



**Children's
Neighbourhoods
Scotland**

**COVID-19 South Lanarkshire
Research Briefing:
Local Service Responses
December 2020**

Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus the inequalities affecting children and families in rural South Lanarkshire communities, 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. This briefing focusses on learning in relation to how local service providers in South Lanarkshire 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](#).

Key points and recommendations

- The response of third sector organisations in South Lanarkshire during this pandemic was described as '*absolutely phenomenal*'. Third sector organisations had to adapt rapidly and provide a different type of service to ensure that families were still receiving support under lockdown, including the provision of food, practical support as well as responding to families' emotional needs and mental health concerns.
- Service professionals across sectors in South Lanarkshire worked hard to support communities suffering the worst effects of the crisis. This was evident in the community wellbeing helpline and the new coordinating groups set up to organise local service provision.
- Local authorities and the Scottish Government have a role in raising awareness of the lifeline provided by the third sector during this period and ensuring that local and national policy is developed collaboratively. The role of the sector should be recognised and supported through a shared commitment to funding local third sector organisations.
- Ways to sustain the local action seen during the pandemic should be explored. Agency and capacity within communities could be built through asset-based community development approaches.

Service responses - adapting to the 'new normal'

This briefing describes the way in which the local authority and third sector organised a response to the pandemic and the first national lockdown. It covers the rapid transformation of local service provision; the extension of support from food provision to emotional wellbeing; the role of education services and nature of remote learning; the challenge of supporting new service users; and community participation.

The detailed research findings from this section can be found in the [full research report](#).

Rapid transformation of local service provision

With the announcement of lockdown, the landscape of voluntary and community sector service provision in South Lanarkshire transformed overnight:

We had a very depressing day [...] when it became apparent what was starting to unfold. [...] By the end of that day, we had over 1000 [groups, activities] that had stopped across South Lanarkshire, on our board. And we had about four or five on the other side that were still continuing (Rachel, public sector).

After the initial shock of the lockdown announcement, the focus of attention became supporting local third sector organisations to keep going. South Lanarkshire Council's Community Engagement team and the third sector interface (TSI) began conversations with community groups on what might be possible. There was a desire from local groups to continue to operate if possible.

The third sector and the local authority worked together to overcome the challenges and organised a local service response at speed: *'We were able to pull together very quickly'* (Linda, public sector). Key actions included setting up a community wellbeing helpline (before the national helpline was established); using food funds from national government to purchase resources; and establishing new digital communication mechanisms. Coordination work included monitoring resources, volunteers, space and equipment and the capacity of local organisations to deliver food and to support the most vulnerable. Priority was given to accessing resources and setting up new protocols and processes to ensure the safety of volunteers and members of the public. The pace of change and the amount of new information shared between services in the initial months was described by an interviewee as *'overwhelming'*.

The community wellbeing helpline received calls from people who were clinically vulnerable and needed support in South Lanarkshire. Callers to the helpline included people who were furloughed, waiting for Universal Credit (UC) who found themselves suddenly in financial hardship. They were described as *'embarrassed at having to use the service'*. Call handlers helped them to overcome their reluctance to receiving support:

As soon as you mention the food bank then people were initially [saying] "no, no, no, I don't want to take from somebody that doesn't have anything". So, a big part of my role was [to say] "well, unfortunately everybody's in the same boat just now" (Linda, public sector).

In the local area of Clydesdale, the community response included 28 individual COVID-19 groups including 'pop up' groups (self-organising groups) and well-established third sector organisations. These groups made up food bags that were delivered directly to people in their homes or taken to a local venue for collection. Local food banks supplied a variety of food and access to fuel and phone top ups. Bags were made up by volunteers and then delivered directly to people in their homes. The provision of hot meals from Food Hubs, initially provided to elderly people and people who were shielding, was extended to vulnerable families.

Emotional support and mental health

After the initial focus on food and practical needs, the attention of local services shifted to emotional needs and mental health support. Third sector organisations maintained contact with individuals and families through regular phone calls, text messaging and Zoom calls. A third sector manager highlighted the importance of also supporting the wellbeing of staff during this time: *'The big challenge was in terms of making sure that our staff were well looked after because they were dealing with very harrowing situations'* (Ruth, third sector).

The importance of supporting children and young people's mental health through contact with key professionals outside the family was also recognised. A helpline was set up by the educational psychology service and teachers passed by homes and waved at the children as a way of communicating support to families during the lockdown period: *'Head teachers walked round the area and [...] knocked on doors, waved through windows, made phone calls'* (Carrie, public sector).

Education services and remote learning

School childcare hubs were set up for the children of key workers and the most vulnerable children. Eligible children were identified through a multi-agency approach between education and social work. This approach did not reach all vulnerable families, only those known to these agencies as in need of support. The Education Department relied on the knowledge and judgement of headteachers to monitor and support their pupils and their local school community. There was a sense of frustration at the bespoke nature of home-schooling and the gap in digital provision at a national level. One interviewee argued that there was need for a standard national online curriculum:

If I was on level two [...] I would just go back on there on a Monday and I would work my way through. A bit like BBC Bitesize [...] And again, I know it's not ideal and learning is to be bespoke, but I would learn more doing that than I would trying to scrabble about with egg boxes. And this is the risk, when we're leaving [the curriculum] to interpretation (Carrie, public sector).

New service users

From March to August 2020, many South Lanarkshire households began receiving UC. Around 2,100 more households with children were in receipt of UC in South Lanarkshire in August compared to March (DWP 2020). An additional challenge for local employability services was responding to the needs of new claimants and managing their expectations of the services and support available:

It's challenging for them to, first of all [to] acknowledge that they need assistance, and secondly, because they've been in different places, they have expectations of services working in ways which the public sector can't necessarily do (Rachel, public sector).

There was also a recognition that many families who were still in employment may soon need support as the full economic impact of the pandemic becomes apparent, with interviewees concerned that people vulnerable to the social and economic effects of the pandemic may *'fall through nets'*:

This needs to continue; we need to keep [...] the access to the food available. We need to have these in more local areas. We need to get over the hurdle of the stigma of food banks for people to actually engage. [...] There's lots of talk round about how we continue to support people (Linda, public sector).

Community participation

Service providers highlighted that the crisis had renewed a 'sense of community' in South Lanarkshire. A number of pop-up support groups emerged and there was a surge in volunteering organised at a street level:

I think people have engaged more locally. I think people now know their neighbours. People know what's more going on in their local area and are being responsive to the needs that are coming up from the local areas (Linda, public sector).

A number of interviewees also reflected on the emotional and moral sense of the need to act and to work together that came from within local communities. The emergency response had given people greater agency to speak up and voice their opinions:

So, people feel more empowered to be able to have a voice and to say, well yeah, I think this worked well in the community, and to be listened to (Linda, public sector).

The upsurge in community participation 'ties perfectly in with the Community Empowerment Act' but its strength lay in the feeling that this was not being imposed on communities and individuals, with the energy and momentum coming from within communities themselves. A future challenge identified was how to maintain this momentum of volunteers and sustain the feelings of social solidarity: 'How do we keep the positivity in the communities so that we can make sure that we're all united in making a difference?' (Linda, public sector).

Discussion

This briefing has presented research findings in relation to the South Lanarkshire local service responses to the pandemic and national lockdown. In this final section we discuss some of the key themes and points of learning gained from the research.

The 'can do' attitude of frontline workers in South Lanarkshire during the pandemic was striking. Despite numerous challenges they found a way to keep food supplies and other service provision going during lockdown. In the short-term this was essential to help families through the immediate crisis, although in the longer-term this level of activity may be difficult to sustain. Local services provided food and designed a range of activities on-line and offline to help families children and young people keep active, positive and engaged, although this relied on families having the digital devices and broadband service to participate.

Trusting relationships between frontline third sector workers and families in South Lanarkshire were critical to identifying issues and providing support to families. Third sector organisations adopted the

role of *'local responders'*. Over time, local third sector organisations expanded their support to address other practical needs such as digital access and emotional support.

Across service areas, interviewees were concerned to avoid creating *'new dependencies'* by providing support that was not financially sustainable in the longer-term. This was aligned to an argument for greater autonomy within communities, encouraging more local self-help and asset-based approaches. The wider evidence supports the need across all service areas to promote asset-based approaches and collective resilience (Seaman et al., 2014). In the context of COVID-19 recovery, Harkins (2020) recommends that vulnerable populations and groups are engaged in the design and implementation of community recovery initiatives.

Conclusion

In South Lanarkshire, local services quickly mobilised their resources and worked together to develop and coordinate a localised response and approach to emergency food provision. Organisations across sectors demonstrated what could be achieved by working together at a local level to support the families and communities feeling the worst effects of the pandemic.

Despite, the enforced isolation of lockdown, in South Lanarkshire this crisis has been a catalyst for a renewed sense of community and social solidarity. Local communities have self-organised and third sector organisations acted as *'first responders'* deploying their staff in a monumental effort to help people through these unprecedented times. The evidence presented in this report suggests that this collective effort from the third sector may have mitigated some of the worst social effects of the national lockdown on families, children and young people in South Lanarkshire.

References

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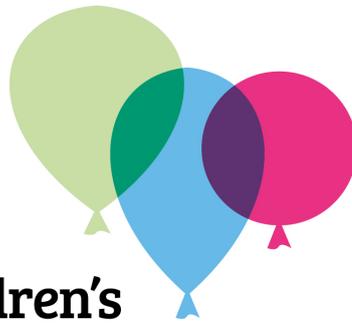
Appendix: Research approach and methodology

From June to September 2020, 10 qualitative interviews were conducted with service providers, working across a range of services in the public and third sectors including: youth work, family support, befriending, education services, health improvement, and community planning. 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.

A decision was taken to interview frontline professionals with established and trusting relationships with children and families in high poverty areas 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).

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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