a positive one, where the groups were able to effectively deliver support to those most in need.

A consistent theme emerging was that the partnerships developed prior to the pandemic were key to allowing a smooth transition to emergency functionality. For example, in one case it was noted many of the members of a local Emergency Management Team were, in normal times, members of the same area's CPP. This meant that trust and familiarity had already been established, removing many of the potential barriers that can occur when teams are formed at short notice. One CPP stated that if CPPs hadn't existed prior to the pandemic, somebody would have had to invent them to deal with the response to the pandemic anyway.

Another theme which has emerged through discussions with CPPs, is the impact on Local Outcomes Improvement Plans (LOIPs). Some CPPs stated that they were likely to factor the recovery into their plans moving forward, whilst others felt that the priorities identified originally in the LOIP were more relevant than ever now. Certainly, issues such as poverty, outcomes for younger people and inequality are generally considered to have been exacerbated by COVID-19 and those CPPs who had already planned to tackle them did not feel that a major reset of their LOIP would be necessary. In other cases, some CPPs mentioned that whilst the broad issues that the LOIP covered remained the same, the pandemic had altered the way they could be addressed, so this required some work. For example, one CPP noted that its definition of poverty

had shifted as a result of the pandemic, moving from child poverty to a much broader definition, with the recognition that addressing all forms of poverty would still achieve positive outcomes for children.

Many of the most important lessons, and success stories were tied up in place. CPPs felt that in terms of the emergency response, teams which were locally based operated as one team, regardless of jurisdictions prior to the pandemic. They learnt that involving the community as early as possible in planning and preparation helped to deliver services better. Others noted that this approach should also be adopted in terms of the recovery.

Learning

- Local Resilience Partnerships and Community Planning Partnerships have been essential to the response to COVID-19.
- Experiences emerging from CPPs signify the importance of a place-based response to meet the needs and requirements in any given locality, and the importance of local flexibility in the implementation of support.

G) Partnership working with third sector

Partnership working and increase in trust between communities, volunteers, the third sector and Local Government has represented an essential component of the COVID-19 response. For example, the third sector and Councils worked closely together in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic helping them to provide support to those most in need, and this mutually supportive partnership has represented a key facet of ensuring successful responses throughout. The increased demand brought about by COVID-19 has often necessitated an increased role of volunteers to provide services such as call handling and delivery. The outset of the pandemic saw a significant interest in volunteering support, however there is a possibility that the numbers may decline in the longer term, and this may have implications for delivery. The lessons highlighted from the case studies below are representative of the benefits that can be accrued from this partnership approach.

- **Stirling Council** – Stirling Council and Stirlingshire Voluntary Enterprise (SVE) have created a [webpage](#) giving community groups, individuals and businesses the opportunity to offer support to those most in need during the COVID-19 outbreak. The Council and SVE continue to receive an unprecedented number of enquiries from residents, local groups and organisations seeking guidance on how to support vulnerable people and keep them safe during the COVID-19 outbreak.
- **South Lanarkshire Council** – South Lanarkshire Council worked closely with its Third Sector Interface, VASLan, to mobilise communities to provide support for those in need. They were inundated by requests from the community to volunteer which were coordinated through the Council's Community Engagement Team and VASLan to ensure they were targeted to help those most in need. In total, 1,587 volunteers

helped to deliver food parcels, collection and delivery of prescriptions and carried out friendly phone calls. This work has also been in partnership with community groups and this has helped to forge greater links between community groups and the council.

Learning

- The available evidence indicates that the delivery of local services and support in response to emergency situations is more effective when there is clear collaboration with third sector partners in place.
- This has been particularly important in meeting the increased demand in enquires and of support that have been brought about by COVID-19.

H) Benchmarking and Knowledge Management

Ensuring that data is collected in a consistent and clear manner has represented a key challenge to Local Government. The Improvement Service benchmarking team have produced a weekly Local Government COVID-19 Dashboard report for Councils, based on an agreed subset of key indicators drawn from a wide suite of COVID-19 data returns. During the initial phase of work, significant progress was made in improving the quality of the data returned through more robust data validation and strengthened metadata, a process which will hopefully drive wider data quality improvements across the sector.

Sharing good practice has represented an important element of response. In terms of sharing learning, Councils have contributed to the Improvement Service's work to build up a collection of case studies. This aims to show how Councils have rapidly redesigned services, created innovative solutions to new problems, and collaborated with communities and other organisations in responding to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. These case studies are published on the Improvement Service [website](#).

As well as highlighting good practice and showing the range of work being carried out by local authorities, these case studies are designed to allow Councils to see what others are doing to feed into their own response.

Lessons Learned - Areas of Challenge

As we continue to respond to COVID-19 developments, it is important that Local Government remains agile in how it engages with emerging issues and is aware of the areas that have provided challenge.

By identifying and considering some of the key challenges that have been prevalent in the response to the pandemic to date, we can consider their implications in a manner which can inform future work.

This section provides an overview of some of the key challenges that have emerged from our research, as well as a high-level analysis of their implications. In particular, it highlights areas or issues that may prove challenging moving forward. It is recognised that the themes outlined below do not represent a fully comprehensive list of experience to date, however they represent issues that have emerged prominently through the course of this work.

A) Impacts on local economies

The impact of the continued restrictions is expected to be felt to varying degrees between different parts of local economies. Examples of the sectors that are reporting particularly large downturns in output are accommodation and food; arts, entertainment, and recreation.

As a result of the differing impact on sectors of the economy, the economic impact is likely to vary between local authorities. Although the impact is likely to vary considerably, clearly no area will escape economic harm. For example, in rural areas the impact on tourism is having the greatest effect on the economy, whereas in more urban settings, businesses are struggling because of the reduction in customers in town and city centres due to the growth in home working. Targeted measures have been implemented by Councils and their partners to support the local economy in a variety of ways. The challenge remains, however, a lack of resources in local authority economic development services, with this non-statutory function having been cut over the years, meaning teams in many Councils are stretched thin. Given the importance of Councils in economic recovery there needs to be additional investment in the resources required.

Investment in local economies will be a crucial part of the recovery process. As well as local investment, local authorities have other levers which can be used to support economic recovery. A [briefing](#) by the Local Government Information Unit (LGIU) highlighted a range of actions Councils could undertake in their economic recovery strategies. These include mapping local needs and flows of goods and services, using procurement to raise social, economic and environmental standards, and updating local economic and industrial strategies for the new context. There is evidence that Councils are already focussing efforts on some of the suggested recovery actions.

Although local businesses have been offered support through the current restrictions, the risk for many businesses will not disappear as soon as restrictions are lifted completely. This will have

implications for the sustainability of a significant volume of local businesses, with compounding implications for high streets, employment and inevitably inequality.

Challenges

- COVID-19 has, and will continue to have, significant impacts on local economies with compounding impacts on Councils.
- When current support arrangements come to an end, the situation has the potential to further deteriorate, as many businesses are reliant on these for their sustainability.
- Resources in Council economic development services are limited in some areas, with rising expectations placing further stress on small teams.

B) Budget pressures facing Local Government

Dealing with COVID-19 is presenting ongoing financial challenges for Local Government during 20/21 and will impact on budgets for years to come. COVID-19 has created costs pressures for Local Government for 2020-21 including:

- immediate spending requirements (social work, community justice, housing etc)
- lost income including fees, charges and commercial income due to closures
- reductions in Council Tax income
- capital project costs
- unachievable savings due to the pandemic
- recovery costs (excluding Education and ELC)

In addition, the emergency and critical responses taken by Councils have had a significant impact on already-fragile Local Government finances, with a number of new asks of Local Government and additional services provided being cost intensive. Once all COVID-related funding is considered a gap of around £360m remains.

Additionally, the re-opening of key services, in line with emerging guidance, is placing pressure on budgets, and ongoing social distancing restrictions and associated behaviour changes will see income across a range of areas continue to be negatively impacted for the foreseeable future. This has immediate and long-term implications for Local Government's ability to both manage the financial impacts of COVID-19 and continue to deliver services.

In terms of spending priorities of Councils, the more common themes that have emerged in engagement with Councils will not be considered surprising. Tackling inequality and poverty, and education, were two of the most common themes. Social care, roads and infrastructure and tackling the climate emergency have also been highlighted in engagement. Additional areas that were mentioned included the rollout of the 1140hrs funded Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) provision and cycling/walking infrastructure, with the same number of Councils prioritising it.

In terms of the areas where cutbacks would have to be made, Councils have been understandably less willing to publish details. Reducing staff costs has often been a necessary

option. This comes in a variety of different forms, for example, not filling vacant posts, reduced travel expenditure and savings on utility bills from empty offices. Of course, creating the IT infrastructure required to allow staff to work from home for the foreseeable future has incurred significant costs in its own right but in most cases this had already been accounted for and the savings as a result were anticipated over the coming period. As Councils chase net zero carbon emissions targets by 2030, remote working may well prove to be a permanent solution.

Many Councils also mentioned the use of reserves as an option to try and mitigate the current funding shortfall. In most cases, this was suggested as simply a review of existing arrangements as to how reserves are best used, with uncertainty around future funding from the Scottish Government cited as the main motivation behind the use of reserves.

Challenges

- COVID-19 has had a considerable impact on Local Government finances, which will have implications in the medium to long term.
- In this context, this has the potential to create difficult decisions regarding the allocation of available resource.

C) Mental health and well-being

COVID-19, and the restrictions that have accompanied the response to the pandemic, have also had far reaching implications on mental health and wellbeing, and has led to greater social isolation and less personal development through interaction and engagement, particularly among young people and vulnerable groups. For example, the pandemic has put a huge strain on many young people who were already struggling with their mental health, due to traumatic experiences, social isolation, a loss of routine and the challenges inherent in providing formal and informal support.

Recent [research](#) by SAMH has revealed that almost half (43%) of people with mental health problems in Scotland felt they did not get care or treatment because of the pandemic. The SAMH study sought to understand the impact of COVID-19 on people with mental health problems, and examined areas including care quality, frequency and communication.

In June 2020, [Public Health Scotland](#) also carried out a rapid review of the impact of COVID-19 on mental health. Their main findings were:

- Based on the limited evidence available, it seems likely that Scotland will experience an increase in poor mental health (particularly among those who already have pre-existing illness, healthcare workers, people who have had exposure to COVID-19 and females). Ways to mitigate this impact should be considered as a matter of urgency. The mental healthcare system also needs to be prepared and responsive to this.
- We (PHS) strongly recommend that research on mental health is undertaken in such a way as to ensure that the study population is representative of Scotland and that validated measures which have been previously used in population surveys (e.g. the Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS), the GHQ-12, the Clinical Interview Schedule-Revised (CIS-R) which are all used in the Scottish Health Survey)

are used to assess mental health outcomes, so that the results from new research can be put in context of what we already know from the substantial research on this topic that we have undertaken as a country over the decades.

While measures have been taken at a national and local level, it is clear that the continuation of the response to COVID-19 in the coming months will have a significant impact on the mental health of many people in Scotland.

This has implications for Councils in terms of the communities that they engage with. We have seen examples of Councils signposting the support that is available in their local area. Councils have responsibilities for delivering a wide range of services that offer assistance and support in the areas of mental health. Councils also have responsibilities in relation to many of the wider social determinants of mental health, such as housing, transport, sports and leisure, many of which have directly been impacted by the pandemic. It is therefore of increasing importance that mitigation efforts are a central component of service design and delivery moving forward.

The continuation of restrictions over the winter period is likely to exacerbate this prevailing situation, as they will have notable effects on the ability of people to visit friends and family or to engage in the community activities that we regularly associate with winter festivities. It will also create increased demand for services that are already under significant pressure, particularly those providing valuable support for vulnerable groups. That is why it is of clear importance that support is easily accessible for people and that sufficient action is taken to address the issues created by social isolation and loneliness.

Challenges

- COVID-19 has had a significant impact on mental health and the wider determinants of mental health
- Councils must continue to consider this prevailing environment in the context of service design and delivery, and support which they provide.

D) Community engagement

The need to make rapid decisions about adapting how public services are delivered has had impacts on the amount and the quality of community engagement that has been able to take place during the pandemic. As has been outlined, Councils have taken significant steps to ensure communities are informed, and to ensure democratic accountability is maintained, during this period, increasingly through digital means. Providing clear and transparent information about decision-making is an important part of community engagement, especially now, when public confidence and buy-in for restrictions to everyone's normal lives are crucial for keeping us safe and well.

There is clearly much to learn from groups that have been supporting communities and individuals locally during the lockdown, providing advice and direct support, and directly from communities across Scotland. New and different forms of engagement and working together have sprung up, whether through befriending, helplines, hubs and many others. These may offer hope for the future, not least for more engagement in Governance and Democracy and serve

to demonstrate the resilience and agility that has been evident in the response to the challenges created by COVID-19.

However, not every community has benefited or been involved in such activity and this creates longer-term challenges for Councils. Engaging groups who have been most affected by COVID-19 and the lockdown is critical to recovery. Redesigning and rebuilding services will need to fundamentally address the inequalities that prevent effective engagement – including issues such as digital exclusion, as is outlined earlier in this report. This is particularly important as many of the seldom heard groups that will not be involved in this engagement are also likely to be digitally excluded.

This is of importance as Councils have been heavily involved in the roll out of new or developing programmes at significant pace, as previously described. While this has been a necessity, it has, in certain circumstances, limited the amount of community engagement that has been able to take place in the formative stages of development. This has implications where these programmes are expected to continue for a considerable period of time, and consideration could be taken of potential steps to ensure that the programmes are reliably person-centred and sustainable for the people who engage with them.

Many Councils have been developing strategies around increasing the capacity of community involvement and self-help in response to this prevailing situation. This is important to maintaining trust, and in many cases, compliance with the programmes that have been put in place to tackle the ongoing pandemic. Relationships with the communities served by Councils are going to be even more important in the months ahead – with the severe challenges to local economies, rising unemployment, increased inequalities, ongoing pressures on the NHS, social care and mental health services.

Challenges

- The pandemic has affected traditional means and methods of community engagement, particularly those requiring in-person engagement.
- Moving forward further consideration could be given as to how to meaningfully engage with seldom heard groups, who may be most in need of the services and support set up in response to COVID-19 but are less likely to be able to engage with them.

E) Sustainability of third sector

Voluntary organisations have supported people and communities through lockdown, often working in partnership with Councils as outlined above. However, many organisations are likely to face reduced income and surging demand over the coming months. As is the case with Local Government, there is widespread concern in the voluntary sector about financial viability as uncertainty over continued funding is exacerbated by the expected economic downturn and restrictions on traditional fundraising activities.

The reduction of income from fundraising, trading, service delivery and increased costs will have long-term consequences. Over half (51%) of charities surveyed by the [Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator](#) in May 2020 had lost income from fundraising. Two in five (42%) had lost

income from other sources such as trading. One in five (20%) reported a critical threat to their financial viability in the next 12 months.

There is a need for funding to meet the expected increased demand on the sector post-lockdown and to help ensure that the pandemic does not lead to further inequalities within our society. The pandemic has hit those that were already the most disadvantaged the hardest and that will inevitably increase demand for services and support. Unemployment, poverty, mental health, and debt will require more capacity, and the public and voluntary sectors will need to deliver services in new or different ways.

As has been highlighted in this report the partnership working between Local Government and the third sector has been vital to the COVID-19 response. As such, the financial viability of the sector will be of central importance to our continued efforts moving forward and reduced capacity and resources in the third sector will inevitably impact on Local Government.

Challenge

- Partnership working between Local Government and the third sector has been an important element of the response effort. However, many third sector organisations are facing financial challenges. This has the potential to create increased demand and challenges for maintaining current levels of support.

F) Environmental Health

As has been detailed throughout this report, the COVID-19 response has placed significant strains on the Local Government workforce. The pandemic has placed pressure on Environmental Health Officers, with increasing concerns about capacity and resilience of environmental health services and the imbalance of current and future workloads. We have seen clear examples of the importance of the work undertaken by Environmental Health Officers in response to COVID-19. For example, 23 local authority environmental health services supported Aberdeen City Council when lockdown restrictions were put in place, representing a clear example of the mutual aid that has been a key feature of this period, and also an important element of lowering the rate of transmission in this specific example.

The pressure on Environmental Health Officers is particularly important as responsibilities continue to increase for what is a relatively small cohort of professionals. For example, the Scottish Government's Strategic Framework indicates that the Government is exploring conferring additional enforcement powers on Environmental Health Officers and Trading Standards Officers, building on the direction-making powers put in place previously, to support their intelligence-led approach to enforcement. This would increase expectations on an already pressed service, which is also centrally involved in Test and Protect and with respect to wider enforcement matters.

The Society of Chief Officers of Environment Health for Scotland (SoCOEHS) has been actively involved with the Scottish Government on the development of guidance, revisions to legislation, lobbying for additional resources and new enforcement powers. They have also established a workforce strategy group which has set short, medium- and long-term recommendations to protect the existing workforce and seek to grow new environmental health professionals for the future.

Challenge

- Managing the increased pressures that are facing Environmental Health Officers in the context of COVID-19, in what is an already pressed service.

G) Data

There has been a real recognition of the importance of using of data and a willingness to collaborate across the public sector to share data and maximise its value. While important strides have been made surrounding sector wide collaboration with respect to data, it is also important to highlight some of the challenges that have been apparent during the response period.

It is notable that the increased focus on data led to a significant increase in data requests to Councils, particularly at the outset of the response to the pandemic. The volume of data requested by the Scottish Government and other partners, often without the provision of a clear understanding of why that data was needed, led to data not being properly assured and concerns about whether the data was being used at all. This situation had implications for the workload of Councils and led to an increased likelihood of the production of poor-quality data. This is something that will need to be accounted for in emergency situations that arise in the future and steps have been taken to this effect as is highlighted in this report.

To address this issue COSLA, Improvement Service, Local Government Digital Office and partners developed a dedicated data dashboard, previously highlighted in the previous section of this report covering benchmarking. Putting in place clear and regular requests for data that are easy to respond to has allowed regular data returns to be collected from all 32 local authorities on a weekly basis. The dashboard and the collaboration fostered has also streamlined requests reducing noise and duplication of data requests. The learning from this will help move us towards a larger data dashboard and enable Local Government to take more control of its own data. In the longer term this experience will contribute to gathering timely or even real time data.

However, an area of challenge that is still apparent is the link between how data is translating into decision making locally and what it has allowed us to deliver in terms of decision making. This is particularly important with respect to how decisions are made in key areas such as health and social care, where the need for real time data to respond to emerging developments is crucial. Local Government continues to work with Public Health Scotland, the Scottish Government and partners to this effect.

Challenges and Learning

- Cross-sector partnership working is essential to the co-ordination of an effective response to an emergency situation. Progress has been made to this effect as a result of COVID-19, this should be maintained and re-enforced moving forward.
- There remains scope to further develop the clear link between available data and decision making locally.

Conclusion

This report has sought to identify broad lessons learned from the response to the COVID-19 pandemic that has been undertaken by Local Government to date.

Themes to this effect have been identified throughout this report. The evidence and themes highlighted throughout this report were determined through a process of research, engagement and evidence gathering progressed over a short period of time, primarily in the autumn months of 2020. There is a considerable volume of information that could have been included as part of this work, and this report has not sought to cover relevant activity in its entirety, rather to build on the existing evidence base to inform and support the response to emerging issues.

It is evident in the examples provided above that Local Government has been essential to the response to COVID-19 and has taken significant steps to adapt and support communities across Scotland. It is also evident that the efforts taken in response to the pandemic have been taken in the most challenging of circumstances. The evidence indicates that Councils have taken decisive action to protect and support communities, people and businesses. It is clear there is a significant amount of information that can be utilised from experience to date to inform future responses.

This report demonstrates that Local Government continues to be the anchor in our communities and our most vulnerable groups; for children, young people and families; for the elderly and those needing extra support; for local businesses; for those needing help with housing; and for the services that protect and improve our physical and emotional well-being and the environment.

However, this does not mean that there have been no difficulties encountered and it is evident that there a number of key challenges that will need to be addressed moving forward. This report has sought to pick out some of these challenges and to evidence these through experiences that have emerged during the pandemic. By taking this approach, the report has the intention of assisting in thinking moving forward to support future work.