



**Children's
Neighbourhoods
Scotland**

**COVID-19 Glasgow
Research Briefing:
Collaboration
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 the enablers and barriers to collaboration between services working in high poverty neighbourhoods and offers recommendations on how future collaboration can be further developed.

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.

Key points and recommendations

- Many third sector workers recognised the historic significance of the COVID-19 pandemic and that the response required building a new form of solidarity. Existing tensions with other organisations were set aside and organisations demonstrated what could be achieved by working together.
- Despite responsive operational partnerships working well, the potential for a cross-sectoral approach to emergency response planning and recovery was not fully realised. The third sector were not wholly recognised as providing essential public services during this emergency.
- A stronger 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.
- The key role of interface organisations in coordinating, sharing information, facilitating learning and collaboration and identifying gaps in service provision should be recognised.
- Community planning processes should be sustained and embedded as a key mechanism for multisector emergency and recovery planning.

Collaboration between local services in response to COVID-19

This section is divided into two parts. The first section describes the enablers of collaboration evident in the response of local services to COVID-19 and support for children and families in high-poverty neighbourhoods. The second discusses barriers to collaboration between the public and third sector.

The detailed research findings from this section can be found in the full research report.

1. Enablers of collaboration in the context of COVID-19

As a direct result of the COVID-19 crisis response this research found evidence of increased cooperation and collaboration between local services across third, public and private sectors. Third sector interfaces (TSIs) provided a single point of access for support and advice for the third sector within local areas. At the community level, third sector organisations and employees supported local networks and groups engaged in the pandemic response. According to interviewees, interface organisations, at the city and neighbourhood level, played a key role in the coordinating effort.

I've been really quite impressed by the collaborative nature of how support is being coordinated. I think the [interface organisation] in particular have done an amazing job of coordinating that third sector response. And the way in which some of the third sector services have adapted so quickly, and really turned around how they practice, how they would normally deliver services, to fit with life as it is at the moment (Kirsty, public sector, Glasgow City).

Against a background of tension and competition for third sector funding and reduced public funds, many third sector organisations came together to face the crisis.

There's no doubt. We compete for funding. We're all trying to do our own bit. But absolutely, I think this time, all the barriers went down, all the walls went down and we just said, right, okay, we've got a duty to do [...] let's get together, and let's do this (Theresa, third sector, Glasgow South).

A similar feeling of 'standing shoulder to shoulder' was observed between managers and directors in the local authority and with their public sector partners. One public sector manager described the atmosphere: 'it felt like everybody was on the same page, and all really wanting to work together to try and get through this'.

Coordinating the local service response in a complex and rapidly changing landscape

The city-wide TSI quickly recognised that there was an urgent need for an online database of local services that could be updated in real time and linked to the calls from the COVID-19 helpline - *Glasgow Helps*. After a period of mapping local service provision approximately 300 third sector organisations were identified across the 56 neighbourhoods in Glasgow City¹ as providing food and support with other COVID-19 related issues. The database was used to signpost those calling the helpline to the most appropriate local services and to route members of the public interested in volunteering to relevant opportunities.

¹ For neighbourhood geographies see www.gcph.co.uk/assets/0000/2751/Glasgow_City_-_small_area_spines.pdf

City-level collaboration- sharing resources and redeployment of staff

At a city-level the helpline was an example of a new citywide multisector partnership established at pace following the announcement of lockdown. This coordinated effort resulted in a team of multisector staff covering the line during working hours:

The helpline is a great example of some of the positive collaborations that we've seen, ...we got help for that very quickly from [the public sector]. And by help I don't mean just the ... usual kind of 'partnership' as in giving us money to go and do something. What we actually got is the offer of staff time to man the phone. So if you phone through on that number you get one of five different organisations answering the phone and you don't know who it is. And that was set up in four days from start to finish (John, third sector, Glasgow City).

The closing of physical venues operated by public sector bodies and the switch to remote working meant that some public staff services felt *'quite distant from the communities that we're working for'*. Redeployment and volunteering programmes for employees also provided a means of collaborating and sharing resources across departments and organisations in the public sector. A support programme was set up for public sector staff to volunteer for local charities and some staff chose to volunteer in their own time so that they could be part of the immediate response effort.

Local collaboration

At a local level there was significant evidence of collaboration through increased coordination of food deliveries, joint bids for funding and wellbeing support provision. Organisations worked together to utilise their different strengths and resources, such as coordinating skills, premises, staff, volunteers, drivers and funding application writing skills.

So, we collaborated in terms of large buying, purchase buying. All the bags or food parcels are made up in here by our staff and other staff, a couple of volunteers. It's then delivered by our minibus of volunteer drivers [...] There's a huge passion around making sure everybody's okay (Theresa, third sector, Glasgow South).

At the neighbourhood level, examples of collaboration included local services finding innovative ways to help local families. In one neighbourhood the local housing association, youth projects and other services set up stalls in a public area to provide emergency food and household supplies and advice for local people. The ability to coordinate and respond was strengthened by pre-existing collaborative relationships.

Information and learning

One of the most immediate challenges of coordinating the service response to COVID-19 was how to monitor rapid changes in service provision across the city. An interviewee noted *'there's so much going on it can be difficult to keep track'*. At a city and community level, coordinators in public protection and TSI organisations were involved in an exercise of rapid information gathering to help public and third sector organisations keep up to date.

A key feature of this new collaborative effort was the *'voracious demand for information'* with webinars, video conferencing, as well as COVID-19 related bulletins and newsletters being produced and circulated with high frequency. In local networks significant energy and focus were invested in learning and adapting to the new context including how to use new digital platforms and methods of remote working.

2. Barriers to collaboration

The dilemma of collaboration versus competition

A number of the third sector interviewees in this study observed that the new spirit of collaboration between third sector organisations was significant because in normal circumstances these organisations were often *'constrained [...] by having to be in competition with one another'*.

Suspension of formal strategic partnership working

With the UK government announcement of lockdown, the strategic focus of the local authority shifted to emergency planning. From mid-March 2020, the majority of Council-led meetings, were suspended including community planning and the community planning sector and area partnerships that make decisions on funding and grants. Multisector city structures that continued to operate included a children's mental health forum and the Challenge Child Poverty Group. TSIs continued to operate throughout the crisis, including the citywide third sector forum for children, young people and families². This change in the partnership landscape was noted by a public sector service manager:

There seems to have been a significant reduction, in [...] the formal partnership activity across the city in terms of planning arrangements. There have been emergency planning structures put in place, but they tend to be either city based with a lot of [...] public sector and larger third sector organisations engaging (Alistair, public sector, Glasgow City).

A number of interviewees questioned the suspension of these cross-sector communication channels at such a critical time and suggested that this was a lost opportunity to work with the wider third sector and build a shared understanding of the national picture and Glasgow's response strategy.

Digital working - the need for a digital infrastructure for collaboration

With lockdown and the shift to remote working, digital technology became essential for collaborative working. There were initial delays in public sector organisations setting up their video conferencing technology and partner organisations supported meetings on behalf of public sector organisations during this time. The absence of video conferencing within the local authority also created challenges for officers whose role involved working with and organising committees for decision-making.

Speed of response

Most interviewees noted the ability of the third sector services to adapt their services quickly. A public sector manager described the local third sector organisations as the *'primary engagers'*. A challenge for collaboration was the different speeds at which sectors were able to respond to the crisis. Local authorities were described by one third sector manager as *'not used to working nimbly and agilely and flexibly'*.

Officers in the role of public administration, working for the local authority performed a high degree of invisible work which was crucial but not as noticeable as the practical and direct service delivery of third sector organisations. Despite this, one interviewee noted the effort and speed of local authority officers:

People have been working really hard, constantly revising what the contingency plan is [...] so as new government guidance comes out, that's been turned around fairly quickly, in terms of

² The citywide third sector forum for children, young people and families organised a webinar on 'Partnerships in Children's Services Post COVID-19' in June 2020 with the explicit aim of improving collaborative working between the third sector and public services.

adapting the response (Kirsty, public sector, Glasgow City).

The different speeds of response, and institutional cultures, meant that rather than the citywide strategic response to COVID-19 being built from the bottom up, there was an over-layering of new policies and service activities at different times and phases of the lockdown. In a crisis, when there is little time for negotiation and planning, this may be the most practical approach:

I think at the moment there's a real issue that bottom up is being crushed by top down. Not deliberately, with the best intentions. Third sector organisations were quick and out there delivering tens of thousands of meals a week to families. Over ten thousand households in Glasgow were getting packs from the third sector. That now looks to all be changing, because Glasgow City Council are distributing packs directly [...] rather than working with the sector (John, third sector, Glasgow City).

One interviewee suggested that collaborative working, on its own is not enough to achieve resilience to a public health emergency. Underpinning resilience in a crisis was said to be based on 'relational trust' and 'authentic collaboration':

Where there is that strong culture of relational trust and collaboration, authentic collaboration – then resilience will be strong. And you will get a better recovery. Local authorities or organisations where that relational trust and collaboration is not strong, it will be slower to develop because you need that...it's about relationships and it's about trust (Mary, public sector, Glasgow City).

A number of third sector interviewees hoped that greater recognition of the third sector response would lead to a future public and third sector partnership across the city that was 'taken more seriously'.

Digital engagement

A key area of opportunity and potential for collaboration and social connection is in the digital world. A manager in the public sector expressed the feeling that public sector organisations do not currently have the digital infrastructure and capacity to fully engage in the online platforms. In terms of community-based social networks, they were 'digital outsiders':

The third sector and local communities have all developed these big [...] Facebook platforms and Instagram platforms that they're all talking to each other on [...] and we're not engaged at all (Alistair, public sector, Glasgow City).

Discussion

This briefing has presented research findings in relation to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the collaborative work between services in high poverty neighbourhoods. It has examined how services collaborated, the challenges they faced and their perspectives on the future priorities for public service reform and COVID-19 recovery. In this final section some of the key themes and points of learning gained from the research are discussed briefly.

During the early stages of lockdown there were huge logistical challenges and operational issues for local authorities to overcome, as well as new and changing national government guidance and public health briefings to interpret and act upon. Multisector collaboration at a city level was very effective

on operational matters such as establishing the Glasgow Helps helpline. However, collaboration was considered to be weaker at the strategic level and in the cross-sector approach to emergency planning. The decision not to continue with formal community planning meetings and to focus the emergency response on internal local authority cross-departmental working risked overlooking the strategic role of the third sector interface and the value of engagement with the wider third sector.

Recent evidence shows that community planning partnerships in Scotland are often regarded as 'secondary arenas' for policy and decision-making (Escobar et al 2018; Weakley and Escobar 2018). The shutdown of strategic community planning meetings with lockdown, reflects that this type of multisector partnership is widely regarded in practice as '*in addition to*' rather than '*essential*' to strategic service planning.

Some interviewees in this research suggested that the tensions and competition between third sector organisations in Glasgow were associated with the new partnership and funding arrangements of community planning. However, the wider evidence suggests that these tensions are long-standing. They stem from the past regeneration policies, the competitive nature of funding, the size and political leverage of different organisations in the city, which were then magnified by the global economic recession and years of austerity (Bailey & Pill 2014; Kintrea & Madgin 2019).

In the COVID-19 response effort in Glasgow this research found evidence of increased networking, coordinating, cooperating and collaborating. Public and third sector organisations cooperated in new ways through the Glasgow Helps helpline, this included sharing information and learning from each other. These organisations, and the individuals working in them, were seen to have a '*willingness to enhance each other's capacity for mutual benefit and a common purpose*' (Himmelman, 2002:3). This willingness was also evident in the collaboration between local third sector organisations, particularly in coordinating emergency food provision and making joint applications for additional funding to support the wider emergency response.

Across the UK, there is a need for a more planned and coordinated approach to precarity and food insecurity (Barker & Russell 2020). The crisis brought multisector partners together with the shared objective of protecting and supporting communities, but it is unclear at this time whether this collaborative momentum will be sustained over the longer-term.

Conclusion

It is clear that during and beyond the national lockdown, services across Glasgow worked hard to support vulnerable individuals, families and communities. The scale of the organising and coordinating of many forms of practical and emotional support was notable. A number of key lessons are evident from the service response to the pandemic: some organisations were quicker than others to adapt, coordination efforts at scale did not always go plan; strategic emergency planning did not engage all partners. Nevertheless, the scale and extent of the collaborative response effort is undisputable. Further action is required to put in place mechanisms for strategic emergency planning across statutory services and the wider third sector. Cross-sector strategic collaboration should be regarded as essential to emergency planning and response.

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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.



Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland is funded by Scottish Government.



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