

Child Friendly Neighbourhoods: An inclusive route to sustainable community wellbeing?

What we can learn from Covid

On 3 February 2022 Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland hosted an online event drawing together researchers, community activists and representatives from multiple agencies, including local and national government. The online event, attended by 60 people, came at a pivotal moment for considering what has been learnt from the Covid experience and what is worth preserving as we move into a new, post-Covid normality.

This and a companion paper on **Shaping places: children and young people's perspectives** bring together key discussion points from three CNS presentations on current work and broad-ranging discussion and views offered from across the breakout rooms. All comments included in this paper came from the discussion groups are not attributed to any individual. It looks at what we can learn from Covid and what further questions we might ask in order to take this work, fundamental as it is to Scotland's future, forward. For the purposes of this paper, the discussions are noted under four headings – **Trust, Flexibility, Funding and Accountability**, with key points drawn together in a closing **Reflection**. Under each heading, our conversations developed into questions to prompt further thought.

Trust – a Local Commodity?

Scottish Government's commitment to communities – through community wealth building, 20 minute neighbourhoods and, indeed, the Place Principle, requires open and honest dialogue with local people about their aspirations for their own communities. Trust is the bedrock of that dialogue.

Amid the rhetoric of consultation it is easy to overlook the reality that many children and young people are accustomed to being 'done to', rather than consulted. This is especially true in less advantaged areas where the constraints of poverty too often mean that residents are categorised as needing help rather than as active agents in their own lives and communities. And if individuals have experienced a relationship with local and national government that is intermittent, crisis-driven or characterised by broken promises and sudden funding cuts, willingness to make further commitments to that relationship may be hard to achieve. Building trust means challenging past experiences and being consistent in the future.

Children and young people are aware of the promises being made nationally – such matters are encapsulated not just in the Place Principle but also in Scottish Government's adoption into law of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). But those commitments are often not believed in the context of children's and young people's local, lived experiences. To achieve Government's ambitions trust will be essential in lifting children and young people out of the stereotype of the 'hard-to-reach', and, crucially, out of the holding category of 'citizens in waiting', to a position in which there is 'nothing about them without them'.

Q: So how can we ensure that all children and young people are heard?

While Local Authorities are sometimes viewed as 'the opposition' or as remote bodies that become a local presence only in times of crisis, they nevertheless have essential skills and services that their communities need, as well as statutory responsibilities to meet those needs. But, for many, contact with public services is intermittent and unsatisfactory. Repositioning such views so that services are seen to, and do, respond to local views rather than just intervening in people's lives is a delicate project. The experience of the pandemic has shown that third sector organisations are peculiarly well-placed to broker these, often difficult, conversations. At street level it is the third sector that is a constant, living presence and is most likely to be trusted and visible. The pandemic has brought these groups, with local knowledge, local contacts and first-hand understanding of local need into the spotlight.

Trust is all about building personal relationships within communities, networking between organisations and working with them. 'I spend most of my time out and about ... out amongst the madness. You can't do this kind of job sat in an office.'

Q: What roles might the third sector take on in the delivery of the dialogue and action necessary to implement the community well-being and support ambitions of the Place Principle?

Trust comes from genuine reciprocity, from promises that are kept, creating a long term bond that enables communities to build lasting relationships. The experience of the pandemic has been that third sector organisations are better able to offer support, especially if they are already a community presence and have earned trust.

Learning from Covid – Filling the Gaps

The pandemic has opened up conversations about health and well-being that could be hard to stimulate before – these are not necessarily derived from poverty but reflect the pressures and unease felt through all of society.

Many participants in this event were surprised to note that life expectancy – previously a major concern of residents in poorer communities and one of Scottish Government's priorities – was barely mentioned by local people during the pandemic. However, front-line youth workers found they were often expected to take on new roles as health 'experts'. Parents talked to them about their own wellbeing, something that youth workers didn't feel equipped to deal with. That's generated proposals for additional training courses to enable these workers to engage in much needed health discussions.

Flexibility and Connections

All-embracing terms such as 'Children and Young People' conceal a broad range of diversity and difference. Our discussion encompassed the different needs of younger children and teenagers, of those in rural and in urban communities, needs that were sometimes specific to young people and sometimes shared by whole communities. We were well aware that dividing communities into convenient categories, such as age, risked the emergence of yet another silo.

Commitment to consultation and voice can only achieve reality if diverse approaches to engagement reflect the diversity and differences in individuals and their situations – one size does not fit all. This is discussed further in the companion paper 'The Place Principle'. That means navigating a landscape populated by small individual initiatives which too often end up competing with each other for both funding and recipients. There are many

opportunities for sharing ideas and information but 'how well people work in partnership – that's a different question'.

During Covid, third sector organisations proved their capacity to be flexible, responsible and energised, qualities that were urgently needed during the crisis. Characteristics of fluidity and flexibility depend on bridges and connectors who can move between organisations, building trusting relationships and mapping local needs in partnership with local people. Local coordinators were perceived to be neutral, but with the ability to engage with formal structures, to represent local people and to take their voices forward.

The definitions of place and neighbourhood provided by children and young people give us real information from communities. Using that information helps identify which stakeholders or organisations are a local presence and who needs to hear these voices. However, maintaining the fluidity needed to engage with a wide range of organisations, without duplicating effort and without competing for funds or target audiences, requires considerable brokerage by local coordinators (or those who fulfil that role in many of our communities). Collaborative working is (still) largely an ideal, although there are some structures designed to make it happen. There can often be a perception that there are too few 'independent' community connectors. This has a significant impact on the creation of the trust which has already been identified as essential for collaborative working.

Learning from Covid – Brokers and Connectors

Traditionally, potential local allies have been put off by University involvement – the stereotype of the 'Ivory Tower' persists – but CNS and other projects have shown that universities can move quickly and work from a position of neutrality, which means they are better placed to generate trust and move between communities and government.

It is equally important to have people with local knowledge and understanding as connectors who can move between silos, helping to target the right services and activities into the right places. CNS work has been characterised by rapid movements between organisations. A coordinator or connector can use informal approaches to bring in previously unheard voices, building a network of resources and ideas.

Third sector actors have been very agile and responsive during the pandemic but have not always been fully recognised by their statutory counterparts. That imbalance needs to change; the third sector must be accepted as an equal partner that continues to work to address young people's and communities' needs.

This horizontal collaboration may be matched by a vertical integration of the personal with the global. Discussion of place with children and young people elicits concern about littering and recycling, making a direct link between the personal and the global and highlighting how acutely aware children are of the issue of climate. Collective Small Steps – making global problems accessible to individual action, empowers individuals and enables children and young people to see themselves 'making a difference'. It builds confidence that could enable them to participate fully in place-based discussions and connect them to the debate that affects their lives, their sense of home and their sense of future.

A person-centred approach was reflected throughout the discussions. Children are 'not citizens of the future but citizens now...'; '... not an addendum to society but part of it'. 'Children are here and now, not just something we work with as adults-in -waiting'.

Q: What do we need to enable us to remain flexible and adaptable while also maintaining stability and being a 'reliable presence'?

Money Talks - the Funding Challenge

Learning from Covid – Funding Futures?

During Covid funders became much more relaxed and made funding available more easily. There was a blurring of boundaries between different organisations. This is not how our system has traditionally worked but it opens up possibilities for more effective responses to need.

Many participants commented on the persistence of a 'top-down' funding model, the problems of stop/start funding (the 'policy washing machine'), competition for funds and the impact they have on communities which have grown used to being the target of short-lived, unsustainable initiatives. These funding issues most likely to damage the bedrock of trust and long-term relationships within communities because they predominantly affect the third sector, the local presence. This raised questions of where decision-making power lies in talking about place, especially for major projects and investments for which large sums remain under central control or lie with big private or public sector bodies. Uncertainty like this could damage implementation of community voice ambitions. It may mean that children and young people are not truly heard and it could undermine the ambitions embodied in the Place Principle. Participants spoke from lived experience of the segregation of smaller pots of funding that were 'thrown out' to the community – 'No one mentions those millions [spent on large projects. Instead] they come with £50,000 or £10,000 and ask for bids and budgets – which is an insult.'

But if we look at learning from the pandemic, one of the most notable features of the response to it was the amalgamation of different funds in order to deal with the emergency. Here, the third sector demonstrated its ability to move quickly to meet needs, drawing on a single funding pot rather than having to navigate funding silos.

Q: How do we prevent funding from slipping back into familiar bidding and awarding practices?

Current community planning structures, however well-intentioned, do not meet such needs – and they draw heavily on small, often self-selecting, groups of people who are willing to speak up and claim to be representative.

Participants reflected on different models, either proposed or already in use, for example:

1. In Paisley – proposals for bringing sport into the shopping centre – 'not just football' but whole family activities that bring families to town, address some health needs and also benefit retailers through increased footfall.
2. In Europe – the Dutch model – community sports clubs cannot get funding unless they are open to everyone and free to local users on weekdays. That was hard to sell originally but it is beginning to have an impact.

Q: What examples can we offer of how a different funding approach benefits communities and increases engagement? and

Q: What should the role of Scottish Government be in determining funding opportunities and conditions? What action should it take?

Accountability – The ‘Killer Question’

Discussion highlighted the need for a holistic approach to bridge the gulf between the rhetoric of policy and the reality of practice, an approach that recognises the success and flexibility that the third sector offers – and has demonstrated through Covid. That needs to include different approaches to accountability and a resistance to retreating into the narrow confines of fixed criteria, job descriptions or defined activity. Participants reflected that, as a country:

‘We need to aim higher’, ‘We’re too polite ... we need to push back and challenge. If we say we’re listening to communities, why aren’t we?... We need to show major impact’.

Learning from Covid – The ‘Killer Question’

There’s no point looking for excellence based on a Job Description. The best people earn their reputations because they go over and above what the core job demands. That isn’t captured by traditional Key Performance Indicators. A job description is just a starting point. It covers the basics. ‘Best practice happens where people say “I’m not really meant to do this but...” but that’s not rewarded or even recognised’.

Maybe what we need is a ‘Killer question’? If we ask others ‘How will your actions make X better?’ we could set ourselves to ‘Come back in a week and talk about one good deed I’ve done...’?

Projects should be funded only on the basis of demonstrable information in the application form around real impact, real proposed change. And each project should report succinctly on the impact of the work and positive outcomes actually achieved. Some sectors in society already do this – ‘If all of us did as well as the best of us already do, the place would be transformed’.

Q: Should every funding application, every evaluation and appraisal include a single question asking what difference getting the cash/doing the activity will make – what impact will it have for – say, children and young people?

Reflection

Covid has shown us new routes to developing sustainable community wellbeing. It has revealed key factors that must be developed and *actioned* (not just ‘considered’). This is a time for action, not rhetoric, a time to build on what we’ve collectively learned and to ensure that Covid recovery is seized as an opportunity to address issues and develop solutions.

We know where data points to community issues but we also need to understand the lived experiences of those communities – what individual communities mean, or could mean, to children, young people and all generations. Trusted local contact can help us achieve the awareness that puts data into a lived context. To do this we need flexibility in our approaches and, importantly, flexibility in funding. Funding must be aspirational, aimed to help communities develop their sense of self, their passion for their neighbourhood, and supporting them in articulating what they need without the restrictions and limitations of funding silos. Such radical aspirations are easy to express but much harder to achieve. Our participants, drawn from a broad cross-section of agencies, proposed similarly radical approaches. They advocated ‘killer questions’ to be at the centre of all funding and action – What difference will your project make? What outcomes will it achieve? How will you

measure and know that has worked. And for funders – How will you cope with, support, manage and review local entities to clearly articulate the impact they have?

Room for further debate? We think there is?

Q: But what are your thoughts? What do you feel could or should be done to learn from the past and implement a better way forward for communities, for children and young people, hoping for a better future?

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