



**Children's  
Neighbourhoods  
Scotland**

# **COVID-19 Glasgow Research Briefing: Local Service Responses September 2020**

**Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland**

## Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus the inequalities affecting children and families in Glasgow's high poverty neighbourhoods, and how these have been heightened by the crisis. The aim of this research was to examine service responses to the COVID-19 virus pandemic and the experiences of families, children and young people living in high poverty settings. This briefing focusses on learning in relation to how local service providers have responded to the crisis.

An overview of the research methodology and approach used in this research is presented as an Appendix at the end of this briefing.

This briefing paper forms one of a suite of resources published from the CNS COVID-19 research programme. The [full research report](#), other thematic briefing papers and short insight papers are available on the CNS website [childrensneighbourhoods.scot](http://childrensneighbourhoods.scot).

## Key points and recommendations

- The positivity, energy and 'can do' attitude of third sector organisations during this pandemic was clear. Third sector organisations adapted very quickly and provided different types of service to ensure that families were still receiving support.
- During the pandemic third sector organisations were the 'primary engagers' who provided support to children and families, often extending their service provision to other family members and other areas of the city. At the frontline they provided essential services and were quick and agile in their response to the crisis.
- Action should be taken to explore ways to resource, support and harness the local action seen during the pandemic and build grassroots agency and capacity within communities.
- Stable grant funding which was able to be used flexibly was a fundamental enabler of the COVID-19 third sector response. Learning from the faster temporary grant funding measures and the flexibility adopted under the COVID-19 emergency response should be used to inform the development of a long-term approach to third sector funding.
- A strategic partnership is required between the public and third sector – including a shared mechanism for strategic emergency planning and a shared digital infrastructure to enable and support collaborative working.

## Local service responses - adapting to the 'new normal'

This section of the briefing is divided into two parts. The first part describes how services responded to the crisis and the second outlines the barriers and enablers that services faced in providing support to children and families. The detailed research findings from this section can be found in the full research report.

### 1. How local services responded to the crisis

#### **Food insecurity**

The impact of food insecurity on families came into sharper focus during the crisis. Aside from the initial shock to the food supply chain in the early weeks of lockdown, changes in household income, due to furlough, unemployment and benefit delays, meant that many families had less money to spend on food, those in shielding groups were unable to access regular shopping, and school closures meant the loss of food provision via on-site free school meals.

The availability of food shops in particular neighbourhoods was an additional obstacle to accessing food. A number of interviewees spoke of lack of supermarkets in some communities which resulted in families being forced to either travel out of the area, choose more expensive options from local smaller shops, or miss out on fresh produce.

#### **Free school meals**

In Glasgow, the most recent figures show that 30% of pupils in schools received free school meals in 2018, compared to the Scottish average of 16%<sup>1</sup>. With children at home instead of at school, family food budgets were stretched even further, increasing the demand from low-income families for support with food provision. Glasgow City Council acted quickly to ensure continued food provision for those who would have received free school meals. Prepaid Farmfoods vouchers were issued to the families of 32,000 eligible children.

Differing perspectives on the use of vouchers to replace free school meals were evident across the research. A number of interviewees highlighted that in some communities, the Farmfoods shop was not easily accessible without transport, and raised questions as to the nutritional value of vouchers for a frozen food supermarket in comparison with a cooked school meal. In contrast, others were concerned that cash transfers might be used to support parental addictions, rather than to pay for food and other essentials.

#### **Third sector role in food provision**

Interviewees from both sectors acknowledged that the third sector was well placed to respond to the most immediate needs. Third sector organisations who work with children and families responded quickly offering shopping, food packages and helping to support foodbanks which were overwhelmed by referrals. A public sector manager explained:

*[...] We 're not set up [...] as an organisation, to be addressing what I would call the 'short-term crisis' [...] The third sector have almost stepped in there (Alistair, public sector, Glasgow City).*

Interviewees from the third sector explained that their organisations began distributing bags of food to the families they would normally work with and then began working with partner organisations

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish Government Education Statistics, 2018

to provide food to other families.

*Tens of thousands of households a week are getting food provided by voluntary organisations in the city. We are seeing an outbreak of neighbourliness and volunteering that [...] in different times we would be really excited about (John, third sector, Glasgow City).*

Grant funding criteria and processes were relaxed to enable third sector organisations to respond quickly to the rapidly changing situation and to deliver emergency support to families. Additional funding was also made available from a range of local and national sources to support the efforts<sup>2</sup>.

*The speed at which the Government, both national, and local, have turned this around, has been phenomenal [...] in all my days, I don't think I've ever experienced funding getting turned out quite so quickly (Joanne, third sector, Glasgow South).*

Pre-existing relationships with families meant that third sector organisations were in a good position to act as 'first responders' in relation to emergency food provision. A number of community-based mutual aid groups also emerged with volunteers engaged in food shopping, prescription pick-ups, and check-ins on vulnerable people. In addition, some private sector organisations were keen to contribute, including local restaurants who linked up with third sector organisations to provide hot meals.

#### **Food provision – issues with coordination and responding to complex and diverse needs**

A small number of interviewees suggested that the need for a rapid response to food insecurity had resulted in some logistical challenges. The complexity of different families' needs presented challenges, for example, being unable to eat certain meats for religious reasons, having other dietary requirements or standardised approaches not being suitable for children with additional support needs.

There were also problems with organising the food provision across different charities and communities without a clear system in place. This situation was helped by efforts to coordinate 'behind the scenes' as frontline staff worked out who had the 'connections and the contacts'.

#### **Fuel poverty and other practical support**

As more families were working from home, unemployed, or at home with children, there were challenges with rising energy bills. Some third sector organisations were repurposing their funds to mitigate the impacts of fuel poverty. Others sought new funding 'for financial support - top ups for gas and electric, or maybe getting a wee hub for Internet for 30 days'. Other examples of practical support to help families during the initial lockdown period included dog walking, check-in phone calls, befriending, prescription delivery, and providing nappies and formula milk for babies.

#### **Supporting families remotely**

Interviewees spoke of checking in with families via telephone, FaceTime, Zoom and social media. One interviewee noted that the shift to using digital tools had some positive engagement effects: 'it actually helped some young people to open up a bit more and reveal more about their anxieties, than they might have done in group work'.

Third sector interviewees described how they had to provide a completely different type of service

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<sup>2</sup> Data provided by GCVS (Glasgow's third sector interface) shows that Glasgow received approximately £7 million for food via COVID-19 grants funded by the Scottish Government plus £2.7 million from Glasgow City Council for the Holiday Food Programme.

to ensure that people were still receiving support under lockdown. This change was evident across all service areas. A local government funding officer noted: *'mental health, employment, arts, learning, [...] a whole range of issues are being addressed just completely differently to how they were before'*.

### **Maintaining contact with families and children**

In the most part, the continuation of in-person support was limited to third sector organisations *'checking in'* on families when delivering food or activity packs to their door or regular telephone calls. This limited contact was considered valuable as frontline workers could get a sense of how parents and children were coping.

*They know that somebody is still there [...] we're still caring, and they're not alone. We've not just went away and sat in the house and just left them. And I think that's really valuable (Theresa, third sector, Glasgow South).*

School and nursery provision was opened to children of key workers and *'vulnerable'* families, however one interviewee argued that the *'vulnerable children'* label was a factor in the small number of eligible children taking up their place: *'There's a stigma when you walk in the school gate just now and people know you're not a key worker'*.

In the field of child protection an interviewee highlighted that social work were reviewing and prioritising the children most in need of face-to-face support: *'There is now face-to-face contact, but it still would tend to be the most urgent situations, and where it's felt that there is no other option but to visit the family home'*.

### **Community-focused approaches**

The *'turn to the third sector'* in response to the pandemic was described by one third sector manager as *'remarkable'*. Another concluded that *'community-focused asset-based approaches'*<sup>3</sup> had proven to be the most effective response to this type of crisis:

*"We talk a lot about the value of asset-based approaches and community work, but actually these have really shone out as being the fastest and best response possible during this time. There's something here public policy wise [...] about the value of community" (John, third sector, Glasgow City).*

The community response had taken some interviewees by surprise. One public service manager remarked *'they've mobilised themselves around this [...] there's an element of resilience in these communities, in how they've engaged and got going'*. The same manager recognised the irony of public services sitting in meetings talking about *'communities'* while these *'communities'* had taken action for themselves: *'the people' have got up and done it without us'*.

## **2. Enablers and barriers to local service responses**

### **Funding**

Organisations that were able to adapt their services quickly to meet local needs were predominantly grant funded. Grant funded projects were able to negotiate new arrangements with their funders to

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<sup>3</sup> Asset-based approaches value the skills, strengths and successes of individuals and communities, recognising the importance of achieving a balance between service delivery and community building, as well as meeting people's needs and nurturing their strengths and resources (McLean, Mitchell and McNeice, 2017).

allow them to re-prioritise to meet the most immediate needs. Those third sector organisations that relied on fundraising and other income sources, were more exposed to the economic effects of the pandemic:

*Organisations that are reliant upon trading or fundraising have seen their incomes drop dramatically. So, we're seeing almost a split in the sector in terms of how organisations are able to respond. Some, mainly grant funded, are able to quickly reallocate resources and help people, others that [...] have their income from other sources are having to furlough staff and actually do less, just at a point that they want to be able to do more (John, third sector, Glasgow City).*

Local government funding processes and funding criteria for grants were immediately reviewed and relaxed to support local organisations in response to the pandemic. This enabled third sector organisations to shift from working with groups to working directly with individuals and families in their homes and supporting them with the resources that they needed. In order for local authority funding processes to continue during lockdown, officials designed a new funding mechanism while ensuring that the scrutiny and accountability of funding procedures remained robust. Underpinning this rapid change in standard operations was a willingness to be as responsive as possible to the emerging needs of communities. *'We need to listen to what people are saying [and] continually adapt the funding approach to meet needs'*. Interviewees also highlighted that the local authority was keeping in regular contact to support the work that the third sector were doing and allowing flexibility in how the funding could be used.

*We are spending a lot of the volunteer expenses budgets that would normally go on activities and travel, on food and care packages for families who are struggling (Jill, third sector, Glasgow City).*

### *Supporting new service users*

Interviewees explained that they were engaging with people and families who would not normally access their services but required support as a result of their changed circumstances. Third sector organisations spoke of being *'overwhelmed'* with requests for support from new individuals and families who had lost income and were struggling to cope. Several interviewees also expressed concerns that people whose circumstances have *'dramatically changed'* were not yet known to local services.

### *Limited capacity to respond to complex mental health issues*

Interviewees suggested that while the practical support the third sector organisations were able to provide for families had been excellent, there were limits to its capacity to respond to more complex needs of families, especially around mental health. There was a strong sense that the effects of the crisis and lockdown have had a significant impact on mental health which will require a long-term response. One third sector interviewee reflected that while *'there was a willingness to help'*, professional expertise was needed: *'We're not experts in mental health issues. We're not experts in dealing with anxiety and depression'*.

### *Increased pressure on staff*

Many organisations were trying to support increased numbers of individuals and families despite having reduced capacity due to fewer staff being available. Some interviewees raised the issue of frontline workers, the anxiety of being exposed to the virus, the risks to their own health and uncertainty about what they were allowed to do: *'it's the fear and anxiety, [...] will I catch it? What will I do? Will people die? And, should I be doing this? Should I be doing that?'*

## Discussion

This briefing has presented research findings in relation to local service responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this section we discuss some of the key themes and points of learning gained from the research.

Trusting relationships between frontline third sector workers and individuals and families were critical in identifying issues and providing support in high-poverty neighbourhoods. When lockdown was announced, statutory services suspended or reduced a majority of their services and third sector organisations adopted the role of 'first responders' or 'primary engagers'. Over time they expanded their support to address other practical needs such as fuel poverty, digital access and emotional support. The local authority streamlined funding and decision-making processes and supported organisations to repurpose grants to meet urgent needs.

The third sector organisations interviewed for this study were quick and agile in their response to the pandemic, but they raised concerns that the value of this may not be fully acknowledged by public sector services. The lockdown exposed the reliance of the UK and Scottish Governments on the third sector and community organisations to provide emergency food provision and relief for the most vulnerable families. A recent study described the UK government response as '*piecemeal and driven by pressure groups and charities*' (Barker & Russell 2020: 868).

The pandemic and lockdown resulted in a significant increase in volunteering and community mobilisation. Service providers interviewed for this research were keen to sustain this momentum by encouraging more local self-help and community-focused approaches. The wider evidence supports the need for a move from deficit-based to asset-based approaches for collective resilience (Seaman et al., 2014). In the context of COVID-19 recovery, Harkins (2020) recommends that communities, vulnerable populations and groups are engaged in the design and implementation of community recovery initiatives.

## Conclusion

It is clear that during the lockdown, services across Glasgow worked incredibly hard to support vulnerable children and families. Frontline workers and professionals across services and sectors demonstrated their compassion, will and energy to help communities in Glasgow suffering the worst effects of the crisis. Glasgow's third sector organisations and volunteers mitigated some of the worst effects of the pandemic through their commitment to supporting those who were most vulnerable during the lockdown. The scale of the organising and coordinating of food provision and other forms of practical and emotional support has been remarkable.

The crisis has also been a catalyst for new forms of social connection and activism. Volunteering has flourished, local communities have self-organised and third sector groups have mobilised their staff in an effort to help people through these unprecedented times. Further research is needed to understand the longer-term mental health and wellbeing impacts of the crisis; how services are being redesigned for COVID-19 recovery; and the sustainability of funding for third sector organisations.

## References

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## Appendix One: Research approach and methodology

From April to June 2020, 15 qualitative interviews were conducted with service providers, working across a range of services in the public and third sectors including housing associations, childcare providers, volunteering, education services, social work and child protection, culture and leisure, community planning; and third sector organisations and interfaces. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by phone or on Zoom video conferencing software and lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, with the exception of one interview.

The decision to interview frontline professionals with established and trusting relationships with children and families in high poverty neighbourhoods to understand the breadth of experience of service delivery during lockdown. This was achieved without risk of causing harm or difficulty to families at a time of high anxiety. The research met the highest standards of ethical research conduct, research integrity, data management and data protection, as approved by the University of Glasgow.

The voices and perspectives represented in this report are those of service professionals. Research participants were anonymised to ensure confidentiality. Services and organisations were categorised by sector (public or third sector) and neighbourhoods in terms of their broad geographical area – Glasgow North West, Glasgow North East, Glasgow South, Glasgow City.

The detailed research approach, methodology and interviewee pseudonym and designation is presented in the full research report.



# Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland

This report is published by Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland.

## About us

A children's neighbourhood is an initiative that brings together people, resources and organisations in a neighbourhood area, so that all of those things can work together towards better lives for the children living there.

Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland is a collaborative centre, developed by Glasgow Centre for Population Health, Policy Scotland and Robert Owen Centre at the University of Glasgow.



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