Locked Down, Locked Out? Local Partnership Resilience in the Covid-19 Pandemic: Final Report

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Locked Down, Locked Out? Local Partnership Resilience in the Covid-19 Pandemic

In Scotland and across much of the UK, there is a growing recognition of the value of local partnership in responding to some of the most complex social issues and problems. In Scotland, this is particularly true following the 2011 Christie Commission report which recommended stronger local partnership working and the orientation of local public services towards preventing rather than just reacting to adverse outcomes. The Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdown measures (beginning in March 2020) have posed enormous challenges for public services and partnership working at the local level. Aside from rising demand for cash-strapped public services, and troubling implications for existing social inequalities, the lockdown has also forced organisations to work in different ways, particularly working remotely. Our project researched the impact of the pandemic and lockdown on local partnership working arrangements, aiming to answer the following research questions:

1. How has Covid-19 affected Scottish local partnership arrangements, in the short and medium term?
2. How has Covid-19 affected efforts to implement the recommendations of the Christie Commission (particularly the prevention principle) in Scottish local government?
3. How have Scottish local partnerships changed their practices to meet the challenge of the pandemic, and how can any progress be built upon?
4. What are the implications of these for existing social inequalities?
5. What are the potential lessons for other countries, particularly in terms of local partnership responses to crises?

Alongside the challenges posed by Covid-19 there are a range of opportunities and successes, alongside examples of innovative and successful partnership working, often developed and carried out very quickly and with a minimum of preparation. While acknowledging the enormously negative impacts Covid-19 has had in Scotland and globally, it is important to draw out possible lessons for partnership working in crisis situations. We therefore sought to identify examples of successful or innovative practice by and in local partnerships in response to Covid-19, and the potential lessons these may provide for other local partnerships.

For inquiries about this research please contact the Principal Investigator, Dr Jamie Buchan: J.Buchan@napier.ac.uk.

Executive Summary

In this brief section, we supply answers to our five research questions.

1. How has Covid-19 affected Scottish local partnership arrangements, in the short and medium term?

   - During the first weeks of lockdown, Scottish local partnerships had to deal with an extremely intense period of increased workload to address complex challenges quickly.

   - It was also necessary to shift to online remote working; most (but not all) partnerships had little experience with this but broadly overcame early 'teething problems'.

   - Partnerships then moved to a medium-term response, continuing to work at an elevated pitch but increasingly having to balance this with returning to 'business as usual'.

   - Although motivated by camaraderie amid shared adversity, particularly early on, people working in partnerships continue to endure significant stress and increased workloads.

2. How has Covid-19 affected efforts to implement the recommendations of the Christie Commission (particularly the prevention principle) in Scottish local government?

   - The need to respond to the immediate demands of the pandemic in the short term often drew resources and attention away from more long-term prevention work.

   - Many communities formed their own organic, unofficial responses. A renewed appetite for participation sometimes conflicted with local authority cultures and hierarchies.

3. How have Scottish local partnerships changed their practices to meet the challenge of the pandemic, and how can any progress be built upon?

   - Local partnerships responded with impressive agility to produce innovative practice; bureaucratic obstacles that had seemed immovable seemed to 'fall away'.

- In some situations, efforts in 2019 to prepare for the impacts of the UK's exit from the European Union served to lay the groundwork for partnership working during Covid.
- However, this relied on a level of work that cannot be sustained in the long term.
- The pandemic demonstrated the value of flexible working especially in large rural areas.
- There is a need to learn lessons and maintain some of this agility as we transition out of pandemic response. This requires us to attend to 'partnership resilience' and to trust partnerships to work together and respond to local needs (Section 8).

4. What are the implications of these for existing social inequalities?
   - Our mostly rural data highlighted lesser-known impacts of Covid-19 on inequalities around poverty of access, social isolation, food poverty and the digital divide.
   - Our data also highlight the impacts in areas economically reliant on tourism, with unemployment and precarity giving way to concerns about overtourism.
   - Partnerships were able to form and work quickly around these 'wicked problems'.

5. What are the potential lessons for other countries, particularly in terms of local partnership responses to crises?
   - Local partnership working plays an important role in fostering resilient communities through material support, and by facilitating community participation.
   - Community resilience must be driven organically and facilitated, not imposed from the top down, particularly not as a 'fix' for reducing expenditure.
   - Community resilience and partnership working developed amid one type of crisis can prove helpful in weathering subsequent, different crisis situations.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

1. We recommend careful attention to reduce the impact of stress on employees and organisations, to include occupational health responses and attention to workloads, with explicit recognition of their contributions and shared stresses during lockdown.

2. As we transition out of the pandemic, it will be necessary to keep an eye towards the longer term, to ensure strategic prevention and resilience building do not lose out. We recommend a formally designated and structured programme of work to ensure that prevention is (re-)embedded strategically through recovery from Covid-19.

3. Local partnerships and particularly local authorities must be willing to be flexible in accommodating and facilitating communities' efforts to participate in the decisions that affect them, even where these might not dovetail with existing structures, hierarchies and organisational cultures. We heard significant examples of good practice in this respect, but this was not consistently the case across our data.

4. Given the demonstrated value of videoconferencing for convenience and participation in partnership meetings, we recommend that videoconferencing options be offered as a matter of course in any meeting involving partners or partner organisations which are not physically proximate.

5. Alongside community resilience, we also recommend careful consideration of 'partnership resilience'. This means developing models of partnership working in which there is flexibility, spare resources and trust to allow for innovative and locally responsive approaches; in which the benefits of flexible working are fully realised and in which workload is managed at acceptable levels in times of crisis.

6. Rural areas deal with specific inequalities largely characterised by poverty of access (see Section 4); addressing these will be key to building resilience and fostering participation, and may require partnership structures specific to more rural and sparsely populated authorities, and tailored specifically to addressing these issues.

7. Community resilience is crucial to weathering crises but must be fostered and supported to develop organically rather than imposed. The rationales for carrying out these interventions are important – contra the 'Big Society' politics of the 2010s, it cannot be simply a fix for reducing public sector expenditure.

Methods

This project used a combination of methods: a survey to scope the landscape of partnership working and interviews to get in-depth qualitative data with a focus on particular local areas. These areas were selected to include a diversity of urban and rural geography across Scotland. We aimed thereby to gain data that are both 'wide' and 'deep'. We received **31** responses to our online survey and **24** completed interviews. Between the interviews and survey, we received responses from **12** local authority areas and from nationwide organisations, across a range of partnerships.

We used the survey as one way to recruit participants for our interviews. The survey was hosted on Qualtrics and included a number of questions on partnership working experiences and key issues which we used to shape the development of interview questions. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions, interviews were carried out online using Microsoft Teams or WebEx. Interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 1 hour 50 minutes, with most lasting around one hour, and were conducted by the Research Assistant or a member of the research team. Interviews were then transcribed, cleaned and uploaded on to NVivo 20, where thematic analysis was carried out by the research team (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Initially we coded three transcripts as a team to develop a coding structure. We then coded the remaining transcripts, meeting regularly to discuss our updated coding structure. The following report sections are organised thematically.

One unanticipated result of our need to rely on online interviewing is that we were able to interview participants from a much wider geographic range of Scotland – most of our interviewees were based outside the heavily urbanised (and more extensively researched) 'Central Belt'. Although it was not our intention to focus on these areas, the fact that we have done so means we are able to gain valuable and less-heard perspectives on partnerships, infrastructure and rural poverty and inequalities. Where we had several interviews from one area we have also provided brief 'case studies' of the specific local authority areas in question. Throughout the report, quotes from these areas are identified with the pseudonym of the area (Abertairn, Benross and Cullenshire), while others are simply identified with approximate sector and type of employer. All individual participants are anonymised and referred to only by a letter.

Terminology and Definitions

This report deals with **communities**, **partnerships, prevention** and **resilience.**

Community can refer to any group of people with something in common. This term is extremely frequently used in public life across the UK. It may refer to communities of identity or interest (such as the 'LGBT+ community' or 'the literary community') but is frequently used to refer to place-based communities. In this report, we use the term 'community' principally in its place-based sense, to refer to groups of people united by specific places – but these may also be communities of interest (since residents of a place have an interest in that place's public services).

Where services are described as being 'in the community' this tends to refer to their provision within the local contexts where people live as opposed to within specific institutions; empowerment or participation of communities refers to engaging with ordinary residents in local communities through democratic mechanisms to inform and develop services. We acknowledge however that there are controversies regarding the extent to which 'community'-focused interventions really do empower communities or break down traditional state-led hierarchies.

Similarly, discussions of 'community resilience' are grounded in the concept of 'community' as comprising a place and the people within it. We largely follow local authority boundaries in delineating places from each other.

Partnership can refer to any association of people, but we use it here to mean more or less formal partnership arrangements between agencies or institutions with some public function (although of any sector). Partnerships are justified on the basis that many social problems – such as unemployment, crime and addictions – have complex social causes and consequences that require specialist expertise, but which are beyond the capacity of any single agency to deal with.

Like 'community', partnership has been popular across British public life since about the 1990s. The 2011 Christie Commission report gave renewed impetus to partnerships in Scotland to improve delivery and reorient public services towards prevention of, rather than reaction to, negative outcomes (the 'prevention principle'). Interagency partnerships, in theory, are more efficient because they can pool resources and expertise. Alongside the prevention principle, this approach to

partnerships seeks to mitigate the impacts of austerity budget cuts by making services more efficient rather than reducing the level of service.

Partnership working is not without its challenges; perhaps the most common concern is 'silo working', where partner agencies, groups or individuals work separately without sharing knowledge or resources with others. Related to this are situations where partners may be unwilling to share scarce resources with each other, or where different organisational objectives and working cultures may come into conflict.

Prevention has been a key part of the Scottish public services agenda since the 2011 report of the *Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services* (Christie Commission). That report, in response to the twin challenges of falling budgets and rising demand for public services from an ageing population, advocated closer partnership working alongside a shift towards preventing adverse outcomes rather than responding to them.

There are various ways of understanding prevention. The objective of prevention is often split into three elements:

- Primary prevention seeks to reduce the risk of negative outcomes arising through universal prevention measures and/or by public information measures.
- Secondary prevention targets groups and situations at a high risk to reduce the risk of negative outcomes.
- Tertiary prevention addresses circumstances in which the negative outcome has already occurred, with a view to preventing reoccurrence.

Another way to understand prevention is as split into short- and long-term elements – short-term entailing immediate action to prevent specific negative outcomes in a situationally-focused way with longer-term prevention more resembling planning and allocation of resources.

While the idea that prevention is better than reaction (or cure) is morally clear-cut and economically rational, it may not be straightforward to calculate or demonstrate the benefits of (particularly) longer-term and primary forms of prevention, because the impact of events that have not occurred is hard to measure. Furthermore, and as

discussed in Section 6 below, in crisis situations the need for short-term reaction may override the value of longer-term planning.

Resilience can refer to any ability to endure or recover from difficulties. The earliest academic use of this concept was in ecology; the conceptualisation of resilience as having to do with the capacity of systems to withstand change has now been developed in various other disciplines (see Bhamra et al., 2011). This is different to the psychological conception of resilience as the capacity of individuals to deal with challenging circumstances. In developing the project, we started from a geographic definition of 'community resilience' as

> *"The existence, development, and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise." (Magis, 2010: 401)*

Resilience in communities can be understood as a combination of 'adaptive capacity' - the ability of a system to maintain itself amid an environment that is changing on a short-term basis - and 'transformation' - the ability to reorient the entire system to new circumstances (Cretney, 2014: 630). As Magis (2010:404) notes, systems undergo minor change almost constantly, but in extreme situations minor change to operations is no longer sufficient and a transformation is required.

Community resilience is relevant not only to the context of Covid-19 but to any major challenges or crises. It is not just a question of crisis response but also of the systems and practices put in place in the medium to long-term to ensure that communities can respond and even succeed in times of crisis. Community resilience bears close relation to the 'prevention principle' articulated by the Christie Commission (2011). As we discuss in Section 1 below, our participants discussed the concept of resilience in complex ways which defied easy categorisation.

Outline of the Report

This final report from the project begins by discussing how partnerships adapted in the immediate aftermath of the early Covid lockdown, before moving to a medium-term focus to consider longer lasting adaptations of partnership practices. The report then considers the various definitions of 'resilience' and how these played out in the context of pandemic partnership working. Two subsequent sections discuss the impacts of Covid-

19 on local communities, and on employees within local partnerships, before turning to the impact of the pandemic and lockdown on efforts to implement the Christie Commission's (2011) prevention principle. Highlighting the context of the fieldwork taking place largely after the most intense period of lockdown, we consider what the return to 'normal' might look like for post-Covid partnership working, as well as issues to do with the organisation of service on a geographic basis. We conclude with some possible learning and good practice for local partnerships seeking to develop community resilience in times of instability and crisis.

Interspersed throughout the report (pages 30, 58 and 77) are three short vignettes spotlighting specific local authority areas from our data, pseudonymised as 'Abertairn', 'Benross' and 'Cullenshire'.

Section 1: Defining Community Resilience

Key Findings:

- Our participants saw resilience as important but defined it in different ways.
- The 'capital R' resilience associated with governmental responses to civil contingencies was not as straightforwardly separable as expected from everyday community resilience activities, particularly where these have developed in response to local emergencies.
- Resilience can be conceived of as operating at individual, local community and whole-society levels, yet in reality, these often mix and merge.
- Some of the most in-depth discussions of resilience centred on particular sectors and systems in which partnerships were seeking to build resilience.
- Of particular note was the work done in some partnerships to improve food resilience with an integrated approach to food poverty, supply chain problems and local economy.

We spoke about resilience in our interviews and found a real diversity of thinking about what resilience is, and how it is developed and maintained. The separation between community resilience and the concept of resilience as used in national civic emergencies planning was not always as clear-cut as we had initially expected. Furthermore, community and societal resilience was not always easily separated from the concept of individual resilience. Our participants also discussed specific forms of resilience in reference to particular sectors of activity and social problems: the resilience of food supply chain systems to prevent and mitigate food poverty, and the resilience of communities to deal with climate change.

Civil contingencies and disasters: "Resilience with a Capital 'R'"

Some of our interviewees were keen to distinguish between the resilience that might be found among individuals and communities facing challenging events and circumstances, and the more formalised and structured approaches to resilience which create statutory responsibilities for public sector bodies and other public services at times of emergency, particularly under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. Even though the UK Government did

not make use of the 2004 Act in responding to the pandemic (instead relying on public health powers and making new legislation specifically to address the pandemic), the civil contingencies infrastructure underpinned by that Act was important in addressing the Covid pandemic in Scotland. These structures exist to deal with emergencies including extreme weather events, pandemics and terrorist attacks.

This infrastructure includes the body 'Ready Scotland', the Scottish Government Resilience Room, Regional and Local Resilience Partnerships. Some of our participants were involved in this type of 'resilience with a capital R' activity, in addition to their local partnership roles. These participants suggested that resilience-related work, in the earlier preparations for Brexit, had helped to prepare for national 'capital R' resilience responses to Covid-19.

> The significant thing, I think, was that we had just finished a very intensive year of preparing for Brexit. And I don't think in my experience of having worked in resilience in Scotland since 2002, that I've seen closer partnership working. We, we were able, after just a very short pause at the start of 2020, to basically re-mobilise all the partnerships, with all the relationships, with all the good practice, and brush down these arrangements and plans quickly, and start to assess the risks for Coronavirus.
> Participant P [Resilience planning, Cullenshire and nationally]

However, the dividing line between this 'pure' and highly structured form of resilience, and the definition of 'community resilience' on which we have focused, is in fact not always a clear one. Several participants highlighted the role of emergency situations in developing and fostering community resilience within local communities – especially in more rural and isolated areas at a distance from urban hubs.

> A good example is that there's quite a lot of resilience groups in Cullenshire, whether there's been maybe flooding, or emergency weather, there are now self sufficient to support their own communities and do check-ins on those that are most vulnerable, where you go back five or 10 years and they would be, for example, council officers that would have to go out and visit all these communities and try and check that everybody's okay and now the community are being able to look after more for themselves, so that's how I would see it. And that's continued on into the pandemic, where you've got people making sure those that are vulnerable have got medical supplies, they've got food supplies, you know, just the welfare checks checking in that they're ok. So all that has really came to the fore.
> Participant C [Community Learning and Development, Cullenshire]

> [Rural communities are] used to being sort of like snowed in, they're used to being in the back of beyond. They're used to services taking a long time to get there. And therefore they've adapted and adjusted their way of being as a result of that. So I think back to the 2009 floods when I went and met with their community council right in the midst of the floods, and normally when you go to a situation like that one, they're saying what are you doing about X, Y and Z - this was a complete role reversal. I was sat in front of 300 people and they said, we will brief you on what we are doing and if you 've got any questions of us at the end of this then you can ask them. So a complete 180 degrees in terms of how it should be, of the community telling the agency what's going on as opposed to the other way round. And I think that's because there was a bridge down there, there was a landslip on the other side. So they were physically cut off. And that's what they were used to in terms of that sort of reality. Other communities ... - big large urban areas - do not have that same level of isolation, risk, and therefore they just rock and work in completely different ways. They are less resourceful, less resilient, I would suggest, more dependent on public services and that's the greater expectation.
>
> Participant S [Resilience planning, local authority and nationally]

Conversely, much of the formal 'capital R' resilience activity of bodies like Ready Scotland seeks to develop community and individual capacity to survive, respond to and thrive amid disaster and emergency situations (Pickering et al., 2018). Therefore, while the focus of our research is on a fairly broadly defined range of community resilience activities, the discussion of local partnership responses to Covid-19 must also include some consideration of formal civil contingencies measures.

Levels of Resilience

Another way to think about resilience is in terms of operating at different levels: that of individuals, communities and wider society. In practice, these levels are deeply linked – resilient societies depend on resilient communities and in turn on resilient individuals (Ready Scotland, 2019). Again, even though our initial focus was on community resilience within local communities, our participants' accounts highlighted that the levels were not always easily separated from each other. For some participants, community resilience began at the individual level:

> Resilience as you know is a personal thing. So, if you take it right back to the bare bones, you've got resilient people who are, you know, strong, they are resilient, they can bounce back. So, if you take that a next step – so, you have resilient families that can make sure that they have the proper insurances in place, flood mitigation, all of these things, fire evacuation plans, all of that, this is just a small example, and then we take the families to our communities. We've got resilient communities,

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> where they can step up when there is a disruptive challenge. And then, organisations in terms of business continuity, it's all under the umbrella of resilience. And then we've got our response, risk assessments, risk preparedness to all of the risks that are out there where that that makes us more resilient as well. So for me, the vision for Benross right now it's like a place to work, visit, whatever – but for me it would be a resilient Benross, that would be my vision. And you can only do that by taking it back, like I said, to the individuals.
>
> Participant R [Resilience planning, Benross]

Others identified individual resilience in lives marked by socioeconomic deprivation and structural disadvantage – before, during and after a pandemic which has served as a flashpoint of social inequalities (see Section 4 below).

> I think because we are working in such a deprived area, the resilience of the people that I work with anyway is second to none, you know what I mean, they're survivors, they've all been through trauma from childhood, or adulthood, or whatever and they're all very, like, as much as they'll – they're survivors. They're very resilient in terms of dealing with the deprivation that they are living, but they don't necessarily have the coping skills for life skills, if that makes sense. There is that resilience there which, to me, that's sort of how I would define resilience, as they're able to keep going. They get up every morning and they, they keep going, and they are sort of accepting, almost, of their current situation…
>
> Participant H [Third sector criminal justice organisation]

Several interviewees stated that the exigencies of the pandemic had created stronger links between individuals as neighbours and friends. Mutual aid was identified as a key element of community resilience, whether this was through formal structures or informally between ordinary individuals.

> So it's about things like that, you're actually helping people to move forward now, and to me that's what resilience is, it's not about being stuck in a hole, it's about moving forward, helping people, helping those around you.
>
> Participant F [Local third sector organisation]

Sectors of Resilience

Thinking about individual, community and wider social resilience offers a 'vertically segmented' way of thinking about resilience. However, if resilience is conceived of in terms of readiness for challenges and crisis, it can also be divided 'horizontally', with resilience inhering in specific sectors and systemic challenges.

Several interviewees explained resilience in these terms, with reference to the economic impacts of the pandemic, the system of food procurement and the global challenge of climate change. These sectors have features specific to them, but are also clearly interlinked:

> I think it feels particularly at a community level, there is a lot of commonality, a lot of people wanting to make change happen, in terms of climate resilience, and in particular that I'm experiencing in the food side of things, because, you know, although people are coming out of the pandemic right now, a lot of people have taken on board the fact that our food system is so unstable, and factor in climate change, Brexit, any future pandemics, and we have a real extremely challenging situation, so, I think this whole thing around resilience will be core to what we, as an organisation, try to deliver over the next five to 10 years.
>
> Participant B [Local third sector organisation]

Food Resilience

The fragility of supply chains for food was already a salient issue in the UK as the negotiations around Brexit unfolded, and became more so in the first few months of the pandemic, as images of empty supermarket shelves were a frequent sight in news and social media. Further to this, food *poverty* was highlighted as a feature of the impact of Covid-19 on existing social and economic inequalities (see Section 4). The impacts of Covid-19 on people's ability to feed themselves can be divided roughly into impacts on the ability to afford to buy food (i.e. poverty) and non-financial impacts on the ability to *obtain* food (i.e. issues of supply). Additionally, self-isolating citizens required food to be delivered to them.

The economic impacts of the pandemic, and pre-existing inequalities at a wider scale, led to concerns about the ability of people to provide food for themselves. Our interviewees suggested that in certain, particularly rural and island areas of Scotland, wider concerns about poverty, combined with supply chain issues and the tendency of food to cost more and take longer to arrive in these areas, created strains on people's ability to feed themselves healthily. Food poverty is also discussed, alongside other forms of poverty and inequality, in Section 4.

Some participants from the third sector suggested that an *over*-provision of food to food banks had had implications for the development of individual resilience:

> And I think, it's really important to us that – because we don't want a dependency culture on things like, you know, food banks, and all the

different things. I mean, we have, you know, thousands of groups and organisations and charities. And really, as a society, we need to make a decision on "is this right?", that they are doing the work.

Participant M [Third Sector Interface]

One longer account highlighted problems in the specific food provided to foodbanks as reflective of the class dynamics implicated in local public service provision, volunteering, and community action more generally.

"It's interesting I think everybody jumped on the bandwagon that, food banks, we're needing food banks everywhere, and for some reason people felt that that was a good thing. Where, you know, it was my worst nightmare for people to be like 'oh we'll set up a food bank, people need food,' and what they were doing was basically giving people the things that they didn't want, you know, the whole pasta, the tomatoes, you know things when you looked at the box you're thinking, you know what, I couldn't make anything out of that why are we treating people so differently?

I think it showed real inequalities of, oh people are wanting to give you are saying, oh this is a good thing - but actually treating their neighbour differently. Because, you know, I said to folk, 'when you go for your shopping, is that what you would put in for shopping?' There was no bread, there was no fresh veg, there was no dairy, there was nothing like that. And I think it opened people's eyes to say, like: why would you give that to somebody? You can't make a meal of that. And that's to last you a whole week. And these, they, their heart was in the right place but I think it just showed there was a real divide about getting the real people who we needed to volunteer. So if you have volunteers who are struggling themselves, you know, who are doing that - they understand what people need. Not maybe that next class up, and I'll use class because that's what we're thinking of, and there was an imbalance of the volunteers that were actually setting up the food banks, and those who were going out sort of to deliver.

Now what happened was there was an increase of food and people needed food because they couldn't get out. I mean, they can't get out obviously. I mean, you're inside the house, you eat more, you know, that's because there's not much to do, so that's why there was an increase of food. Equally the other side of it was people were going on furlough, they didn't have the money, so there was different areas of why people needed food, and that wasn't recognized. It was just a case of, 'we'll give them tins of tomatoes and pasta' and you know, what can you do with that with kids? But interestingly on what happened now is, when they put up all these food banks and everything there, when people came out, they're thinking, what do we do with all this food we've collected? You know, the council was the same, they, they set up big halls of food and it was of no use to

> anybody. And I still don't know where that food went! So I think there was an injustice of showing, people wanted to help and they thought they were helping, but again people didn't really understand their communities. But as a result of this people started to understand the people and the communities and who was actually there, and who was most vulnerable."
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> Participant A [Community Learning and Development, Abertairn]

As with other forms of deprivation, rural food poverty was intensified by issues of access. The resilience of food systems was a particular issue for rural and island areas. Long and complex journeys to deliver food from urban/mainland suppliers meant that it did not always arrive in time. This combined with pre-existing issues in the organisation of food retailing, and travel restrictions imposed in response to the pandemic, to produce a situation in which, for some people in the most rural areas, shopping for food was inconvenient, time-consuming and expensive:

> There were people on the isles in particular, who had never really realised how close they were to the breadline but because people weren't allowed to leave home, they weren't allowed to come across to the [authority] mainland, for example, to shop in the supermarkets, they were having to use their local shops and the prices there can be double what they are in the supermarkets, even allowing for coming over on the boat. And so we had families that actually couldn't afford to buy food on their islands.
>
> Participant D [Community development, local authority]

This is in some ways similar to the phenomenon of 'food deserts' first described in the 1990s and defined as "populated urban areas where residents do not have access to an affordable and healthy diet" (Cummins and Macintyre, 2002).[1] In fact, however, most contemporary research (Widener, 2018) suggests that while geography is extremely relevant to access to food, the reality of spatial access to food is more complex and more locally fine-grained than the 'food desert' metaphor would suggest.

As Garnett et al. (2020) among others have noted, the dependence of the UK food supply system on imported produce, cheap and precarious labour and 'just-in-time' long-range logistics has made it extremely vulnerable to disruptions. One interviewee linked

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[1] The phrase is thought to have originated in an interview with a resident of a social housing scheme in the West of Scotland in the 1990s.

issues around food supply explicitly to questions of 'capital-R' resilience amid national crises.

> We had also done quite a bit of work in the lead up to EU exit preparation, where we were looking at all of the risks around our communities. And one of the things that we did identify quite clearly was that our rural and island communities faced higher risks around food availability, because at the very end of very long food chains – both for public sector access, so for us to get it to our islands, but also for retail. And what, what happens if there is a delay, what happens if there is an import issue at Dover? What impact is that having in our communities on [area of Benross] when they're quite a bit further away from others? ... We also knew from EU exit preparation, there could be risks around employment opportunities, and impacts of withdrawals of EU funding which could potentially mean more people would be left vulnerable, and with less money in their pockets, which again we knew would mean more demand for school meals, and people with less cash in their pockets.
>
> Participant N [Food procurement, Benross]

We also heard about exciting and innovative ways to address food poverty and build resilience within the food system, while also using food as a way to promote community resilience more generally. In particular, this was highlighted by one interviewee (Participant N) who described repurposing buildings and facilities for food preparation and provision, as well as using partnership structures to build relationships with food suppliers to develop more robust and locally-oriented supply chains which also benefited local economic development (see also Sections 4 and 8).

Climate Resilience

While prevention (as it appears in the Christie Commission report) has been described as 'the ultimate 'wicked' problem', which cuts across the full range of sectoral activity (Cairney and St. Denny, 2020), the climate crisis could be described in similar terms, with interlinked implications across the full spectrum of human society and activity.

We have already noted the role played by specific extreme weather events (particularly floods and heavy snowstorms) in fostering community resilience, and conversely, the necessity of community resilience to responding to extreme weather events. As one interviewee explained, the development of community resilience as a concept is deeply rooted in community responses to specific events.

> Now, just to go back to community resilience - community resilience, as a phrase, has been around in Scotland since probably 2010, 2009, we

had two very bad winters, where consecutive winters where it was very, very, very cold in Scotland for extended periods, but it was very unluckily that they were back-to-back. And during that time we were very worried about elderly frail, vulnerable people being housebound, not being able to collect food, not being able to get out, and we were able, amongst other local authorities, but we were able to do it in Cullenshire, to, to create volunteer groups - spontaneous groups that come together, but by giving them a bit of nudge, a bit of support, a bit of resource to help them get established, we were able to form about 65 groups in Cullenshire alone, in communities, in small communities, and we called these groups community resilience groups. They took on roles around looking after people who were living alone, but we also, some of them some of the more able bodied in that group were able to clear paths of snow and ice, they were able to put grit and salt down on pavements, they were able to, to help create safe routes from maybe sheltered housing estates into the grocery store, for people that felt able to go out. So there were, so we were able to, over the years, support these groups as they then moved to flooding, they were able to put sandbags out, they were able to work in village halls with communities flooded to give people a refuge or rest centre to go to, and to help people go through that real crisis point. So these community resilience groups, whilst they were used to responding to flooding, and bad weather and snow and ice, they wanted themselves to respond to this crisis.

Participant P [Resilience planning, Cullenshire and nationally]

Hence, climate resilience is not only a response to extreme weather, but also implicated in the development of community resilience generally. The academic conception of resilience in terms of a system's capacity to maintain itself amid change was first developed in ecology alongside mathematical models which highlighted the ability of ecosystems to sustain themselves even amid changes in the external environment (Holling, 1973); it was only after this that the term was applied to social/geographic communities alongside the natural environment.

Here, 'climate resilience' refers not to ecosystems themselves but to the ability of communities to withstand environmental change *and* to adjust systems, infrastructure and lifestyles to reduce and mitigate the future impacts of climate change. Hence it is closely connected to other forms of resilience and to community resilience more generally. One interviewee in particular emphasised the connection between areas of resilience in the context of efforts to build local resilience to the changing climate.

I think it feels particularly at a community level, there is a lot of commonality, a lot of people wanting to make change happen, in terms of climate resilience, and in particular that I'm experiencing in the food side of things, because, you know, although people are coming out of the pandemic right now, a lot of people have taken on board the fact

> that our food system is so instable? unstable, and factor in climate change, Brexit, any future pandemics, and we have a real extremely challenging situation, so, I think this whole thing around resilience will be core to what we, as an organisation, try to deliver over the next five to 10 years.
>
> Participant B [Local third sector organisation]

All current predictions suggest that as the climate crisis deepens, extreme weather events will become more frequent and global systems such as the food supply chain will become more disrupted. The implications for socioeconomic inequalities are already seen at a global level.

Discussions of climate resilience in the community partnership context exemplify the environmentalist slogan "Think global, act local." Climate change is a global problem with local as well as global impacts; local resilience to climate change is a matter of local community resilience as well as global initiatives.

This section has discussed various forms of resilience as they appeared in our participants' accounts, highlighting that resilience operates at various levels and that there is not always a clear separation between the informal everyday resilience of communities and individuals and more structured and formal resilience activities to respond to civil contingencies. Climate resilience exemplifies the links between community and 'capital R' resilience, and is likely to be a key area for local partnerships to focus on in the near future.
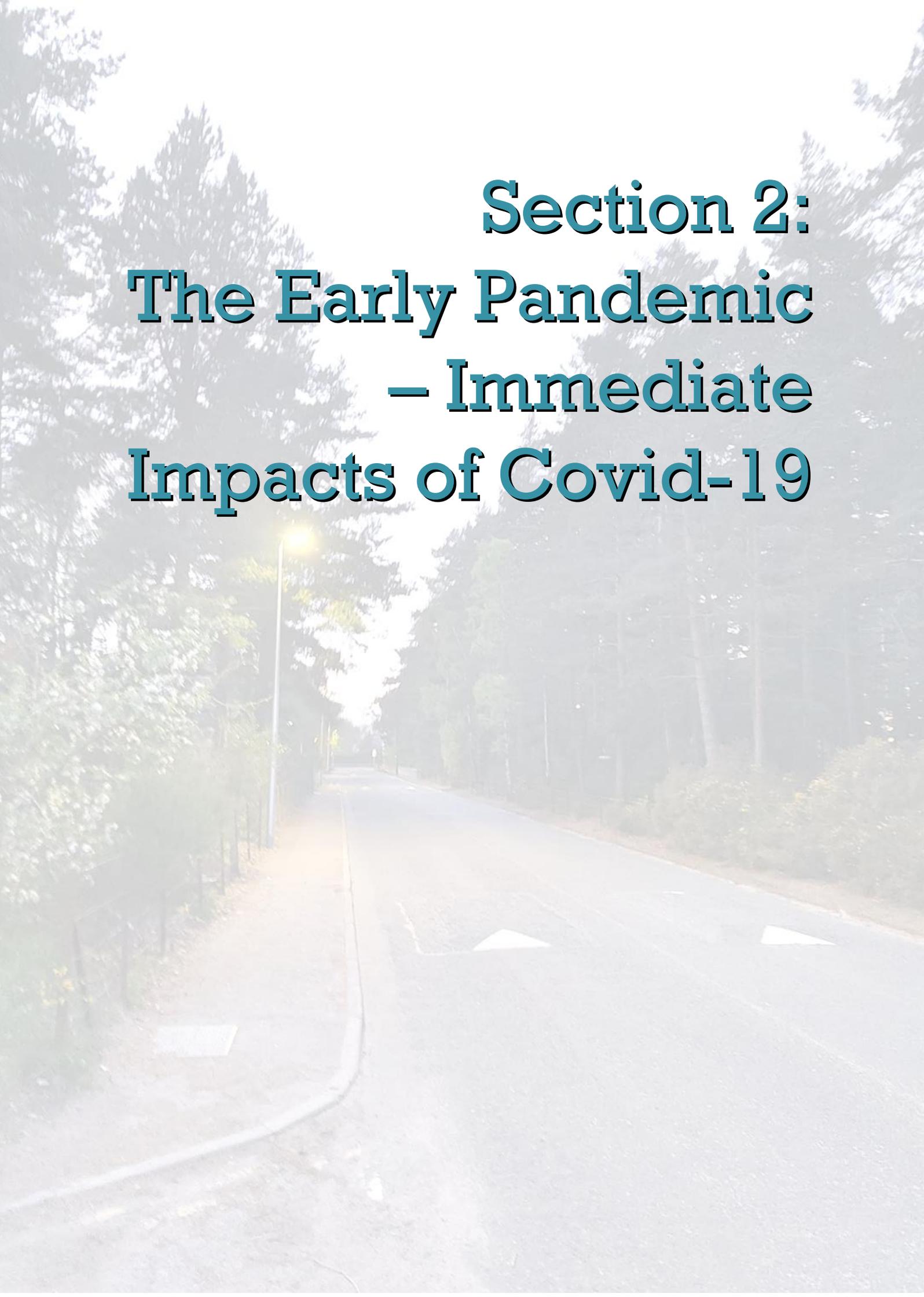
Section 2: The Early Pandemic – Immediate Impacts of Covid-19

Key Findings:

- Local partnerships adapted extremely quickly to ensure the continuity of services and protect the most vulnerable amid the pandemic and lockdown, amid rapidly changing guidance and regulations in the early stages of lockdown.
- This included rapid redeployment of staff into roles with which they were unfamiliar. Although very successful in meeting immediate needs, this also created significant personal and professional challenges for the staff members involved and disrupted everyday partnership activities.
- At the same time, most organisations and employees had to deal with a very rapid shift to working from home, which entailed both technological and organisational implications.
- The experience of rapid adaptation, redeployment and the shift to home working was one of enormous uncertainty, which has continuing effects on working lives in local partnerships (which we discuss further in Section 5).
- The need for rapid response to the pandemic drew attention away from regular partnership working; this was compounded by the shift to home working and the redeployment of some staff.

Context

The first recorded cases of the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 appeared in Wuhan, China, in November or December 2019. In the context of a globalised world in which the international movement of goods and people account for a significant proportion of economic activity, the virus was quickly able to spread worldwide. The first British cases of the highly contagious and dangerous infectious disease Covid-19 appeared shortly after, in January 2020; the first confirmed case in Scotland was recorded on 1 March 2020. That month, the World Health Organisation had declared Covid-19 a global pandemic. Although most people with Covid-19 suffered relatively minor and temporary symptoms, the disease was sometimes extremely serious and could be fatal. The first confirmed Covid-19 death in Scotland occurred on 13 March 2020. It would become clear later that many patients who largely recover from Covid-19 may still suffer symptoms for months or years afterwards.

In the initial absence of a vaccine for Covid-19, with little known about effective treatment of the disease, and with the NHS under enormous strain, the public health response centred on preventing airborne transmission. The UK and Scottish governments began by discouraging large in-person events, before closing down venues and leisure facilities. On 24th March 2020, Scotland went into lockdown. At that time, the rules imposed by the 2020 Coronavirus Act required:[2]

- Working from home wherever possible
- Not leaving home without a reasonable excuse e.g. food shopping, picking up medicine or travelling to work if unable to work from home
- Social distancing of 2 metres between people wherever possible
- The closure of non-essential businesses
- 'Shielding' (self-isolation) of people thought to have contracted the disease, or those who were clinically vulnerable

Aside from the health impacts of Covid-19, the disease and the measures used to control its transmission affected every aspect of life in Scotland. As the pandemic continued and effective vaccines and treatments could be developed, these rules were progressively relaxed but much more slowly than many people initially expected. Measures sometimes had to be reimposed to deal with rises in cases (e.g. the 'second lockdown' around the winter of 2020).

At the time of writing, the lockdown is effectively ended in Scotland and the UK, but it will likely take many years to know in full the social, economic and health impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. This section focuses on the early stages of the pandemic and how local partnerships were impacted in the highly uncertain early months of the lockdown.

Flux and Uncertainty

The early phase of the Covid-19 pandemic created a step change in the role and requirements for local partnership agencies, particularly local authorities, which had statutory responsibilities for enacting regulations and providing services in communities. The onset of the pandemic and the announcement of a national lockdown meant that staff in local partnerships had to respond rapidly to both the changing guidance and

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[2] See https://spice-spotlight.scot/2022/05/27/timeline-of-coronavirus-covid-19-in-scotland/ for a timeline of events related to Covid-19 and the lockdown in Scotland

understand the impact of a national lockdown and global pandemic on residents and services. This resulted in a period of real flux, where job roles changed and workloads often escalated. The speed and agility of local responses to Covid-19 has been recognised elsewhere, but our research (here and in Section 5 below) also highlights the impacts of this response on the working lives of people in these partnerships.

> And just as I said previously, the smallest tasks, took forever. Because you're having to phone this one, and then oh no, they're not working today or they're working from home, you need to phone the helpline number or any, I mean it was just round. We were all finding our feet, we didn't know what we were doing. Does that make sense, we were all just flying by the seat of our pants, aye, that's it.
>
> Participant H [Third sector criminal justice organisation]

This participant captures the challenge of the early days of lockdown and the challenges of reorganising local authority business to try and respond to the needs of the community while implementing Scottish and UK Government policy. In the early stages of the lockdown, national guidance and relevant legal provisions were changing extremely quickly. Nearly all of our survey respondents stated that their job was harder or much harder in the period following the initial lockdown.

> I think, you remember right in the beginning, when there was no masks, and even a debate for a long time about whether we should wear masks, [...] gel, even what the procedures were, or how to use and how do you do this, and then trying to communicate that to your whole staff group. And then that would change overnight because they would make an announcement from the scientists on the six o'clock news, so you knew you were going into work the next day to flux and hundreds of emails. I think... Yeah, I think, at the height of the pandemic on average, I was getting about 250 emails a day - just either from staff or service users or whatever, just, I think the volume and pace and change was like a tsunami hitting us.
>
> Participant I [Criminal justice, Cullenshire]

Interviewees gave a real sense of trying to address an unprecedented situation in an ordered way, while uncertainty and complexity dominated decision making. This led to staff doing their best and 'muddling through' the situation. Given the way that staff were furloughed, the local authority had to quickly identify the gaps in critical service provision and coordinate resources – both physical and human – in order to support critical areas of business.

Initial Redeployment

The initial adaptation to the pandemic required some staff in local partnerships to be 'redeployed' - assigned on a temporary basis to tasks or responsibilities outside their normal job description. 25% of councils across the entire UK reported having redeployed staff as a pandemic response in the first two months of lockdown.3 Redeployment was a dominant theme among interviewees, who had both positive and negative views of it. Some staff found redeployment a positive experience, whereby they were given more responsibility and able to forge relationships and understanding that they would not have had previously:

> I got redeployed into food distribution, an area that I was not an expert in for, like at all! – but actually, it gives me a good awareness of the food poverty issues and the challenges that some of our other partners face working with food distribution companies who are... yeah, different, different to work with! And working with different people because of that was really good and it strengthened, some of the other networks that we maybe didn't have contacts within[...] So that was really useful, that was something that I'd not really been involved in up until then, and meant that our food growing strategy was a lot more informed because of that
>
> <div align="right">Participant G [Community planning, Abertairn]</div>

Redeployment was not universally seen as being more complex or harder. Some participants noted that because of the emergency legislation, things that before the pandemic were complex and time-consuming became quicker and more streamlined (see Section 3). Although this led to some questioning whether some of the due process that normally governs spending decisions had been bypassed, others highlighted the advantage this gave teams to 'get things done':

> It was almost easier at the start when we all got redeployed, and every, other normal work under emergency legislation you could not do things that you normally have to do, you know, so for example you haven't got to jump through all the usual hoops to do with issuing, issuing grants and so on, you can just get stuff out the door straight away.
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> <div align="right">Participant G [Community planning, Abertairn]</div>

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3 New Local (formerly New Local Government Network), 2020. *NGLN Leadership Index: MEASURING THE MOOD OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT EDITION #9: COVID-19.* Available at: https://www.newlocal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Leadership-Index_MAY-2020.pdf

However, the redeployment of staff did lead to very substantial and rapid problem-solving being required to address logistical and practical issues that emerged, often leading to extremely escalated workloads during this period.

> There was lots of services closed overnight, you know, leisure, culture, and, you know, all that side of things. So all the staff there were really put towards the immediate response so some of those were multi-, upskilled they were helping out with refuse collection, waste and moved into shielding and, you know, taking shielding calls and providing advice to vulnerable people. So, you know, it completely really changed over overnight. As did my own role, I was pulled into to work in business continuity, so that was the - it was all the services that were left in the ground that were still going, that weren't closed. And then having to really troubleshoot some of the problems that were emerging on a day to day basis that really weren't expected [...] it was crazy. It was intense. And still trying to keep bits of my other role going, you know?
> Participant C [Community Learning and Development, Cullenshire]

> I got redeployed to help set up our Coronavirus Support Hub for people that were shielding. So I was drawing up, I drew up our volunteer register for that, recruited 100 or so volunteers onto that. We didn't know how many we'd need, you see - in the end we didn't actually need that many but we had no idea at the start, how many people we might end up with isolating...
> Participant D [Community development, local authority]

Concerns with unfamiliar job roles when already dealing with uncertainty around the pandemic created additional challenges for staff. For many this was a period of intense change and moving into new roles which was stressful and time-consuming. They might also be juggling anxiety about the virus, childcare and home-schooling, self-isolation (in some cases) and other general stresses that affected most of society at this time. Uncertainty, rapid change of roles and reacting to quickly developing guidance and law meant that these early months of the pandemic were frenetic. Section 5 discusses in more detail the effects of the pandemic, lockdown and working from home on the working lives and wellbeing of partnership employees.

> It was awful at the beginning, and it was just long hours, constant problem solving, trying to figure it out, and on top of maintaining the service we also had people contacting us who had no food, who had electricity, who had no gas, who had been told to stay at home but couldn't get their prescriptions. So, we spent the first few weeks as well running around delivering food parcels, collecting peoples' medicines for them. So yeah, so we were all still pretty much coming into the office trying to keep our distance from one another, and then quickly we had to set up a rota.

As the lockdown measures continued long past the first few weeks, local partnerships continued to redeploy staff as well as other resources; these longer-term forms of redeployment are discussed in Section 3.

The Shift to Home Working

Local partnerships, like many other organisations, reported moving most or all of their activity and meetings online, with staff working from home, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The need to shift quickly to working from home, alongside the stress of redeployment and very high workloads, was made more challenging by issues with technological capacity and communications infrastructure, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic.

On the technological side, these issues included unsuitable or outdated computer equipment, restrictive information security protocols, gaps in computer software provision and (particularly relevant to partnership working) issues of compatibility/interoperability of different systems between different organisations. On the human side, gaps in computer literacy and technical skills were sometimes also an issue. All of these posed challenges for the shift to online and flexible working, although participants generally reported these had been overcome by the time we carried out our interviews.

> Again, technology was a challenge as well because for a lot of local authority workers. there wasn't enough devices or home packages to work at home, so the technology servers behind the scenes, they were fiddling around with different combinations because screens were freezing, things were taking ages, so you know, that was certainly a challenge.
> Participant C [Community Learning and Development, Cullenshire]

> Services that were not delivering a frontline statutory service, either didn't have the infrastructure, so didn't have laptops didn't, some of them don't even have phones, to contacting them was really difficult, or they just didn't deliver a service, but it took them a long time to deliver a service, or there were only available on the phone if you could get hold of them.
> Participant I [Criminal justice, Cullenshire]

> Some of our laptops were exceptionally old and not fit for purpose

(Survey Respondent 7 - Management Level, urban Community Justice Partnership)

The shift to home working is now one of the most widely recognised features of white-collar working life during the Covid pandemic and afterwards. It has also been one of the most enduring, with many employees choosing to continue working primarily from home. We discuss the longer-term implications of this, *beyond* the initial reaction to the pandemic, in Section 5. Section 4 discusses the digital divide, while Section 7 considers the implications of digital technology for community empowerment activities.

Suspension of Everyday Business

As a number of interviewees and survey participants highlighted, the speed of adaptations to the lockdown required the everyday 'business as usual' to be suspended to address and support the Covid-19 efforts. While redeployment and repurposing resources was essential to respond to the pandemic and lockdown, it also created challenges around the continuity of ordinary, everyday partnership working. This was particularly the case when people were redeployed to areas of work that they were unfamiliar with and where their partnership roles were less prominent in the context of the immediate Covid response:

> We were in a really good place and it's been such a shame because it really put us back a step, because as soon as the pandemic hit, I got redeployed into food distribution. A lot of my colleagues across Scotland did. And they essentially parked the Community Planning function at a time when I felt it was probably at its most important to keep it going.
> Participant G [Community planning, Abertairn]

As local authorities came out of the immediate phase of the first lockdown, staff redeployment also created challenges for how to re-engage existing community partnership structures with the new structures created in the early phase of the pandemic. With duplication of work and challenges around 'double roles' (see Section 5 below), this is an ongoing problem that will require consideration as we exit the pandemic and restrictions continue to ease.

Literature on resilience of communities and systems in times of crisis highlights the importance of adaptation and adaptability in dealing with situations of change and crisis. Our empirically grounded research shows not only that it was necessary for local partnerships and service providers to transform their operations and ways of working, but also gives a sense of what this adaptation looked like 'on the ground', from the

perspective of individual staff – in our discussion of workloads and wellbeing below (Section 5). The sections below explore in more detail the impact of the pandemic on partnerships and communities in the longer term.

'Abertairn' is located outwith the Central Belt. It is a mostly rural area, with a couple of large towns. It is close to mountainous areas of Scotland and has a number of remote rural areas which are predominantly farming, as well as a section of coast; one interviewee described it as "a mini-Scotland within Scotland". Three datazones within this local authority are among the 15% most deprived in Scotland, according to SIMD data. The area also ranks in some of the least deprived in Scotland in terms of income, employment and health.

Farming and tourism are important industries in this local authority, along with food production and manufacturing. Manufacturing is embedded within the local authority, accounting for a much larger proportion of employment than the Scottish average of 7.9%. The county is also seeing an expansion of capabilities to support both onshore and offshore renewable projects and contribute to the energy sector in the area.

Three of our interviewees worked within this local authority area. Participants working in Abertairn described a generally supportive and open occupational culture as a key factor in responding to Covid-19. The Covid-19 response benefited from very close working relationships between local authority personnel and those employed by the authority's Third Sector Interface; the sense was that relevant people not only felt a personal rapport but a deep understanding of each other's roles. This was particularly helpful early in the pandemic when the TSI was able to move faster in developing responses than the council itself. Community organisations were also able to respond quickly and sometimes work in partnership across local authority boundaries.

Another area of identified good practice was the flexible and reactive approach to different partnership structures to redeploy staff and repurpose buildings (including libraries, sports centres and school halls) for Covid response, and to share these resources between each other. Covid-19 spurred longstanding (but hitherto largely unsuccessful) efforts to embed digital working practices in the authority. Online council meetings facilitated partnership working but, as in other local authorities, also brought renewed attention to the impact of digital divides.

However, some interviewees in this area suggested that in the context of a fairly conservative political culture, the local authority tended to be rigidly hierarchical and sometimes too distant form the most serious economic concerns of local communities to get a clear sense of the impacts of inequalities. There was also (here as elsewhere) concern that the return to everyday business after the pandemic would mean some of the successes of developing partnership in this area would be lost.
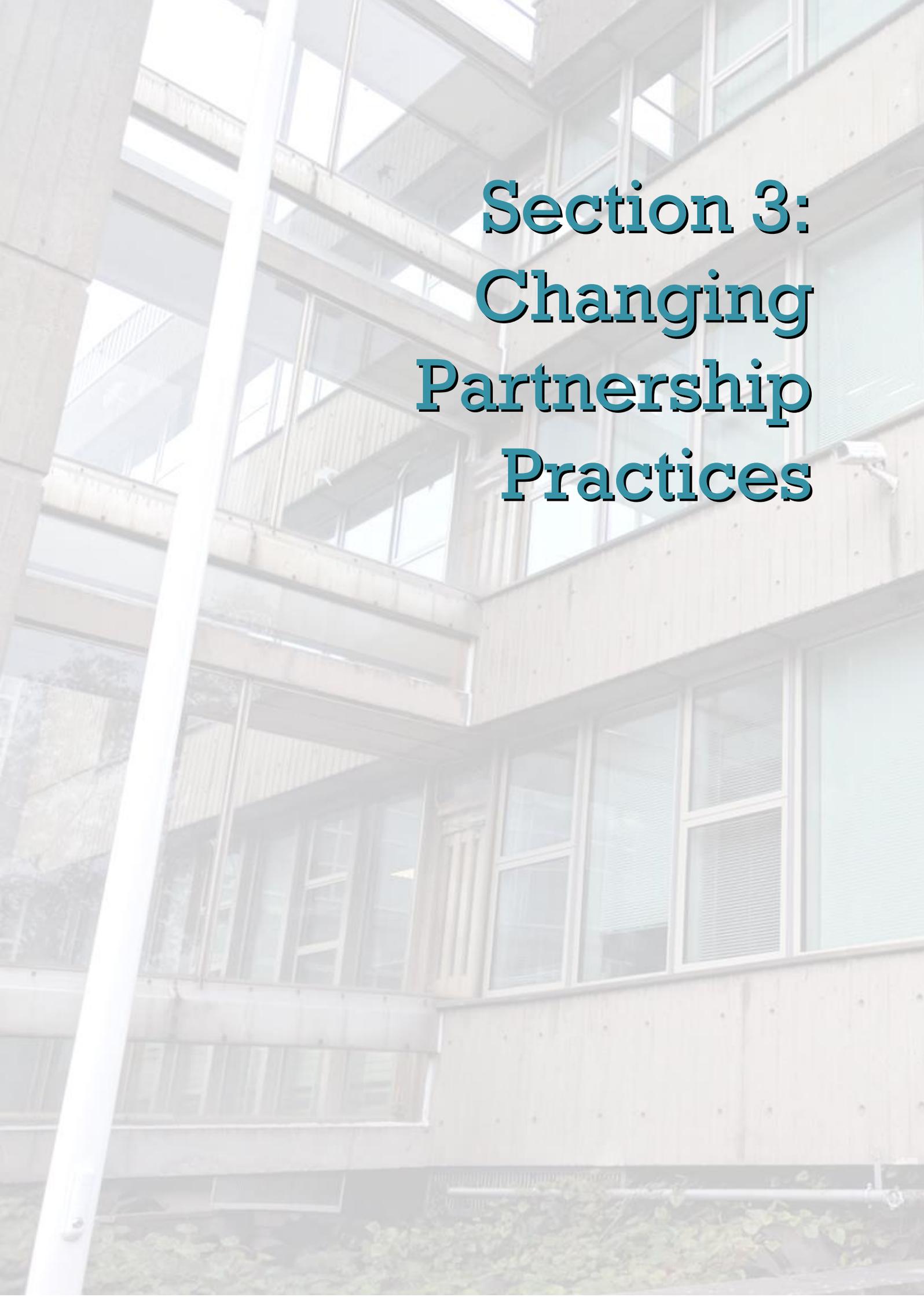
Section 3: Changing Partnership Practices

Key Findings:

- Responding to the pandemic entailed significant medium-term changes to partnership working, in which local partnerships were able to become more agile and responsive.
- This included the breaking down of 'silo working' between agencies and the lowering or overcoming of process-driven bureaucratic barriers to successful partnership working.
- As the pandemic progressed and amid the closure of some facilities and the furloughing of staff, redeployment of staff as well as other resources facilitated partnership approaches while mitigating the impact of the pandemic on staff and communities.
- The rise in volunteering amid the pandemic created a new resource for local partnerships but there were challenges around deployment and organisation of volunteers.
- The shift to flexible working (principally working from home with videoconferencing) had both positive and negative impacts for local partnerships.

As the pandemic progressed into the summer of 2020, the focus of intensified partnership activity shifted away from reacting to the most immediate problems and towards more medium-term concerns.

This section discusses the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on partnership working practices, and how practices in partnership working evolved and adapted to the restrictions and to the social impacts of the pandemic. Although the responses present a mixed and context-specific picture, it is important to examine the key successes, particularly as these may present lessons for building more resilient and successful partnerships in the future.

In the survey stage of the study, a large majority of the participants agreed that the pandemic and lockdown had made their work harder or much harder. In general, though, most survey respondents (19/31) stated that their partnership arrangements had responded well or very well in the initial lockdown.

The picture that emerged from our data is one of partnerships becoming very agile to adapt to new circumstances and ensure service provision amid the pandemic. We heard of silos being 'broken down' and bureaucratic red tape 'falling away', particularly as local authorities used emergency powers granted under Covid legislation. Resources including staff and buildings were redeployed or repurposed to meet immediate needs, the shift to home working enabled a more flexible set of responses, and the huge rise in community volunteering created a valuable additional resource.

However, there were also significant challenges, both to successful partnership working in the short term and to the possibility of sustained improvement throughout and beyond the pandemic.

Silos Breaking Down

A significant barrier to much development of interagency partnership has been 'silo working', in which organisations and teams work narrowly within their own limits without engaging fully with other organisations. Silo working is a problem for any effort to coordinate activities between organisations; it may arise when there are significant differences in organisational cultures, or competition for resources, between organisations within a partnership. Bureaucratic processes that obstruct partnership working also contribute to the development of 'silos'. This can be a particular problem for community partnerships which seek to deal with complex social problems and hence require contributions from a range of highly specialised agencies.

A consistent finding in our research was that amid the extremely pressured situation created by the pandemic, 'silo working' broke down as employees in partnerships found new ways to engage with colleagues in other organisations. With complex and overlapping implications that went far beyond physical health - including insecure employment, fractured supply chains and social isolation – the pandemic pulled organisations out of their silos and into closer partnership (Mitchell, 2020).

> The main things we've learned from this is, keep communicating and be honest. You know? And don't go into silo thinking. I think that's, if we can manage that, as we come out the pandemic and we move to the next phases, post-pandemic, I think the communication has been brilliant, it's been increased. The honesty is there as well. Part of good partnership is that you've got to be transparent and then honest, and if we can keep that going, and build on that, I think that would be the legacy of this pandemic.

<div align="right">Participant V [Managers, national criminal justice]</div>

This 'breakdown' of silos was sometimes described with a sense of 'despecialisation' - as organisations began to work more closely together, their identity became less specialised and professionalised and more focused on place- and problem-based partnership working. Individual members of staff who had been seconded, formally or otherwise, to other roles (see 'Redeploying Resources' below), described a similar experience. Employees challenged to work beyond their organisations and job descriptions found themselves experiencing partnership working from other perspectives.

> I think that was evidenced in the [Third Sector Interface] and myself, because I totally immersed myself, I learned all about [the TSI], really got into the you know, that whole why do you do this, why's that, what's your philosophy on that. Equally [my colleague] got to say 'right why are you doing that, why've you got that' and we really actually took over each other's roles. And we understood their services a lot better that way, and to me that's when you can really say you're in true partnership work when the partners actually take over each other's roles!
>
> <div align="right">Participant A [Community Learning and Development, Abertairn]</div>

Very frequent meetings, particularly as organisations adapted to rapidly shifting requirements in the early stages of the pandemic, allowed organisations and employees to develop closer links with each other. These meetings tended to be virtual, and the shift towards teleconferencing and home working facilitated closer partnership (see 'Partnerships and Flexible Working' below).

> You know, in terms of, there was maybe more regular check-ins, but there might be virtual meetings for like 20/30 minutes and just really focusing in on what the key issues are, so a lot of the time, you know, the main plan was probably put to one side and it was more about the partners working together just to work on what was, you know, coming up on the ground, be it kind of digital or, like I said, those that are needing clinical support around food, health, you know, those type of issues.
>
> <div align="right">Participant C [Community Learning and Development, Cullenshire]</div>

Our findings on silo working chime with other findings on partnership working during Covid-19 from elsewhere in the UK. Research by Nesta on six councils in England has highlighted stronger collaboration and reduced bureaucracy as features of a new model of working that has emerged in response to the pandemic. Northern Ireland's Department of Health launched a 'No More Silos' action plan in response to the care needs around Covid-19 (Cretu, 2020; Northern Ireland Department of Health, 2020).

The frequency and intensity of partnership working during the pandemic were widely acknowledged as successful and perhaps even transformative, particularly in ensuring that 'joined-up' support could be provided to the most vulnerable people and those most affected by the pandemic. However, the breaking down of barriers between units and organisations, and intensification of partnership working, had significant and hitherto largely unacknowledged workload implications for people working within partnerships, which we discuss below. We found a real appetite to ensure that silo working did not return, but as we discuss in Section 6, there is a danger that partnerships will settle back into this habit as the country continues to transition out of Covid-19 response measures.

The falling away of interagency silos sometimes included new formal or informal interagency partnership arrangements, formed on a short-term basis to deal with the immediate impact of the pandemic. As local partnerships transition out of the pandemic response, some local authorities are using partnership structures to prevent a return to silo working and ensure that close partnerships can continue.

Removal of Bureaucracy

Bureaucracy – the use of ostensibly rational, rules-based administrative procedures to govern decision-making and service provision, particularly where these rely on written or digital records – is a feature of much professional life around the world, particularly in the public sector. Although probably in some sense necessary to the functioning of complex post-industrial societies, bureaucracy is synonymous for many with inefficient, overcomplicated systems prone to delay and irrational decisions.

Local partnership organisations must meet a wide range of requirements around bureaucratic process. Scottish local authorities are regularly audited and must report on a range of performance metrics to local government, and like other public sector bodies must also account for their spending. These authorities are also accountable electorally, through councillors. National organisations such as the NHS are subject to their own bureaucratic requirements which interlink with those at the local level, while third-sector organisations are subject to their own regulatory and accounting requirements via the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO). Requirements like these are commonly cited as a significant factor in silo working, and an obstacle to successful partnership. The internal bureaucratic requirements of specific agencies or specific units

or offices within agencies may come into conflict with each other, or may stifle successful partnership working or resource and information sharing.

Shortly before the Covid-19 pandemic, the implementation of the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) by the UK's 2018 Data Protection Act had added significantly to bureaucratic workloads for local partnerships and related bodies by creating obligations around data compliance, monitoring and information sharing. This posed significant challenges for partnership working, which depends heavily on information sharing particularly to support vulnerable people.

Alongside the reduction in silo working, interviewees reported the falling away of bureaucratic obstacles to successful partnership working. This arose partly in an organic way, as a relatively straightforward result of the extreme urgency of the Covid-19 situation, particularly as partnerships adapted to very rapidly changing guidelines in the early weeks of the pandemic. The need to save lives and prevent harm was prioritised above the need to meet process requirements, here as in other parts of the UK.

> The lines of bureaucracy, kind of disappeared within authorities, because something needed happened in an hour's time and it was just made to happen.
>
> Participant C [Community Learning and Development, Cullenshire]

> So we really quickly set up a subgroup, with the drug and alcohol partners, and identified, they had the data to be able to identify who we thought would be at risk, so that we could set up, and then to pass that information to our shielding team, who made proactive contact with them to check that they were okay... not worrying too much about who has what data, and we'll worry about that later about ISPs and GDPR and data sharing, because lives are at risk here, so we need to work together. And we did, so very quickly, we found ways around that to share information that before, that would have been an information sharing protocol and months of discussing how we were going to discuss, to share the data. Within the space of two weeks, we'd agreed a joint spreadsheet for who we thought was at risk in the region through their chronic drug and alcohol misuse, we'd collated all the numbers, their addresses and their contact details, which we passed to the shielding team and got the shielding team to make proactive contact with them.
>
> Participant I [Criminal justice, Cullenshire]

A further factor was the use of time-limited emergency powers granted to local authorities which enabled them to circumvent or ignore ordinary processes (SPICe, 2021) – however, only a few interviewees mentioned these; most of the 'unfreezing' of

bureaucratic processes was more to do with informal changes in ways of working, underpinned by significantly increased workloads (see Section 5 below).

> I think the flexibility - the responding quickly, is a good one. Now we can't always do that because we're hemmed around by legislation, and people have been saying, why can't you always do it like we've been doing it for the past year? And we have to say, well, actually we've been operating under emergency powers, and it's not always that easy, we can't always just drop all the rules and do stuff instantly whenever you want it done. We normally have to be a lot more accountable than that.
> Participant D [Community development, local authority]

The removal of bureaucracy was seen very positively, as an important part of local partnership response to Covid and as strongly developmental for local partnership working generally. The suspension of ordinary processes of accountability and scrutiny, even where those processes may be flawed, is not necessarily unproblematic; there are questions of privacy and due process, and below (Section 6) we discuss the implications of these in the longer term as local partnerships transition out of the pandemic measures. However, in prioritising saving lives and preventing harm over meeting process requirements, local partnerships have called into question established ways of working.

Redeploying Resources (Staff and Buildings)

A number of our participants discussed the redeployment of resources to cope with the impact of Covid-19. Distinct from the initial redeployment in the first weeks of the pandemic (see Section 1 above), some members of staff were redeployed on a more medium-term basis into other roles.

While job roles are increasingly specialised, particularly within the public sector, the shock of the pandemic forced many members of staff effectively to 'despecialise', carrying out work roles very different to their usual ones. In the first two months of lockdown alone, 25% of UK councils reported redeploying staff in response to the pandemic; as the pandemic furlough scheme was first introduced, and then made more flexible (in July 2020) to allow a combination of part-time furloughing and part-time work, redeployment of staff became more flexible and allowed for a greater range of possibilities.

Within a local authority context, the mandatory closure of leisure facilities to comply with requirements around social distancing and restrictions on gatherings – including

hundreds of gyms, swimming pools and sports centres, but also libraries and some community venues – presented local authorities with a 'pool' of staff who could be redeployed to fill gaps elsewhere. A similar pattern occurred in England and Wales, with a report from the Local Government Association highlighting that staff from the leisure and culture sectors were particularly likely to be redeployed into other Covid support roles (Local Government Association, 2020). Although problematic in terms of long-term health and wellbeing outcomes (Ferguson, 2020), the closure of leisure facilities allowed local authorities to fill gaps in short-term service provision and avoid having to furlough their staff entirely.

> We were able, local authority were able to deploy staff, because we had a lot of staff who were maybe used to working in sport and leisure centres but these sport and leisure centres were closed. And without making too many assumptions about the kind of staff, a lot of the staff are young and they're healthy because they work in sport centres, and these young healthy staff were able to, to, to do a lot to help communities so, and they were in uniform, they had ID badges they had been background checked, they'd been through disclosure checks etc so we could clearly trust these staff. So we used these as a bit of a workforce, to work alongside the volunteers, to do the shopping, to do the pharmacy, to do the dog walking to, to basically make themselves available to try and minimise the clinical risks [to people vulnerable to Covid-19].
>
> Participant P [Resilience planning, Cullenshire and nationally]

> I shut all of my leisure centres. I had to by legislation, they were shut. I then deployed 90 leisure assistants to go and work in residential care homes or in care at home centres, so rather than furlough those staff, which I couldn't do anyway - and I had a shortage of people in the care homes, so right you're going and working there! So we had these young lifeguards making, sort of, some of our residents and cups of tea and stuff like that, you know, that's what you did.
>
> Participant S [Resilience planning, local authority and nationally]

Participants also described repurposing unused or underused buildings and indoor spaces to ensure continuity of services as well as adherence to social distancing. The redeployment of resources, including staff and buildings, facilitated flexibility in maintaining services to communities and adapting partnership working in the pandemic.

> Just as that started to open up, it's the recognizing that the impacts that might have come with that, so for example our schools reopening. It's generally not a problem, but we had to be conscious of, an example, we have community campuses so their shared facilities between a school and a leisure facility, which is our ALEO [Arm's Length External Organisation]. That just required a bit of... coming together of parties

and planning so how will the pupils travel throughout the school. I think at that point, we were still, I think - that's the high school I'm talking about, so I think there was still a social distancing requirement or there was a ventilation requirement, so there was potentials of looking at, can we maybe turn some of the gym halls into classrooms to allow for social distancing? But then we had to be conscious of well at that point leisure centres hadn't reopened. And if they did - I think at that point there was a potential for them to open not long after the schools - this was when we did our first reopening last year before it all closed down again, but we had to be conscious of if we do, if we're using these gym halls as classrooms that's going to impact our ALEO and their income generation, which would then impact their income for paying their staff. It... You know, we just had to be conscious of the domino effect there as what were doing. But a lot of that was just, again, we had a bit more space at the time, to engage with each other, identify the risks and report them for consideration by our leadership team and the ALEO's board.

Participant L [Strategic commissioning, Abertairn]

Volunteering

For many people, the story of the pandemic is one of volunteering and mutual aid among community members. In Scotland, 60,000 people signed up to the Scotland Cares campaign, while the UK government reports that 21% of people in England volunteered during the pandemic, (Scottish Government, 2022; DCMS, 2021) although the picture of volunteering in the UK is probably more complex and ambiguous than often reported. Although not the focus of our research, volunteering was discussed by our participants.

Within the third sector, volunteers were particularly valued as a source of labour which could be redeployed quickly and as needed. Volunteers and volunteer groups could be (re)deployed or (re)deploy themselves more quickly and work more flexibly than the public sector, even under emergency powers. However, there were also sometimes challenges involved in coordinating volunteers, particularly when these people were relatively new to volunteering.

Volunteers recruited but then not deployed and left without any communication from the regional bodies such as [large UK charity] who recruited them. TSIs not always involved in a timely way to help make the difference

(Survey Respondent 21- Senior Management Level, rural Third Sector Interface)

This was a particular issue in a pandemic context because the usual demographic of community volunteers (older and retired people), who were also more likely to have experience, is also more vulnerable to the pandemic and hence was more likely to have

needed to self-isolate during the period when this was required. Across the UK, an increase in volunteering among younger people was offset by a decrease in volunteering among older people, and while some volunteer involving organisations benefited, others lost volunteers. Some participants described measures to coordinate and support volunteer action.

> We were establishing volunteer purchasing cards where some of those volunteer groups that popped up on the ground in communities were doing shopping for neighbours, but were finding it difficult to pay for that shopping. So we enabled them to have Council purchasing cards, where they could use the council purchasing cards to pay for the food, and it would be charged to the council, and depending on the circumstances we would either foot the bill through the Scottish Government allocation of funding, or we would re-charge the family if the family had the money to spend, if it was just an access issue because they were stuck at home, then we could help bridge that gap.
>
> Participant N [Food procurement, Benross]

However, one participant also highlighted that many local volunteers needed neither permission nor assistance to begin their work. The focus of our project is on formal inter-agency and organisational partnership arrangements, but it seems likely that there is a large 'dark figure' of informal volunteering in local communities, outside of any organisational structures. Although difficult to capture and measure, this form of volunteering can be highly effective and meaningful to those who benefit from it, usually in smaller communities and at the local level.

> You know, [in my village] people that had maybe never volunteered in the past, who were maybe furloughed or maybe retired, or couldn't go to their usual office and had capacity, wanted to do something. And like many villages and towns and cities, people want to help, locally, where they can, and even within this little village, we raised hundreds and hundreds of pounds, we were able to, we had a restaurant that had closed that was still able to cook food, was able to get people hot meals every day, we had a grocer's shop that was able to put in a home delivery service that had never been deployed in the past, it didn't have that, they never... There was never a demand. So people were able to pivot very quickly, were able to use their skills, the local initiative, some of it never, frankly, [interviewer], it never came anywhere near the humanitarian hubs because it didn't need to. It didn't... you know, there was no requirement to bureaucratize and to formalise it.
>
> Participant P [Resilience planning, Cullenshire and nationally]

Partnerships and Flexible Working

Opportunities provided by digital working centred particularly on the removal of geographic distance, enabling partners to attend meetings from further away. This was particularly valued in rural and island areas, and larger local authorities, where participation in in-person meetings might be very difficult, expensive, or constitute a major time cost. Participation in partnership meetings thus became more convenient and more geographically accessible.

> Where I live, I used to have to travel 3 hours a day to attend meetings in the main town in the region. Teams and Zoom have made it far easier for me to attend more meetings as well as cut costs, my time and better for the environment.
>
> (Survey Respondent 24 - Management Level, rural third sector)

> If you live on an island, you can attend a meeting in Edinburgh or Glasgow as easily as you can one next door.
>
> Participant D [Community development, local authority]

Some respondents highlighted environmental benefits of flexible working; others implied a degree of surprise and concern that videoconferencing and home working technologies had not been fully harnessed before the pandemic.

> So, from a carbon point of view it's great, of course, because we're not travelling anywhere.
>
> Participant B [Local third sector organisation]

> And I think, you know, changing to an online – I mean, it would have took the council, years to move to using Teams properly and things – in the space of three or four weeks, the majority of people were doing it. Things transformed in a very short space of time.
>
> Participant C [Community Learning and Development, Cullenshire]

By the time the advantages of remote and flexible working had become embedded in partnership working, the technical issues (e.g. around devices, connectivity and compatibility) discussed in Section 2 above had usually been resolved or circumvented. However, they were accompanied by more intractable social and organisational problems with remote and flexible working. Some of our survey respondents reported feelings of isolation from their colleagues, with attendant management and mental health implications.

> My work is almost all via Teams. From a local perspective this can be frustrating not being able to see colleagues and have that face to face conversations. Getting things completed electronically can take longer as it is circulated rather than a group just meeting to discuss it.
>
> (Survey Respondent 14. Management Level, rural NHS Board)

> On a personal level I feel it has fractured our wider team as we no longer see each other and we are no longer aware of the day to day happenings within the wider team and this is isolating and has exacerbated some colleagues mental health issues.
>
> (Survey Respondent - Front Line Employee, mixed urban/rural HSCP)

The loss of informal contact between colleagues was actually exacerbated, rather than alleviated, by the greater time-efficiency afforded by flexible working, which allowed employees to be in 'back to back' meetings with minimal time between them:

> For me, the technology has worked so much better than I thought it would, you know, maybe too well because I think somebody could just have back-to-back meetings, whereas you wouldn't do that if you were in the office because you'd be walking to your next meeting, so you wouldn't have one finished at 11 o'clock and another one starting at 11 o'clock.
>
> Participant J [Criminal justice, Cullenshire]

> The way of working the agile way of working, where you're on back-to-back meetings, you can start at eight o'clock, you won't get out of the meeting until maybe six o'clock at night - it's bang bang bang, so there's no time for that spontaneous, sort of, 'I'm just gonna call you know so-and-so in social work and see how they're getting on'… We need to get staff from different disciplines coming together and leave them to it, because when you leave staff to it - at the kettle - the stuff they come up is you know, fantastic.
>
> Participant A [Community Learning and Development, Abertairn]

> [T]he bit we really miss is at the end of the meetings, where you could stand and have can have a chat with somebody and talk maybe talk to them about an issue, or they would talk to you about an issue - the networking that you miss out on… I mean, the thing is, networking I've always found to be the best way to move forward. If you network with people and you meet them socially, you have a coffee, you have a chat, you can actually learn more that way than you can picking up a phone and phoning them in their office. Because if you're out sitting, having a coffee you're in a nice, comfortable situation, you've not got the stress, you've not got anything else going on behind you and you actually get more out of it.
>
> Participant F [Local third sector organisation]

Digital working enabled more immediate and flexible responses to short-term imperatives, but also produced a closing down of horizons which limited the potential for truly new approaches. If the shift to digital working was beneficial for the *adaptive* aspects of resilience, it was perhaps less beneficial for the transformational potential of this approach.

Some of these points are mirrored in interactions between partnership employees and the general public. We discuss below (Section 4) the implications of a continuing 'digital divide' in wider society, particularly rural areas, for partnership working amid Covid-19.

This section has highlighted the medium-term adaptations of partnership working to the Covid-19 pandemic. Partnerships were able to become dramatically more flexible in the medium term by reducing silo working and bureaucracy, redeploying staff and other resources, making use of a pool of new volunteer labour and harnessing remote working technologies. None of these were without challenges, however.

Section 4:
The Social Impact of Covid-19 on Communities

Key Findings:

- Respondents reported increased challenges with poverty, especially poverty of access, perhaps reflecting this project's largely rural focus. The symbiotic relationship between poverty of access and structural poverty was highlighted in our findings, whereby the difficulty accessing services increased the likelihood of short and long-term material disadvantage, and vice-versa.

- The impact of Covid on local economies was significant, especially on rural communities whose economies are particularly reliant on tourism. The boom in domestic holidays after the first lockdown produced economic benefits but also challenges in some areas.

- Related to increases in poverty of access, respondents also reported increases in problems caused by isolation and more broadly, mental health conditions.

- Amid a rise in the use of foodbanks and similar services, concerns about food poverty among our interviewees were not just connected to material poverty but also deeply linked with rural poverty of access and food supply chains.

- Digital poverty (inability or difficulty accessing services online) was also highlighted by our participants as increasingly visible during Covid. Factors including age and rural broadband coverage were cited, linking digital exclusion again to poverty of access.

The impact of Covid-19 on existing inequalities has been a key part of the rationale for this project, particularly given the importance of local partnership working in mitigating and responding to these inequalities. In general, this concern was reflected in a consensus among our interviewees that Covid-19 acted as a flashpoint for pre-existing inequalities:

> It probably follows a similar trend to pre-, pre-COVID, in terms of people that lived in poverty pre-, pre-the pandemic. That is still there, it's worse, but also people that are at work, and still in poverty, has grown, also. And I think, you know, the kind of uncertainty around jobs and furlough, has seen things definitely much worse from a food poverty perspective, and poverty in general. You know we've got, we've got homelessness as well has become more of an issue. And I think there is, you know, well I know there is the mental health problems that are facing people because of isolation, because of poverty, because of the pandemic, is huge, and probably nobody knows the depth of that impact.

Participant B [Local third sector organisation]

Yep, I think it became really obvious, really quickly, that the pandemic was impacting on those that the lower end of the social and economic stratosphere, more.

Participant I [Criminal justice, Cullenshire]

We've seen poverty go through the roof, not just from the people who were in poverty, but it's now the people who were on the breadline, just dipping into it now and having to go to food banks. We've seen people who are, who ran really successful businesses really struggling now

Participant G [Community planning, Abertairn]

Significant research has already been carried out on the social impact of Covid-19 in local communities in Scotland and across the UK. We do not seek to rehearse these arguments and ours is not the type of large-scale evaluative research which would gauge the impact on communities. However, all our participants set their work in the context of the social impact of the pandemic on local communities, and our data do give a sense of what partnership employees saw as the most important and striking socioeconomic impacts.

This section outlines their perspectives on how the pandemic intensified inequalities in specifically *rural* poverty and its impact on rural economies dependent on tourism as well as implications for mental ill-health, food poverty and the digital divide.

Rurality and Rural Poverty

A significant unsought advantage to our use of virtual as opposed to in-person interviews was that we were able to 'get out' of the urbanised Central Belt of Scotland and seek perspectives from less populous and prosperous rural and island areas of Scotland. This gave us more of a sense of the socioeconomic impacts of Covid-19 in these less populated areas and of its impact on specifically rural poverty.

Arguably, many mainstream indicators as well as contemporary conversations centre urban poverty. For instance, although widely used and highly relevant for a policy context, the Scottish Indices of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)[4] has been criticised for neglecting the specific dimensions of rural poverty, including some higher costs of living (see McKendrick et al., 2011).

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[4] See https://simd.scot

Employment in rural areas is more likely to be in small businesses or as self-employment, particularly in areas where tourism is a major part of the economy (discussed further just below). Furthermore, people newly impoverished by the impacts of Covid-19 may be unaware of their entitlements to support and the services available to them.

> We've seen poverty go through the roof, not just from the people who were in poverty, but it's now the people who were on the breadline, just dipping into it now and having to go to food banks. We've seen people who are, who ran really successful businesses really struggling now, our young people, the resilience within them isn't that great anymore, and that's a real worry for us.
>
> Participant G [Community planning, Abertairn]

> And until someone raises it you may not even realise it's happening because on an island, where everybody knows everybody else, if people are in poverty, they don't want to say so and they may not even recognise they are. You know, it's something that's come up, particularly in the last year, we've had people who've just been tipped over the edge by the pandemic, and they might have been very close to it before – self-employed families in particular. So they're not really aware of the services that are there and they're not known to any of the organisations that could help.
>
> Participant D [Community development, local authority]

These issues are compounded by the character of rural poverty specifically, being more a poverty of *access* – access to employment, public services and transport and, as we discuss further below, food provision and internet connectivity. This was a theme raised frequently by interviewees.

> One issue we have at present is families on some of the isles for example who are not coming in for dental appointments because they can't afford the ferry fare, which is quite high for a whole family. And so we've, that was one issue that came to our partnership board at its last meeting, you know, it's just an example.
>
> Participant D [Community development, local authority]

Geographic access to services is one of the key indicators of SIMD, but this is calculated using only travel times in minutes (by car or public transport) to various relevant services, and does not include frequency, reliability or cost of public transport (which poorer people are more likely to rely on). Expensive, infrequent and unreliable services may have just as much of a negative impact on access as distance and travel time themselves.

> Transport is a nightmare, absolute nightmare. We've got one bus company that have got a loggerhead in the whole area. And as far as

anybody is concerned, they are just a bunch of cowboys. And that's the honest word for it because they are, they're a nightmare. They put routes on, they take routes off. They run a route to show that it doesn't make money but they don't actually put anywhere to pick up the passengers... they just say oh no, we never picked anybody up, right we can take that route off. Right, we're cutting this route at this time of night. In [other place], where one of the main bases are, they stop all the buses at seven o'clock at night. They own the taxi firm, right? They got away with it [there] but they haven't got away with it [here]! ... So transport has always been a nightmare, for most of the villages round about here, six o'clock is it, that's just cut off.

<div style="text-align: right">Participant F [Local third sector organisation]</div>

Poverty of access is not easily separated from other forms, as Farrington and Farrington (2005: 9) explain:

Poverty of access to activities and services can lead to a lack of qualifications and skills that can in turn lead to 'structural' manifestations such as poverty and low income. Equally, poverty of access is not experienced solely as a result of geographical isolation, but can be rooted in poverty and low income, age, gender, lack of qualifications and skills, and other 'structural' characteristics of social injustice. Such characteristics are historically liable to be tackled by sectoral policies.

For some of the most vulnerable people, the changing and locally varied rules governing travel during the pandemic meshed with pre-existing problems in rural public transport and the geographic structuring of services to constrain further a situation already characterised by poverty of access. This anecdote describes an extremely challenging situation for a woman already affected by domestic abuse and criminalisation.

I had one girl who was arrested, taken for whatever reason to a police station [far away], which I would only, can only imagine that that was to do with maybe COVID social distancing type stuff, but she was released without charge, it was in the middle of a domestic situation. She was released without charge, no bus fares, nothing couldn't even work out how to, they had taken her clothes, so she was in like the jogging suit and plimsolls stuff – and was left to try and find her way back with all the transport being reduced, it was a nightmare. So I was having to basically be on the phone with her to right, Googling where she needs to get the bus, this, that and the next thing, it was just became – the slightest wee things just became so hard... Her phone died, so I don't even know if she managed to get home or not. I managed to navigate her to a bus stop, and that was the whole thing,

she was like, my phone's dying. The police had given her bus fares, but hadn't given her enough. So, she had to ask people on the street to lend the money, during a pandemic, which wasn't great either, she was a pound short. And it was just it was just a nightmare obviously, she was very distressed, she'd been in a domestic incident. She had been arrested wrongfully, taken the clothes off her for forensics, abandoned in [place], trying to find her way back to [home local authority], and it was just... it was just a nightmare. So stuff like that, like, whereas normally, as much as it would've been traumatic for her, we could've got in the car, I could've went and picked her up, we could have done the sort of de-escalation, we could've got Women's Aid, and she was – I referred her to Women's Aid during this time, again, though, unfortunately, just due to the pandemic, everything was telephone, her mental health was really bad. So, the mental health nurse, all the appointments were telephone appointments, so everything was telephone, there was no face to face. So a contact, it was just horrible.

Participant H [Third sector criminal justice organisation]

Tourism, Hospitality and Rural Economies

In general, urban areas are likely to have more diverse economies, comprising wider ranges of services, employers and sources of capital. These diverse economies may be a source of economic resilience amid crises such as pandemics. However, small rural communities may have narrower economic 'bases' which present a vulnerability to changes in the economic climate. In the context of our predominantly rural Scottish interviewees, the tourism and hospitality sectors were very seriously affected by the pandemic.

Some have obviously benefited from furlough but the tourist industry, which is critical to Cullenshire, you know, it's been a frustrating period as it is for all involved – trying to get back up and having to refocus their business, you know, if you've got a restaurant, limiting the number of people you've got, but some businesses evolved and were creative in terms of, you know, collecting food and going back home rather than providing a restaurant and you know, providing a different array of services, but it certainly had a massive impact.
Participant C [Community Learning and Development, Cullenshire]

Employment in these sectors is often short-term and/or seasonal, but they provide 'entry-level' jobs for many people, including those who might otherwise find it very difficult to

find work e.g. because of irregular work histories or criminal records. This role as a provider of 'entry-level' employment also meant it was vulnerable to knock-on effects from changing patterns of life and employment elsewhere, further intensifying social and economic inequalities.

> Just about releases [from prison] during COVID, and people's uncertainty and part of that was, there was things brought up that I hadn't thought about, such as people were seeing the industries that have been really impacted with things like hospitality, and it's the hospitality sector that quite often will give somebody an opportunity of a job, if they've got an offending background so there was even less opportunities for people, [...] than the ones before
> Participant J [Criminal justice, Cullenshire]

> So a lot of our employment is temporary, you know, or part-time and you know a lot of is dependent on these hotels or these cafes or whatever else, you know, supporting young people. What's happened this year, and again, we don't know how going forward this will happen, but we had a lot of people who would traditionally go out of Benross and go to University or whatever didn't. You know, so they've stayed and they're then taking jobs that the ones who are maybe less academic would usually have taken, so it's then had a knock-on effect on the - if you like the ones who struggled with their learning, they tend to stay in the area and then if they have been able to find work it's either been less hours or much shorter-term contracts, or whatever. So that's been a kind of consequence of people not going to uni and taking a year out because of the pandemic. Now that may well resolve itself, don't know, time will tell - however, it may be that people move away from that traditional route of going to uni, you know, but for Benross that's a real challenge because we don't have the, the, the breadth and depth of opportunity, I suppose, from an employability or education perspective, which is why they drift away from communities into the Big Smoke.
> Participant Q [Community Learning and Development, Benross]

However, as the initial wave of the pandemic eased around summer 2020, there was a boom in holidaying within the UK, with some areas of rural Scotland exceptionally well-placed to take advantage of the economic benefits of this tourism. However, this was not without challenges of its own, as rural areas sometimes dealt with the arrival of large numbers of tourists unfamiliar with the community and with rural 'responsible tourism' practices.

> Impacted by staycation, absolutely no doubt about it, if we move to the positives! The negative over the positive, they've been impacted in a positive way in the businesses, there's been staycation everyone's been in Benross and - well, not everyone but sometimes I'm sure it's felt like that - and that's brought impacts in terms of environmental impacts in a

> negative sense into the area, and things like campervans on the roads, and traffic, and islands, and traffic on the islands and these sort of things that, that perhaps some people, it would make some people nervous about Covid and Covid rates and things like that and... Yeah, I don't know whether it's a positive or negative because I think it depends who you speak to, what their line of business is, and where their level of risk is around sort of Covid and being out and about. Main impacts though have been economic, isolation, mental health... financial.
>
> Participant K [Community planning, Benross]

This chimes with research conducted by another team at Edinburgh Napier (Wooff et al., 2021) with a focus on policing during the pandemic, which highlighted concerns within rural areas about tourists transmitting the virus in areas with previously low rates of infection (whether or not these visitors were formally in breach of regulations). This was a particular concern for rural areas because of the comparative difficulty of accessing healthcare facilities, which may be much smaller and further away, in the event of a Covid outbreak and/or serious or life-threatening symptoms. In the Wooff et al. (2021) report, as in the quote above, these concerns sat alongside wider issues about the impact of (over)tourism in rural communities, particularly given the higher proportion of tourism accounted for by city-dwellers relatively unfamiliar with the characteristics and way of life of rural areas.

The long-term impact of Covid-19 on tourism in rural Scotland remains to be seen and is in any case outside the scope of this project. However, what our data shows is that changes in patterns of tourism are highly consequential at the local level and implicated in complex ways with pre-existing patterns of inequality.

Mental Health and Isolation

The implications of the pandemic for mental health in communities were also highlighted by interviewees. There has already been extensive research on the mental health impacts of the pandemic, which may include those associated with experiencing the illness itself (Xie et al., 2022) or arising directly from traumatic loss of friends and family to the disease – as well as more indirect impacts to do fear and anxiety around the disease itself and its impact on everyday life.

There are also major indirect impacts arising from Covid-related unemployment and attendant economic uncertainty, and from social isolation. This includes self-isolation/shielding required by Covid-19 regulations, voluntary self-isolation/shielding

due to anxiety about the disease, and social isolation with less direct causes which may still be attributable to the pandemic e.g. being unable to travel, reductions in transport routes, unemployment or furlough, lack of resources to attend events and meet friends and technological obstacles (see 'The Digital Divide' below) which may prevent videoconferencing with friends and family. Increased use of drugs (including alcohol) is also related to social isolation and to mental health problems, in complex ways that are also bi-directional, i.e. people may use drugs and alcohol to self-medicate for mental illness, but these substances can also negatively effect emotional states.

> And one of the other things that highlighted and I think enhanced was that isolation, that loneliness, isolation, and it isn't just elderly, it's across the whole spectrum of young people, children, right up to sort of older folk there, and the mental health issue is really kicking in now and I think that's for workers, it's for sort of anybody in there, so and that kind of effects, I think, and it's actually really showing through now.
> Participant A [Community Learning and Development, Abertairn]

> Actually because when you've heard people talking about COVID and they talk about trauma, and how that's impacted on their behaviour and they've been drinking more since they're at home all the time with COVID, and they feel their mental health suffers.
> Participant J [Criminal justice, Cullenshire]

Like prevention and climate change, social isolation is a cross-cutting issue which is linked in complex, causally bidirectional ways with socioeconomic deprivation, rural poverty of access, mental and physical health problems, unemployment and offending. There is little statistical evidence for differences in prevalence of social isolation between urban and rural areas, but the nature of rurality and rural poverty means that at the level of individual experience, rural isolation may be more acute than the same phenomenon in urban environments.

In any case, social isolation and mental ill-health need to be understood as deeply embedded in existing patterns of inequality and as a long-term consequence of Covid-19. The mental health impacts of the pandemic on employees of local partnerships are discussed further in Section 5 below.

> This is not the time to stop or take the eye off mental health, this is the time to absolutely be here, be present for people, even if we can't be in person present, what can we do?
> Participant E [Third Sector Interface]

Food and Food Poverty

A further area of inequality intensified by Covid-19 relates to food. Food poverty is not only the lack of money to buy food, but also the inability to obtain good quality, nutritious food even where people do have the money to do so. Many of our participants highlighted an increased role for foodbanks during the pandemic.

A YouGov survey carried out by the Food Foundation suggested that the early weeks of the pandemic were particularly damaging in terms of food poverty, but that overall throughout the Covid-19 lockdown, the number of people in food insecurity in the UK quadrupled (Loopstra, 2020). This is accounted for partly by loss of income but also by the impact of social isolation among other factors. Obviously, the mere existence of foodbanks is deeply problematic in a rich contemporary society.

> Why do we need a food bank? This shouldn't, in a modern society in 21st century Scotland, food banks should not be needed. And why is it that they are needed?
>
> Participant M [Third Sector Interface]

However, some interviewees whose organisations were involved in providing food through foodbanks highlighted the challenges involved in providing food amid Covid-19 restrictions. In particular, the restrictions meant that it was not always possible to combine the provision of food with giving support and advice, which diminished the potential to build resilience among their user base (though the provision of food remains the immediate and essential element for survival).

> Usually with a foodbank, we would have people in the office, we'd be talking to them like, what can we do, and we couldn't really do that. We did end up just giving out food to people, because you can't do it over the phone or they appear at the door and they obviously don't want to speak at the door, you know, it wasn't, it wasn't easy to, to sort of deal with people.
>
> Participant O [Third sector, Cullenshire and elsewhere]

Food is another area in which the nature of rural poverty as 'poverty of access' comes in to play, as stretched supply chains struggled to service food retail in very rural and island areas. Notably, the Food Foundation research (Loopstra, 2020) found that fully 40% of food insecurity experiences could be accounted for by a lack of food in shops. Furthermore, people who are shielding/self-isolating may be unable to go out to buy food, particularly if they are already geographically isolated and/or lacking the skills or technology to shop for food online (see 'The Digital Divide' below).

There were also questions raised over the appropriateness of foodbank donations and the implications of foodbanks for individual resilience, which we discuss above. We also discuss elsewhere (under Sections 1 and 4 and in the vignette on 'Benross') efforts to develop resilience within food supply chains to ensure that good-quality, environmentally and economically sustainable food is available to people particularly in rural and island communities.

The Digital Divide

One of the most well-known effects of the Covid-19 pandemic is the shift to online modes of working (particularly for certain professional and traditionally office-based roles) and, to a lesser extent, socialising. We discuss elsewhere (in Sections 2, 3 and 5) the implications for partnerships and their employees of the shift to online working, but there were also significant implications around inequalities for the people in communities who use local services. While most people in Scotland now have home internet access, Covid-19 brought attention to the continued existence of a 'digital divide' in Scotland. Warren (2007: 375) uses the term

> *"to describe a situation where a discrete sector of the population suffers significant and possibly indefinite lags in its adoption of ICT through circumstances beyond its immediate control."*

Recent work by Audit Scotland (McKay, 2021) uses the term 'digital exclusion' to capture the sense of being cut off from the benefits of digital technology:

> *"Digital exclusion is experienced by those who do not have access to an appropriate digital device, an affordable or reliable internet connection or the right skills to be able to use digital tools."*

The digital divide amid Covid-19 can be understood at an individual level in terms of 'simple' socioeconomic deprivation and/or a lack of technical skills required to use digital devices. The 2019 Scottish Household Survey found that only 82% of households in the most deprived 20% of SIMD areas had internet access, compared with 96% in the least deprived 20% of areas. Perhaps not surprisingly given the disconnect between SIMD scores and individual/household experiences of deprivation, the difference is starker for household income: 99% of households with an annual income of over £40,000 have internet access, compared with only 65% of households with an annual

income of under £10,000. Age is a significant factor; only two-thirds of adults over 60 use the internet compared with nearly everyone in the 16-24 age group. It is likely that this is at least partly explained by deficits in technical skills.

Similarly to food poverty, the digital divide can also manifest at a broader geographic scale, as a question of infrastructural provision. In fact, the percentage of houses without superfast broadband in an area is one of the measures of geographic access used in SIMD. Broadband and mobile internet services are often limited in rural and island areas of Scotland, particularly compared to the often excellent service available in Scotland's prosperous cities, leading Philip et al. (2015) to describe a 'two-speed Scotland'. The R100 (Reaching 100%) programme was intended to provide superfast (30Mbps) broadband across all of Scotland by the end of 2021, using vouchers to make up for shortfalls in provision by Internet Service Providers. However, this aim has not yet been met.

> [Area] has major gaps in digital connectivity and mobile notspots which have been highlighted by the need for remote working and learning. The delay in rollout of R100 in the North lot means this situation is not going to resolved quickly.
>
> (Survey Respondent 5 - Management Level, rural CPP)

The digital divide also has implications for other socioeconomic inequalities, particularly as public services in Scotland and the wider UK have increasingly moved online. This was intensified by Covid-19 in several ways. Measures to respond to the pandemic accelerated the shift to online service provision, but widespread expectations about the ability of people to engage with these services did not always take full account of the continued impact of digital exclusion.

> Lots of people talk about inequalities, but at the same time we do lots of things where we reinforce that inequality. So, so many services have moved online - to get your benefits, to make a GP appointment, everything, you've got to be digital, you've got to be online. And what the pandemic demonstrated was the huge number of people that we work with who have to choose between feeding themselves, or having data. And, and, and I don't think the predominant working- or middle-class element of the country really appreciated that until the pandemic. Really appreciated there is a whole swathe of society who can't self-school because they can't afford a computer, or they've got three kids trying to do their homework on a phone.
>
> Participant I [Criminal justice, Cullenshire]

The pandemic also led directly to the closure of public facilities such as job centres and libraries which previously provided a source of internet connectivity to people experiencing digital exclusion.

> And you want to go to the internet to fill in your, your application for your benefits. My hairdresser went self-employed two months before the pandemic, she's worked all her life and for the first time in her life she had to claim benefits. And she said, you know, I think she said she was on the phone for 18 hours trying to get through to get benefits. And they asked her lots of questions and lots of information to fill in, and I said to her before the pandemic my service users had to go and sit and do that in the library or come in to us and use our phone. So, there's no privacy, there's no, you know, and, and there's that sort of thing in our society of like, well if you have to live off the state you're not entitled to privacy and I think I challenge, where, well it's bad enough having to ask the state for money to live off in the first place, but then we humiliate people by saying, well you're not entitled, your privacy is not as important, so you have to do it in the middle of an open plan library. And I think all our public services are predicated on the assumption, huge assumptions. That's one of the things the pandemic did, it highlighted the assumptions of how we organise our public services, and the huge assumption was, everybody's got access to the internet.
>
> Participant I [Criminal justice, Cullenshire]

Finally, there is a point about the *nature* of service provision. A number of participants involved in providing services to members of the public highlighted that even for people not affected by digital exclusion, services provided online may not be as effective or may not entail the same quality of experience for the user as those provided in person, particularly in fields which involve working directly with vulnerable people.

> I mean, some feedback we've had on the other side of some people saying they do really like mobile phones and laptops, on the other side other people were saying, we just couldn't build up the same relationship with staff and with service users because it's not the same. It's different if   you already know somebody. So, Apex for instance, if they were working with someone and then they had to change to telephone contact. That's okay but if you've never actually met somebody face to face and all your contact is done that way, it's challenging...
>
> Participant J [Criminal justice, Cullenshire]

> And you know, it's one of the key things - the isolation part around about their mental, you know, again, that's and, the whole idea of socialization especially round about young people and their development, you know, I think has - has been an issue long term but I think Covid has really compounded and you know, and we hear from a lot of young people who are speaking about anxiety about mixing again, about going out

> and meeting people, an anxiety about how they do that. You know, not greatly comfortable at doing it online and, a lot conversation about digital fatigue, you know, they're taught online, it's online for everything - my goodness what I'm gonna stop school and I'm gonna jump on a youth group and do something online again?
>
> Participant Q [Community Learning and Development, Benross]

Although Scotland's digital divide is shrinking, digital exclusion remains highly concentrated in some areas (see Wilson and Hopkins, 2019). There are many benefits to online service provision, and they should be available to everybody in Scotland regardless of income, age, location, etc. However, it is also essential to acknowledge that online provision is not appropriate for all services and may be a poor substitute for social interaction, particularly in work that centres on developing interpersonal rapport.

This section has discussed various forms of socioeconomic inequality which were intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic and the measures used to control the disease. While our research cannot measure the extent of these problems, it is clear that partnership employees see these forms of inequality as interconnected and intensified in interconnected ways by the impacts of the pandemic.

Benross is large and rural; the overall population density is very low in comparison to Scotland as a whole. This authority is spread over a varied geography including some mainland and some islands, with large sparsely populated areas and some towns and no cities. Large parts of this authority are remote, and accessibility can be difficult as public transport does not cover this whole geographic area. Unemployment is lower than average; like some other rural authorities, Benross has a high proportion of people working in agriculture and tourism.

There are pockets of intense poverty in this authority, with areas around the main towns amongst the 10% deprived areas in Scotland for poverty of income, health and education, as measured by the SIMD. Other parts of the authority also score low on the SIMD ranking for geographical access to services, and digital connectivity was a problem for many prior to the pandemic. Politically, this authority has been led by a coalition by different parties on the centre-left over the past three decades, though with representation from parties across the political spectrum represented on the council.

Five of our interviewees worked partly or fully in this area. These respondents often mentioned the cohesive partnership structures and a collaborative and friendly organisational culture prior to the pandemic, which facilitated some of the more rapid changes required once the pandemic took hold. One of the upsides of working over this geographic area was that digital and flexible working was already somewhat in place when the pandemic struck, though there were nonetheless many face-to-face meetings for which respondents had to travel long distances.

This authority, like others, rapidly developed new partnership structures to coordinate local short-term responses to the pandemic between partners. However, partners were able to keep an eye on the medium and longer term by setting up a formal body with the explicit mission of building on developments in partnership working, participation and resilience during the pandemic, through the transition back to everyday business.

As also noted in Sections 1 and 4, there has been significant good practice in this authority related to food. In the short term this included home delivery of food parcels and free school meals, as well as issuing purchasing cards for volunteers to buy food for neighbours who were shielding. However, longer-term work to build 'food resilience' in the authority has sought to address food poverty and the vulnerability of food supply chains by developing food production capacity within the area. This may include repurposing public sector kitchens as well as working with local suppliers. As with other work to develop resilience (Section 1), some groundwork for this had already been laid during preparations for EU exit and associated supply chain disruption, although its full impact will not be known for some time. The potential benefits may accrue across social, health, economic and environmental spheres.

Section 5:
The Impact on Partnership Employees

Key findings

- Working in partnerships during the pandemic did at times (perhaps especially in the early days), lead to an increased feeling in camaraderie and unity in the face of the intensity of the nature and scale of the work required. Employees also reported an increased in shared pride in their local areas.

- However, this was counterposed by our respondents' more prevailing responses of stress and burnout in the context of very high workloads and uncertainty. For many, these pressures had an adverse effect on their own and their colleague's mental wellbeing, as they struggled to balance work with the new pressures of domestic life.

- While the shift to working from home and online meetings has had significant advantages (see Section 3) it has also proved problematic for work-life balance, here as in other sectors.

- Stress among employees in local partnerships remains very high, even some time after the initial lockdown. **We recommend careful attention to reduce the impact of this on employees and organisations, to include occupational health responses and attention to workloads, with explicit recognition of their contributions and shared stresses during lockdown.**

As noted above (Section 2) the response to Covid-19 in the early weeks of the pandemic entailed a substantially increased workload on a short-term basis, often with very rapid changes to workload as partnerships adapted to the quickly changing measures and restrictions imposed to control the pandemic.

However, the impact of the pandemic on staff working in local partnerships extended far beyond the early weeks of the pandemic. Our respondents highlighted significant impacts on the workload and wellbeing of employees working in local partnerships. These impacts are still felt currently and are likely to continue to affect local partnership employees for years into the future.

'We're All in this Together': Local Pride and Camaraderie

The impact of the pandemic response on staff morale was not entirely or always negative. Interviewees reported a powerful sense of camaraderie and unity amid the enormous challenge posed by the response to Covid-19.

> I think, it helped that staff wanted to do it because you can't make staff do things like that, you know, but staff were all quite happy to come in, which helps as well, because obviously we were, because of the foodbank, and we were the only ones that were open, and we were just sort of on our own but luckily staff wanted to do it.
> Participant O [Third sector, Cullenshire and elsewhere]

Working relationships newly formed or strengthened amid the stress of the pandemic were often described as a source of support or even friendship – even of mutual understanding which might not be as readily available in employees' personal or family lives.

> I think things have definitely come out of it for individual services, you know we grew so close to [local TSI], criminal justice and that, and I know I could pick up the phone to any of those colleagues now and they'd be 'oh [Participant A], loved working with you', the whole lot. And in that side, you know, it got us a lot more contacts within the council. We knew who people were or we know somebody in that Department who could help us, and that's going on so that's, absolutely, the contacts grew for certain people.
> Participant A [Community Learning and Development, Abertairn]

> That was a phenomenal period, and I think in terms of innovation, we had, you know everything we needed to in place, because people were personally invested in doing their bit...
> Participant P [Resilience planning, Cullenshire and nationally]

These findings resonate with studies of other public service workers involved in the response the pandemic, most prominently healthcare workers (see Baldwin and George, 2021). The descriptions of camaraderie and support sometimes resonated strongly with existing feelings of pride in local areas, whether individual villages or towns or entire local authorities.

> So you're dealing with very diverse issues, you're dealing with - you know, we've got airports, council's got an airport. And small airports on islands as well, so and that's, that's exciting. I think I've never worked in a council and certainly an area - never worked in a council where the people have been so *nice*. Everyone is so nice and so up for working together and what you find is it's actually a very small group of people

> that you find all the time and all meetings to tackle problems. People in communities are very proud of where they live.
>
> Participant K [Community planning, Benross]

> I mean I know, I live in a small village, the one that you can see in my picture [MS Teams virtual background]. You know, people that had maybe never volunteered in the past, who were maybe furloughed or maybe retired, or couldn't go to their usual office and had capacity, wanted to do something.
>
> Participant P [Resilience planning, Cullenshire and nationally]

These feelings of camaraderie and pride probably helped partnership employees to develop their working relationships and overcome inter-agency barriers and bureaucratic hurdles. However, it would be very difficult to maintain this level of camaraderie as we start to transition back to normal (see Section 6).

Staff Wellbeing: Workloads, Stress and Burnout

Despite these feelings of camaraderie, the impact on partnership staff was largely described in terms of very high workloads, stress, burnout and mental health impacts. Workloads, particularly in the early weeks of the pandemic, sometimes became 'double jobs' as employees in local partnerships aimed to keep up with the demands of their everyday work while also responding to the demands of the pandemic, whether or not as part of a structured or formal secondment. In this febrile context, ordinary tasks often took longer than they otherwise would.

> I was pulled into to work in business continuity, so that was the - it was all the services that were left in the ground that were still going, that weren't closed. And then having to really troubleshoot some of the problems that were emerging on a day-to-day basis that really weren't expected. And we had different inboxes set up, so I was manning an inbox for the local elected members, you know, if they were picking up an issue or a concern in their community it would come through to me and then I would have to try and you know liaise with others to get a solution and get some support out so I mean, and that was for – I did that for about six months so it was, it was crazy. It was intense. And still trying to keep bits of my other role going, you know?
>
> Interviewer: *So, do you have to do both, combine both roles then?*
>
> Yes pretty much. Yep, and, and some required, kind of less investment of time, but others required, you know, more, so, I mean I was working probably nearly double my working hours every week for, you know, quite a significant period of time, but you know I wasn't alone and I know the majority of people that were doing the same were doing the same type of thing… It was definitely a double job, there was a lot of

> performance reporting, there was government returns that were
> required so there was almost daily figures that were having to be
> collated and sent back and took a lot of time and stress as well.
> Participant C [Community Learning and Development, Cullenshire]

> So I retrospectively worked out I was probably doing five days a week of
> my core day job. In very simple terms I ended up working my backside
> off! So I was probably, I think, as with many colleagues doing 6 in the
> morning till 10-11 at night, six, seven days a week, in terms of working.
> Participant S [Resilience planning, local authority and nationally]

As it became clear in the early months of the pandemic that the response would require a much longer period of lockdown than previously anticipated, this intensified workload went from a short-term emergency response measure to be somewhat normalised in the medium term of 2020-1. The stress of these very high workloads and the wider context of the pandemic was and continues to be a significant impact on staff wellbeing.

> I think psychologically on staff, you know there's many staff like we said,
> are really absolutely worn out, exhausted. They need a proper break and
> some will get a break but I know others are maybe struggling because
> of the role they are in and might not get the same type of time as
> others.
> Participant C [Community Learning and Development, Cullenshire]

A further impact on staff mental health related to the emotionally taxing nature of working with vulnerable people at a time of extreme stress and intersecting forms of social inequality which had been intensified by Covid-19 and its consequences (as discussed further in Section 4).

> I would say the fact that it's, there's a lot of issues, clashing at once, our
> – it's creating an issue on people's time, so I know that my colleagues in
> health are spread really thin just now, because not only are they trying
> to deal with COVID, they're trying to support with the mental health crisis
> that we now have, and they also have a role to play with poverty and
> trying to get their services where they're needed is a massive challenge,
> so having that ageing population is a bit of an issue as well
> Participant G [Community planning, Abertairn]

> A big part of our team meetings became about health and wellbeing,
> when you've had a staff member for the second time that week, that's
> been talking somebody out of suicide over the phone, do you know,
> because they're so isolated, they can't, they can't get access to services
> they would normally access.
> Participant I [Criminal justice, Cullenshire]

> Interviewer: *Would you say that you were doing double job? Because some of other professionals have highlighted that they have to be doing both.*
>
> Yeah, absolutely and to be honest with you, I don't feel like that level of productivity has dropped yet! And I know that a lot of my colleagues and we talk about it a lot, we talk a lot about burnout, because we just feel like we're running to stand still all the time.
>
> <div align="right">Participant G [Community planning, Abertairn]</div>

Burnout is a phenomenon distinct from 'stress'. The ICD-11 (International Classification of Diseases) defines it as an occupational phenomenon:

> *"Burnout is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterised by three dimensions: 1) feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; 2) increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and 3) a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment. Burn-out refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life."[5]*

Other aspects of burnout may include feelings of detachment, cynicism and helplessness as well as a tendency to procrastinate. Burnout is generally caused by long-term stress in jobs or other roles. Polling by Mental Health UK (2021) highlights that burnout has become an increasing concern for employees in Britain, due not just to increased work stress but also general stress around Covid-19, the blurred boundaries between home and working lives, and financial insecurity in the context of the pandemic.

Aside from the obvious implications for wellbeing and productivity, burnout may also create problems for retention of staff. This is in line with wider social concerns about a 'Great Resignation' of employees (Wadsworth, 2022) as an impact of Covid-19 but may be a particular challenge in professional roles in rural areas of Scotland, where viable replacement candidates are harder to find.

> I've had a couple of really experienced social workers that have completely changed their lives – things they've wanted to do for a long time they've just decided to do, and they're giving up the job because they want a better quality of life. And I'm, and I can't blame them. And I know, across the profession, and I'm sure health is probably the same, that they're really worried that so much knowledge and expertise is

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[5] https://icd.who.int/browse11/l-m/en#/http://id.who.int/icd/entity/129180281

> going to walk out the door in a short time frame. In response to this, because people don't want to do it anymore. Can't do it anymore, can't do it anymore... I don't think they should, and, and it's, it's really interesting for me that finally the dots have joined up, because I think people think that there's no option. And then you get furloughed, and then you see there are options. And I think there's a real push being driven by, and fear, of go back to what we did before, but that benefits a very few people at the top and most people at the bottom, it keeps them in that really hectic hamster wheel that goes round and round and round, and the number of people that have went, I don't want to live my life like that...
>
> Participant I [Criminal justice, Cullenshire]

This report cannot evaluate the extent of stress and burnout among staff, but these accounts highlight not only that it has been intensified by the context of Covid-19 but also that it requires medium- or long-term action to resolve.

Work-Life Balance and the Wellbeing Impacts of Flexible Working

For many professional workers, 'work-life balance' - the ability to balance the often competing demands, stresses and rewards of work and private life - was already challenging before the Covid-19 pandemic. The rise in stress and particularly in workloads that immediately followed the start of the pandemic had significant implications for work-life balance, as employees in local partnerships found themselves with less time to relax or care for themselves and their families.

Another factor implicated in work-life balance issues through the pandemic has been the shift to flexible working and particularly working remotely from home using videoconferencing and other technologies. It appears likely that working from home at least some of the time will remain a feature of many white-collar working lives in the medium to long term.

> I think the challenges are really for our, our work teams, you know? Going from leaving your house to go to work and you kind of leave your domestic life behind and you put your work life hat on. But we have a lot of team members that have children or other, other care duties, and there is no escape, or boundary between, between work and home.
>
> Participant B [Local third sector organisation]

> Some staff have been doing work at night if you've got childcare during the day and stuff like that, and I think it has worked out but it's sometimes.... What's the word? There's not... There's not a break from your, there's no home. (That was my child just waved at me there...) It's

> hard to set a boundary really, I think people find it quite hard to not turn off their phones because they think well, I haven't really seen anybody and I feel bad if I don't speak to them on the phone, because I think they feel that they're not doing the same job because they're not seeing people face to face.
>
> Participant O [Third sector, Cullenshire and elsewhere]

Although in many ways beneficial, this practice has meant that the boundaries between working life and home life become more blurred, both spatially (as employees work in rooms where they may also sleep, eat or relax) and temporally: it becomes easy to work outside of normal working hours, but it may also be necessary to carry out 'home' tasks such as childcare during working hours. The shift to flexible working has therefore partly intensified the impacts of Covid-19 on workloads and staff wellbeing.

Summary

Employees working within local partnership arrangements were subject to very high workloads, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic and lockdown. As partnerships adapted to the demands of the pandemic, feelings of camaraderie and even friendship were a source of considerable support and (in some cases) pride. However, the fact that these workloads remained so high for a very long period, alongside the wider context of the evolving pandemic, has contributed to very high levels of stress for people working in local partnerships, which are likely to have significant long-term impacts on staff health and wellbeing. While the shift to working from home and online meetings has had significant advantages (see Section 3) it has also proved problematic for work-life balance, here as in other sectors.

Section 6: Prevention, the Long Term, and the 'Normal'

Key findings:

- Many participants spoke passionately about the importance of 'prevention' as an important principle in partnership working, and a justification for inter-agency partnership.

- At the time of fieldwork in 2021, respondents continued to deal with the fallout of the pandemic, although the intense pressure of the early phase was now over. Our research illustrated the pressure to focus on the short-term imperatives posed by Covid, pulling focus away from the longer view and efforts to embed preventive logic in a strategic way.

- As the lockdown began to ease, ordinary 'business as usual' requirements re-emerged or were re-imposed even as work to react to the pandemic was still ongoing, creating further tensions between short- and long-term focused ways of working.

- Our fieldwork took place as Covid lockdowns were beginning to ease. However, many of our respondents problematised the notion of 'returning to normal'. Respondents noted, for example, that working in the pandemic had illustrated to partners that different modes of working (e.g., with less bureaucracy) were possible.

- Furthermore, it was noted that pre-pandemic 'normality' was very far from functioning as it should, and therefore it should not be a standard to which we should aim to reach again – the pandemic in fact posed an opportunity to reset, and to improve things in the new 'normal' in the future.

- While the removal of bureaucracy during periods of the pandemic was welcomed by some, others noted the possible adverse effects this may have on the accountability and efficiency of their spending.

This section discusses participants' perspectives on prevention, their longstanding concerns around preventive work in the local authority context, and the requirement of prioritising short-term reactions to the pandemic over longer-term prevention work. Related to this, the section also discusses prospects for a return to 'normal' everyday business as the Covid-19 lockdowns eased, and some of the potentially problematic aspects of this.

Support for Prevention

This project started about a decade after the completion of the Christie Commission (2011) report on the delivery of Scottish public services, which recommended a shift towards prevention of rather than reaction to adverse outcomes. With this context in mind as we began the project, we sought to understand the impact of the pandemic and lockdowns on the preventive 'mission' of local multi-agency partnerships in Scotland.

Participants were strongly supportive of the ideas and arguments of the Christie Commission report. Many interviewees described their work as preventive in focus, and tended to view successful partnership working, with contributions from a range of specialist agencies, as necessary, because of the interconnected nature of social problems.

> I would like it to be more about prevention, I think one of one of my strengths is I've got a good strategic overview of things so I'm working really, really hard to work closely with the Alcohol and Drug Partnership, and Violence Against Women, because I see the obvious links within it. I find it really frustrating when other people don't see the obvious links, so that was something that I have to rein in sometimes with myself, because I just have to understand why you don't see this…
>
> Participant J [Criminal justice, Cullenshire]

> I can't tell you how many times I've talked about the Christie Commission in the past two years, past 10 years [interviewer]! But past two years in particular, and a lot of beating my head off a brick wall and saying 'see if we had this in place already, I've been telling you!' And that's really, for me the food system approach would help to offset a lot of the issues, so… One of the things that I've done, and this is nationally as well as locally is, if we're going to deliver universal free school meals we need to make sure that they are considered as an investment and not as a cost, and that we should be looking at the wider food systems, rather than just delivering a policy recommendation. So there has to be real buy-in nationally, locally to enable that to happen. That is something that falls absolutely within Christie Commission jurisdiction and should always have been in place.
>
> Participant N [Food procurement, Benross]

Others highlighted the role of preventive efforts in relation to young people:

> I mean, a lot of a lot of the CLD [Community Learning and Development] work is involving young people, and we've got a very strong Youth Work Service in Cullenshire so, you know, a lot of that is right is a core of preventative activities, diversion, eh, there is a good project to the moment where there's a youth worker in every secondary school, and almost like a school counsellor project, you know, and that's been – in

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> fact that's been oversubscribed since the pandemic due to the rise in, you know, mental health and wellbeing issues that young people have faced, and similar – I do a bit of work with the antisocial behaviour partnership as well.
>
> Participant B [Local third sector organisation]

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, participants sometimes reported a sense of frustration that the need for joined-up partnership approaches to prevention was not always recognised. However, the public health emergency that followed would intensify this problem.

The Need to React

As noted above (see Introduction), prevention can be divided into short- and long-term activities. Short-term preventive activities are clearly important, and the message that something must be done *now* to prevent disaster is a compelling and urgent one. However, longer term forms of prevention are also vital. The latter however tend also to be more focused on addressing initial factors (which may be far 'upstream' of any negative outcome they prevent) and building up resilience in communities, and to be less targeted on specific people, groups and situations.

For many interviewees as well as survey respondents, the immediate need to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic proved a significant distraction from efforts to embed longer-term preventive approaches. Short-term prevention of Covid-19 transmission, illness, and a range of more or less directly related problems such as food poverty, social isolation and domestic violence, was very clearly necessary and justified by the severity of the direct and indirect effects. However, in the context of limited resources and time, this reactive activity was described as drawing attention away from longer-term preventive and resilience-building measures.

> There has definitely been less focus on preventative approaches, with more time being spent ensuring basic needs are met
> [Survey Respondent 7- Management Level, urban Community Justice Partnership]

> We were always able, [interviewer], to take reactive calls, via the national - but we were then able to make proactive calls, we put the information governance in place, there was a daily data feed every morning at seven o'clock from public health, of all the people that had been called by the end of the day before, they'd been asked if the details can be transferred to the local authority, if they had said yes the details came to us, and we were able, in some cases to make hundreds and hundreds of calls a day in local authority areas to say 'you've been

identified, you've been contacted, do you need support, what do you need, tell us what we can do to help you'

> Participant P [Resilience planning, Cullenshire and nationally]

So, throughout COVID It was all very reactive. 'How can we help you? What would support you?' But now, it needs to be more about, okay, 'in the long term, what's going to make an impact on your life? How can we improve your quality of life?' You know, 'where do you see yourself in 10 years' time, where do you see the area in 10 years' time?' and from people's views like that that's how we can start to put in place a more long-term plan because we're quite reactive it's like, every year we change our council plan, that's not helpful.

> Participant G [Community planning, Abertairn]

This was exacerbated further by the extensive demands on workers' time, particularly during the initial reactions to the pandemic but more generally in the context of stretched budgets and rising demands for local services. We discuss the workload implications of the immediate reaction in the early weeks of the pandemic in Section 2 above.

The structures that we work within, and I think if we, it's quite interesting because we've got some research planned with some of our social workers, and it's about taking them back and putting them in a space where we're getting them to reflect and think about, do they, do they practice within a theoretical paradigm that includes social justice? What would that, what does that look like in their practice, how do they know they're practising social justice? ... I think you get caught up, we're so busy, and our nose are to the grindstone all the time, that you stop actually thinking about, are we actually practising our values?, and if we're practising our values, we are there to challenge social inequalities. We are actually there to advocate on behalf, and enable others to use their voice who have been silenced in society, to challenge some of the social inequalities, but we're kept so busy [interviewer], and we're dictated strategy centrally and locally, that you get caught up in the task, and you stop thinking about what the practice paradigm is that you're practising within.

> Participant J [Criminal justice, Cullenshire]

This focus on the short-term, pulling attention away from longer-term resilience-building measures, was experienced by some interviewees as frustrating. As we were carrying out our interviews, the period of short-term reactions was coming to an end and regular strategic work, with its planning cycles and reporting requirements, would return.

Returning to 'Normal'?

The pandemic was not an isolated incident that was a blip in the road and now we'll go back, the pandemic has been a major disruption that has turned everything on its head, and we now need to piece it back together again.

As we were carrying out our interviews, many of the partnership employees we spoke to were involved in or at least considering a return to normal, everyday business. All our participants were relieved that the necessity for quick adaptations to the pandemic (and the concomitant time and workload pressures) had ended. However, they expressed some concerns about a return to 'normal', alongside hopes for more successful partnership working and more resilient communities in future.

An underlying tension in academic debates over resilience is between adaptation and transformation: resilience as the ability to self-maintain ordinary life and activity amid change, and resilience as the ability to transform entirely to meet a new set of demands. While many of the ordinary requirements of partnership structures are strategic in nature, the 'pause' offered by the pandemic was an opportunity to show that targets and reporting requirements might not always have contributed to building resilience and long-term prevention.

The question of what is 'normal' or 'business as usual' is politically contingent. Not only did the pandemic bring to the foreground deep and long-lasting patterns of inequality and deprivation – often in intensifying them (see Section 4); the febrile atmosphere of the lockdown was an environment in which apparently settled patterns of inequalities, environmental crisis, and (inter-)institutional responses could be called into question by practitioners.

> I think one of the things that we've noticed during the pandemic is there was not, realisation isn't the right word because I think everybody knew social work was the safety net, but it was almost as accepted of that's how it is, and it just felt really complicated to untangle and how would you change that because it's just system - It's systematic so how would you deal with that? And then during the pandemic, what we demonstrated was, well actually you can start to make some inroads to that, but we need to be holding each other to account. So that's the difference before, where there wasn't the urgency and meetings and bureaucracy, getting change took forever.
>
> Participant I [Criminal justice, Cullenshire]

> And there was actually a comment made at the last meeting that there seems to be this perception that, if we just catch up with all the backlog of unpaid workers and we just catch up with the backlog of core services and core cases it'll all be fine, but the reality is the justice system wasn't fine before Covid-19.
>
> Participant J [Criminal justice, Cullenshire]

> So we want to, we want to improve things, not just go back to where we were before. We're really trying to … there's a lot of things happening in [authority] do with renewable energy at the moment. And so if we're looking to rebuild the economy, we want to capitalise on that. Build it back greener than it was before because that's the future.
>
> Participant D [Community development, local authority]

Many of our survey participants also argued, not only for the possibility but for the *necessity* of 'building back better' after the pandemic – maintaining an improved standard of partnership working, with less bureaucracy and silo working and more involvement for the third sector and for local communities and their members. The consensus was clear: local partnerships do not want to return to business as usual. Furthermore, the prospect of further social and economic strains only partly caused by the impact of Covid-19 suggest that long-term resilience will require not merely adaptation but transformation.

The impact on partnership working

The return of 'business as usual' also brought about more concrete changes to partnership working. Staff began to be redeployed back to their old roles as furloughs ended and facilities such as leisure centres returned to their original intended uses. The return to the usual structures and deadlines of bureaucracy was sometimes experienced as a rather jarring transition, with efforts to carry out 'business as usual' in tension with the requirements of medium-term recovery from Covid. The end of the lockdown also brought with it the end of certain additional powers and financial flexibility granted to local authorities.[6]

> I think people were surprised, I'd say, the annual report that we do is another one that goes to [Community] Justice Scotland so that was that they, they wanted in September, so I think we were surprised that we were still having to go ahead and produce them because we rely on partners to provide us with data. Now, the last thing I want to go do is go to colleagues and Justice Social Worker, when they were in the middle of like, it was chaos at the beginning as you can imagine, and say to them, oh by the way, can you send me some statistics and data about Community Payback Orders and can you tell me how many Drug

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[6] See for instance the Local Authority (Capital Finance and Accounting) (Scotland) (Coronavirus) Amendment Regulations 2021 (still partially in force at time of writing) and The Local Authority (Capital Finance and Accounting) (Scotland) (Coronavirus) Amendment Regulations 2022 (in force), both of which grant local authorities financial relief by allowing them to defer loan repayments. The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Directions by Local Authorities) (Scotland) Regulations 2020 (in force at time of writing) grant various powers around Covid regulations with respect to public gatherings and premises.

> Treatment and Testing Orders you had this year and, and all that kind of stuff, and data from the police and data from the prison. So, I think you'll be really surprised that we were then under pressure still to complete these things as normal. And that came back from the partners as well so when we were having, we had a partnership meeting, and some of the partners were saying, this is ridiculous, there shouldn't be a focus on strategic work at the moment, the focus should be on operational work. So it's difficult, and for me that can be difficult because I'm having to feed that back to Community Justice Scotland without looking like I'm just being difficult, but I'm feeding back what what's coming from my partnership.
>
> Participant J [Criminal justice, Cullenshire]

Most participants welcomed the 'falling away' of bureaucracy amid the early response to Covid, but there were also critical voices highlighting the implications of this for local partnerships' financial efficiency, data protection practices and public accountability.

> I think the flexibility - the responding quickly, is a good one. Now we can't always do that because we're hemmed around by legislation, and people have been saying, why can't you always do it like we've been doing it for the past year? And we have to say, well, actually we've been operating under emergency powers, and it's not always that easy, we can't always just drop all the rules and do stuff instantly whenever you want it done. We normally have to be a lot more accountable than that.
>
> Participant D [Community development, local authority]

> There has been a lot of money given out, and I wouldn't say it's always been given appropriately, funding-wise – I think money has been chucked away, I mean, including ourselves, the council gave out a ridiculous amount of money, and didn't really want to have much say in it. So, I think there's been a lot of money wasted on and we've been lucky the last couple of years because of Covid, it has made such a difference, I mean [my organisation] has made a huge surplus last year to definitely for various things, but we'll pay for it a couple of years' time, because...
>
> *And would you say that's because of duplication?*
>
> That we've done so well? Surplus wise? Foodbanks got an enormous amount of donations in, an enormous amount of donations, yeah.
>
> *Yeah, but you were saying that there was a lot of funding allocated by the council and...*
>
> Yeah, I think that most of the funding came from the government. So the government gave them, right this is for the providers, and they just gave it out. But it was people like ourselves that they had worked with, so they just gave it to us but we didn't really, didn't really need it to be honest, but we're not going to say no to it. And the council, I did have a conversation, I was like, I don't know, like, we don't need this. "No, no,

> just take it, just take it." But they didn't want to give it back. If they didn't use it the government would take it back, it's just…
>
> Participant O [Third sector, Cullenshire and elsewhere]

While some participants welcomed the creation of new partnership structures in short-term response to the pandemic, there was concern about reduplication of effort and particularly about merging these newer structures with pre-existing ones as the initial lockdowns came to an end. Benross set up a new partnership group to aid the transition back to normal while still seeking to improve partnership working and service delivery in the long term – balancing the short-term reactive needs created by the pandemic with the longer-term preventive approaches advocated by the Christie Commission.

Audit Scotland (2021) is continuing to analyse public spending amid the Covid pandemic as part of the *Following the Pandemic Pound* project. This work entails tracing the impact of the extra funding made available by Scottish Government to local authorities and the third sector. However, the need for accountability and for maximising the social return on the 'investment' of public money must be balanced against the need for services to be properly resourced. It has been noted elsewhere that the additional finances made available as part of the response to the pandemic have come after over a decade of austerity and rising inequality, and represent only a very partial and brief reversal of these trends.

This section has discussed the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdown measures on the efforts of local partnerships to realise the 'prevention principle' articulated by the Christie Commission (2011) report. Participants in the project were strongly supportive of this principle and of the necessity of interagency partnership working to realise its promise. However, many noted that the need for short-term reaction to Covid-19 (including the prevention of death, illness and other immediate threats) had taken momentum away from efforts to build longer-term prevention and more resilient communities. In the context of the relaxation of Covid-19 lockdowns and the ending of some powers and regulations, the possibility of a return to 'normal' was seen as problematic due its workload implications, concerns over accountability and scrutiny of practices during the initial lockdown and (most importantly) a sense that the circumstances prevailing before Covid-19 were very far from ideal, and that the pandemic should be an opportunity to improve the provision and structures of public services and institutions.

Section 7 builds on these ideas but, instead of focusing on short- and long-term preventive measures, discusses the related questions of participation and 'community empowerment' in the context of highly geographically bounded public organisations.

Cullenshire

The population of Cullenshire is around the median for Scottish local authority areas, but sparsely distributed across a very large land area. Cullenshire covers a single contiguous landmass, and is predominantly rural, with a few moderately large towns but no cities. Five of our interviewees worked partly or fully in this area.

There are significant issues with unemployment and rural poverty in some areas of Cullenshire. Some areas of the towns in this region are among the 10% most deprived in Scotland according to the SIMD. Even before the pandemic, these issues were compounded by geographic isolation caused by patchy and limited public transport and gaps in digital connectivity. Tourism/hospitality is a significant part of the economy, leading to significant concern first over the economic impacts of the pandemic and then the influx of tourists during the post-lockdown domestic vacation boom. Forestry and agriculture are also important sectors, and a substantial proportion of people also work in caring-related roles, reflecting a population that skews older relative to Scotland as a whole. Politically, Cullenshire tends to be socially conservative, and this was highlighted by some interviewees as a challenge for developing more radical approaches.

Before the pandemic, partnership meetings were challenging due to the distances and travel time involved in attending these meetings in person. Despite the wide availability of videoconferencing technologies since at least the mid-2000s, it took the pandemic for these technologies to be fully embraced by Cullenshire. Interviewees generally felt that the pandemic had been an opportunity to build trust with local communities. Existing connections were used to develop and distribute 'wellbeing boxes' to those most vulnerable in the pandemic. However, there was some concern about the duplication of relief efforts, particularly in third sector organisations.

Several practitioners in this area highlighted the importance of engaging with clients flexibly, beyond the lines of traditional institutional structures. Our data suggest that local Justice Social Work (JSW) used the opportunity of the lockdown to develop more innovative approaches. Participatory projects sought to actively involve people with lived experience of drug use and the criminal justice system, harnessing their experience as mentors and promoting (re)integration into what were sometimes small rural communities. Local JSW also used online learning to fulfil the 'other purposeful activity' requirement of Community Payback Orders, engaging people under supervision and somewhat mitigating the backlog of unpaid work hours. Our JSW interviewees from this area also highlighted the importance of reducing the stigma associated with criminalisation, and suggested that people with experience of the criminal justice system had often demonstrated significant personal resilience from which the public sector could learn. There was concern about the return of reporting requirements on Community Justice Partnerships and the impact this might have on innovative work in JSW as we return to 'business as usual'.

Section 7: Boundaries, Organisation and Empowerment

Key findings:

- The agility of the local partnership response to the Covid-19 pandemic shone new light on the way in which services are organised at local level, calling into question some established structures and practice.

- Longstanding questions about partnership structures and in particular, the extent to which they are organised locally or centrally, were raised by respondents in part because the pandemic created new lines of funding and communication with central government, while the need for locally sensitive knowledge and flexibility continued. This created particular challenges for third sector organisations.

- This project also highlighted the tensions between local and central organisation of services *within* local partnership structures, with respondents sometimes criticising local authority leadership as over-centralised and out of touch.

- Our participants valued mechanisms for community participation in local partnership work, particularly in providing locally-contingent knowledge and building community resilience.

- The need to react quickly to the pandemic, amid pre-existing challenges, drew attention away from community empowerment work, similar to its effect on strategic prevention activities (see Section 6).

- However, as with volunteering (Section 3), the pandemic created a much greater appetite for community participation in some areas.

- At the same time, the greater agility of partnerships and the challenges to established ways of working created opportunities for new mechanisms of engagement to flourish. We heard examples of innovative community engagement practices which promoted voices of people and groups usually excluded or distanced from democratic processes.

- Although partnerships are geographically focused, the opportunities provided by the move to digital engagement has created some new opportunities for more wider engagement, while also highlighting the continuing impact of the digital divide in this as in other areas (see Section 4).

- Questions remain over how local partnerships could be best organised to foster participation by communities, but flexibility (of organisational structure and means of communication) will be crucial to continue the work of community empowerment on a longer-term basis.

This section considers how the way in which services and partnerships are locally organised figured in the response to the Covid-19 pandemic. It discusses dynamics of local provision versus centralisation not only between local and central government, but also within local authorities, before turning to the question of community empowerment and participation as advocated by the Christie Commission (2011). As this section will discuss, the question of how to engage communities with local partnership working is tied up with questions of how services are organised.

Boundaries and the Local/Central Dynamic

One of the key dimensions when considering how local partnerships responded to the pandemic is how services were and are organised along local lines. The majority of local services in Scotland are organised and subdivided on the basis of the 32 unitary local authorities, albeit sometimes with discontiguous 'mismatches' between different subdivisions and regional 'service areas' of public agencies (see for instance Angiolini, 2012). As noted above (see Introduction), these issues also play into questions of how local communities are defined, particularly in physically larger and more sparsely populated local authority areas.

In terms of how they operate, public services in Scotland as elsewhere must strike a balance between responsiveness to local needs, and the economies of scale and consistency of approach associated with centralised modes of organisation. Participants in local partnerships did not advocate further centralisation of services at the national level, but did highlight the value of having support from the Scottish Government. For 'resilience with a capital R' in response to the crisis, national coordination and close links with central government were vital.

> If I had a role, my role was to be the single point of contact for the local authority kind of, crisis part of the response. And that role, I fulfilled with a number of external agencies: Scottish Government, police, British Red Cross and many, many others. And it meant also that the 32 local authorities channelled things through me, at the kind of tactical level. There were, there were chief executives working clearly at a strategic level doing, doing similar work. But I was able to do that on a tactical level, and I was able then to go, and confidently, to multi-agency meetings, and say that I was speaking on behalf of the sector – not because it was [Participant P] just saying that, but because I within the last 24 hours had probably chaired a meeting with 28 or 29 of the 32 councils on that meeting, and was able to come in confidently, saying,

> this was the view, and I was able to sort of act as an interlocutor
> between, between the partnerships, and the 32 local authorities.
>
> Participant P [Resilience planning, Cullenshire and nationally]

At the same time, local knowledge was also seen as vital to respond to local issues and patterns of deprivation, particularly where these were specific to local areas.

> It then comes down to the more localised partnerships in terms of how
> they can, you know, work together with communities to address specific
> needs and use funding to try and, you know, I was talking about
> broadband, so using funding to say "look this community is really
> suffering let's try and work together to, you know, to improve that
> connectivity".
>
> Participant C [Community Learning and Development, Cullenshire]

There was also sometimes a degree of tension reported in the relationships between local partnerships and central government. Linked to this was a sense of frustration due to the fact that local partnerships had to adapt very fast to changing Covid regulations developed and imposed from the centre. Participants sometimes described a feeling of being 'used' as messengers or as channels for the decisions of central government, while the return of routine reporting requirements for criminal justice services (and see Section 6) was identified as a particularly problematic element of the wider shift towards 'normality'.

> They're anticipating, the [Justice] Analytical Services of the Scottish
> Government have said, over the next three to five years, it could be up
> to a 37% increase in our workload. So we've got some extra money this
> year to do a bit of recruitment, but everybody's recruiting so we don't
> think we're going to be able to fill the posts. So you can't just create a
> qualified experienced social worker. And so, recruitment isn't... throwing
> money at it and asking us to recruit isn't really, it's only a one very small
> part of the answer.
>
> Participant I [Criminal justice, Cullenshire]

Related to this, respondents from third-sector organisations described a sense of much greater financial vulnerability, compared to public sector bodies. This, combined with their tendency to specialise in particular areas of service provision (e.g. active travel, poverty, mental health etc.), meant that even though their commissioned work tended to come from local authorities and be organised at the local level, their financial stability might still sometimes depend on changing national priorities.

> So historically, our organisation has been around for 20-odd years. And
> it's very small to start with, and what used to happen were that we
> would do work on behalf of the local authority through Service Level

Agreements. So, they'd want a piece of work done and we would work together on it. And then that that kind of changed probably around 2005, probably to do with national government and where they were putting money and what their aims and ambitions were, so then a lot of our kind of finance that was coming in through that type of work finished in those types of partnerships, and then we started doing a lot more grant funded work.

Participant B [Local third sector organisation]

With the enhanced summer programme monies that the Scottish Government put out - super last minute, you know, not a great deal of time for planning or being able to respond in a kind of coordinated way, you know, and that's mirrored across a number of funding streams, you know, rather than any long-term planning and resourcing services like ourselves or other third sector organizations long term, it comes in chunks of money that you need to respond to. You know, is, means effectively that if you're not planning right, then you're not necessarily maybe hitting the places and the people that you really want to so that's I suppose, my kind of worry for these guys, is that they're not going to get the support they require at this moment in time.

Participant Q [Community Learning and Development, Benross]

Centralism and Localism within Local Authorities

The question of 'balance' between central and local organisation has tended to be conceived in terms of the political relationship between Scotland's central and local governments (see for instance, Morrison, 2015), including but not limited to through their representative body CoSLA – a relationship characterised not just by cooperation and consensus, but also by conflict and compromise, particularly over funding. While these larger-scale political circumstances are undeniably important, our findings highlight that the question of balance is also highly relevant to public service provision and partnership working *within* individual local authority areas.

This is particularly relevant to the local authority areas where our research was carried out – which are geographically large (with a large land area) with comparatively dispersed populations. There may thus be questions of centralisation *within* local authorities at the smaller scale, as well as *away from* them at the larger scale. The value of some centralisation of services within local authority areas was recognised, particularly where local 'hubs' could be used to pool resources and facilitate partnership working and the breaking down of silos.

The food hubs, for example, we were trying to develop we - again, it was me working with our ALEO who occupies our buildings, to deliver the services it does. So we as the council owned the leisure centres, the

> libraries and the museums. And they occupy it to deliver the services, so they don't own them, so there was a bit of a callback there as far as, we're going to be wanting to use this this hall for the provision of food as like, almost like a depot. What vehicles do you have? You know, can we use them?
>
> <div align="right">Participant L [Strategic commissioning, Abertairn]</div>

Questions of geography also arose in more abstract ways. In some cases this arose when partnerships successfully worked across local authority boundaries – highlighting that even where service provision is locally 'bordered', community action does not need to be and successful communities may transcend these bordered structures. However, this inevitably conflicts with established approaches which disincentivise the pooling of resources between authorities.

> One of the ones that also came to mind was and, they brought together - well I never, but [another local authority] and Abertairn came together and to do the [ ] food hub where you had [various towns and villages]. And you know they phoned up, they got a place in Abertairn, and actually went out to all the rurals - and what you had was the border almost wasn't there, and I thought that is brilliant - but the elected members didn't like it because they thought 'why should we? You know, everything in Abertairn should be staying in Abertairn. And you know, the [other authority] can...' But the community groups themselves - there's no borders for them, they went ahead and they helped each other and that was just, you know, fantastic to actually see that.
>
> <div align="right">Participant A [Community Learning and Development, Abertairn]</div>

The sense was that the structures of local partnerships were not always set up to facilitate and support community action 'on the ground'. Criticisms of overly centralised approaches and 'out of touch' central leadership were more often directed at local authority leadership than at the Scottish Government.

> The child poverty group, you have a lot of middle managers who are probably on £60,000 or more, meeting and deciding on things, which they don't know about which they've probably never experienced. And again, it's my opinion, on you know, when a person is either having to feed their kids, eat themselves, go to the car, to get the car up and going, because of the heat, and then go back in under their duvets because they can't heat the things... I just think we've got an inequalities and an injustice within and what people perceive at that leadership or management level, and what's actually happening on the ground.
>
> <div align="right">Participant A [Community Learning and Development, Abertairn]</div>

These critical perspectives raise important questions not just about how services and partnerships are organised and structured, but also of how partnerships can engage with the community empowerment agenda.

Community Empowerment and Participation

Section 6 has discussed briefly the 'prevention principle' advocated by the Christie Commission (2011); here, we cover another key element of the Commission's recommendations – its recommendations (p22-23):

- *That public service organisations engage with people and communities directly, acknowledging their ultimate authority in the interests of fairness and legitimacy.*

- *That they work more closely with individuals and communities to understand their circumstances, needs and aspirations and enhance self-reliance and community resilience.*

- *That they mobilise a wider range of Scotland's talents and resources in response to society's needs.*

The participatory agenda has longstanding roots and is increasingly popular in other countries as well (for instance, the English think tank New Local uses 'community power' in a similar way – Kaye and Morgan, 2021). It is also closely connected to patterns of volunteering in communities (see Section 3), since participatory activity usually requires citizens to volunteer their own time, whereas conversely voluntary activities may be coordinated through community organisations or participation in community engagement activities.

However, the Christie Commission report (and the various longer-term pressures on public services) have given renewed momentum to it in Scotland. The 2015 Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act seeks to advance this agenda by strengthening voices of community organisations by giving them a right to participate in decisions around how local government and community partnerships develop their outcomes planning. The Act also introduced the right of community groups to request ownership or use of land or buildings for community use – Community Asset Transfer. Community empowerment measures also include the growing use of participatory budgeting (PB) in which

communities make democratic decisions over the spending of public budgets, whether these are part of existing budgets or grants to be disbursed according to community preferences.[7]

As also noted in Section 1 of this report, community empowerment is deeply connected to the development of community resilience, including in disasters and crisis situations. Communities that are more involved and where people feel more involved in the decisions that affect them are better able to develop their own ability to adapt to crises.

However, there are longstanding challenges for the community empowerment agenda. The approach represents a significant break with what has historically been a very centralised system of local government (albeit one in which local government has more power relative to central government than elsewhere in the UK).

The large proportion of privately-owned land (with private estates thought to account for over half of rural land – Glenn et al., 2019) in Scotland is a significant problem with obvious implications for Community Asset Transfer, particularly in some rural areas where private landowners may have an effective monopoly.

Community empowerment seeks to address inequalities, but conversely the ability of communities to participate, and community resilience, are also affected by the resources available to a community and its members (including but not limited to money and time).

It is not always straightforward to define empowerment or participation, and the question (central in any democratic system) of who is included in decision-making and how is not easily answered. It has proven difficult to develop truly representative community bodies. Although numerical representation may not be as necessary in this context as in electoral mechanisms, there is a need for plurality and particularly for marginalised voices to be heard.

As with volunteering, some people will be more willing to participate in local politics and community empowerment mechanisms than others, but there is a danger that community participation becomes limited to 'the usual suspects'. However, it is also necessary to recognise that not everyone is willing or has time to participate in these community empowerment activities, and that the various institutions involved are also

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[7] https://pbscotland.scot/

bound by their own requirements and obligations (Revell and Dinnie, 2020). Finally, Escobar (2022) has also highlighted the challenges facing practitioners in engaging communities, particularly in being caught between 'activist' and 'administrator' roles. The Scottish Government has commenced a review of the 2015 Act due to report in 2023, which is likely to include consideration of the impact of Covid-19 on the community empowerment agenda.[8]

Within our data, a number of participants highlighted challenges to the community empowerment agenda, particularly those around community participation, in the context of squeezed budgets and efficiency concerns. These perspectives suggested either that the cultural shift away from traditional hierarchies, needed to realise the goal of community empowerment, had not yet occurred; or (less problematically) that there was simply insufficient understanding of community empowerment.

> The whole point about the Christie report is not you putting things in the community and calling it a community clinic, and then that's it. It's about the community being actively involved in what you're doing in the community, to add value to their life outcomes. And *that's* what you've got to concentrate on.
>
> Participant M [Third Sector Interface]

> I can see that councils need to go down the digital way of doing it. However, you know what? I don't think they grasp the whole thing of Christie. You know, if your philosophy is about efficiency and cost saving, then it's not gonna work... I think local authorities - well the local authority that I'm in, are still not actually getting it. They're seeing it as the council has to keep the power, or elected members have got to keep the power. They don't want to do PB [participatory budgeting] so we're not doing mainstreaming PB yet, and they want to oversee everything, they're not relinquishing that power or coming together and seeing the benefits of it, and I think that's a hierarchical structure that has been embedded in local government since the Act, I think it was 1963, so 1963, you have the Local, you know Authority Act that had that hierarchical structure. They tried to reform it in the 80s - decentralization, everything else, you know, [this] region, we'll get them fixed up, we'll make it work. But what you still had was that kind of, old boys' club thing, although it's not just men who are in it now, it's that kind of thing and, yeah, that's hard to let go. You really need to have a complete culture change...
>
> Participant A [Community Learning and Development, Abertairn]

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[8] https://www.gov.scot/policies/community-empowerment/

These issues were described as long predating the Covid-19 pandemic but as being intensified by them. As with efforts to embed strategic and preventive thinking (see Section 6), the need to react quickly to the pandemic drew attention, personnel and resources away from participatory projects. Related more subtly to this, the highly reactive *style* of the Covid response could also hinder the development of community participation.

> With health and social care especially, obviously, a lot of people were seconded into completely different roles, and they were certainly experiencing themselves a kind of centralised top-down control that was pulling them back and very much controlling and ordering what they were doing and how they were working… one of the impacts was the head of mental health integrated services in [authority], and other members around that from the public sector, were simply pulled out of things like the [local lived experience] partnership… That meant all the usual pathways to support locally were severed. And the meetings themselves, you know… we're not being told anything actually, but we're being told that the meetings are not going to happen.
>
> Participant E [Third Sector Interface]

> I think one of the things that was very, we were very aware of the…everything took on the kind of a military operation so there's Operation [name], and it was formed on emergency response guidelines, and that was very strange for us, culturally, and it didn't really embrace the idea of the volunteering nature of communities in society, and again it was led by particular statutory bodies, which obviously had the clinical knowledge, but didn't have the societal knowledge of how that might work, but I think… So I would say that public engagement and participation has fundamentally changed, and we're still trying to renew and get back to making sure voices are heard.
>
> Participant M [Third Sector Interface]

> So, throughout COVID It was all very reactive. 'How can we help you? What would support you?' But now, it needs to be more about, okay, 'in the long term, what's going to make an impact on your life? How can we improve your quality of life?' You know, 'where do you see yourself in 10 years' time, where do you see the area in 10 years' time?' and from people's views like that that's how we can start to put in place a more long-term plan because we're quite reactive it's like, every year we change our council plan, that's not helpful.
>
> Participant G [Community planning, Abertairn]

Despite the challenges of doing community empowerment work amid the pandemic, we also heard examples of successful and innovative practice in community empowerment, underpinned by an awareness of the complex effects (both direct and indirect) of the pandemic on a range of communities and groups. On the community side, these

circumstances had fuelled a real appetite for participation. However, at the time of our fieldwork, there was also an awareness that the workload implications of such high rates of participation might not be sustainable on a longer-term basis.

> During Covid my team were responsible for engaging with community - what we've called community response groups - so groups who were providing a direct response within Benross, who wanted and were able to engage with us as the council and the health service and the Third Sector Interface, because we were the three partners that made up the Caring for People project. Our community response groups, if they were able to engage with us like - as in they were willing to do that and happy to work on partnerships - there was about a hundred of those groups, we met and engaged with those groups on a weekly basis actually...
>
> Participant K [Community planning, Benross]

> As a good example at the moment on visitor management, because there was quite a lot of concern about, you know, Cullenshire is a nice place to visit, tourists are going to come into the area, and they're going to spread, you know COVID and all that kind of fear. So there was conversations with community councils about it – what can we do to prevent it, to improve signage, you know, funding awareness raising, additional staff out and patrolling some of those areas so it's those type of things, engagement at a local level is probably at the heart of everything we do, and trying to identify the kind of needs of communities. And then, you know, working alongside them now rather than saying, well, "this is what we think, here you go!". It's more community led, and then working alongside to try and make that aspiration a reality.
>
> Participant C [Community Learning and Development, Cullenshire]

> You know - the big challenge though is everybody wants young people involved now, and everybody wants to consult, you know, and everybody wants young people involved in every committee and everything, and they want to hear their voice. But the key is to make it meaningful and valuable.
>
> Participant Q [Community Learning and Development, Benross]

The most successful examples of community empowerment efforts in Covid involved actively engaging communities and groups in the development of partnership structures. However, structural complexity in these engagement initiatives (e.g. different types of group with different names and remits) can also deter citizens from engaging with community empowerment activities. Hence, a degree of flexibility with respect to structure is needed in terms of how participation and feedback is sought and acted upon, rather than insisting on the 'right' avenues.

> So, we have ones we were all involved in, and then there's one just now that it's primarily aimed at our service where it's about people who have experienced the justice system, it's about enabling their voices to be heard and for them their opinions and ideas to shape services. So, we're in the initial stages of a project, we're looking to employ peer mentors and set up a lived experience, grassroots projects, for people to interact with public services and have their say - people that normally wouldn't, or exclude themselves from those type of activities, and Justice Social Work are taking the lead in that, and then we'll just report back to our partners, and how that's progressing and then later on, we'll be reporting back maybe some of the findings from that, and what parts that might mean for other partners. So I would imagine, once we get that off the ground, and we've got our working - good working groups going, I'm sure though it's aimed at some of the activities that we do, once people start talking to us, I'm sure they'll also tell us what they think about the police or they'll tell us what they think about the court. And so though that's not the aim of it, I'm sure, we'll get that. And what we'll do is we'll feed that back to our partners saying, this is something you might want to think about or how you might want to develop this in your service. But we're asking people about our service, but they're also telling us some of the stuff about your service.
>
> Participant I [Criminal justice, Cullenshire]

This is particularly relevant when seeking to engage people marginalised by patterns of deprivation, inequality and discrimination were centred in providing responses. Hence, there is a point here about democracy, empowering marginalised and stigmatised groups and supporting them to participate and contribute.

> They have this thing about the 'hard to reach', which I totally disagree with - absolutely wrong. It means our engagement is wrong, we're in the wrong place because, people have to go out to the shops, people, you know, there's certain things people have to do. That's where they say sort of, that population that is deemed to be, you know hard to reach is nonsense, it's just because we're not listening we're not at the right places or we're not in the right places at the right time as well. So that to me, that whole true participation, has to be reducing, it's not even reducing barriers, it's taking away the barriers for both sides and it's a balance.
>
> Participant A [Community Learning and Development, Abertairn]

There was also a mixed picture with respect to the use of digital technology to engage communities, with some successes but also a heightened awareness of difficulties and limitations. While the delocalising effects of telecommunications technology on everyday life and work have likely been overstated, it is clear that the shift to working from home 'disembedded' many white-collar employees, across all sectors, from their physical place of work. In a similar way, the shift of services online created new opportunities for

engagement beyond local boundaries but also raised concerns about maintaining connections to local communities. Digital technology created significant opportunities to foster participation and community empowerment through videoconferencing (as well as simpler and older communication technologies). As with the use of videoconferencing for partnership meetings (see Section 3), these technologies enabled engaging with participants who might otherwise be excluded by distance and issues of geographic access.

> Well, our digital world has gone absolutely mega, I think, you know, just because everything has gone online so our social profile has grown a lot, but in that growth, we've also needed to reconcile some of it, because it was so tangent-y, then we've got like different groups for lots of different things, but I think in terms of how we engage with the public, we used to be very [area]-focused, but because of the digital world we're talking to people all over the world. [laughs] So that's quite interesting! Yeah, yeah, no, we have people coming from different places to some of our sessions. But at the same time, you know we are, we are missing the very physical nature of public engagement, and particularly given that we are a geographically focused organisation.
>
> Participant B [Local third sector organisation]

> The online community meetings in terms of reaching the... You know that probably would be something in terms of, you know, I know from speaking to police colleagues, they've found it fantastic because they've been able to join a meeting with the community, hear the issues first hand, and then almost respond immediately to dealing with an area of concern...
>
> Participant C [Community Learning and Development, Cullenshire]

> I think [public engagement] is a lot better. It's improved because we've firstly we put a very good officer on to our website... he's extremely good at it, so he was managing to keep up this constant stream of information, in the right sort of tone, friendly and engaging. And that's been a very big success.
>
> Participant D [Community development, local authority]

This chimes with findings from policing research carried out at Edinburgh Napier (Wooff et al., 2021), which highlighted the increasingly 'abstract' character of particularly rural policing, particularly during the pandemic but dating back to the centralisation of Scottish policing in 2013.

However, the context of the digital divide also creates challenges for this form of 'digital engagement'; some people will be less able to participate fully (or even at all). Digital modes of community engagement cannot therefore be expected to replace in-person

engagement entirely – flexibility of means of engagement as well as organisational structures is preferable for maximising participation.

> Our [authority] Opinions group, the citizens panel - of the people on that, about half of them still choose to send their survey forms back on paper. And these are people who presumably either don't have internet or aren't comfortable using it. We offer the option every single time, and still half of them prefer to do it on paper so that shows you there's quite a large number of people, if you only consult online, you're going to miss them out.
>
> Participant E [Third Sector Interface]

Overall, the picture for community empowerment was mixed. The necessity of reacting immediately to the Covid-19 pandemic intensified some of the challenges associated with realising the community empowerment agenda, and cultural readiness to engage with community empowerment agenda varies between local authority areas.

Our project is not a comprehensive survey or evaluation of community empowerment and related activities during the pandemic – although such an endeavour would certainly be valuable. However, what our data can show is that at least in some areas, the pandemic created a real appetite for participation and, by challenging existing ways of working, created spaces in which new approaches could be developed.

Similarly to partnership working more generally, however, the challenge now will be to maintain and continue the successes of community empowerment on a longer-term basis, and ensure more marginalised voices are heard, as we transition out of the pandemic. Flexibility – of organisational structures and communications – will be key to this.
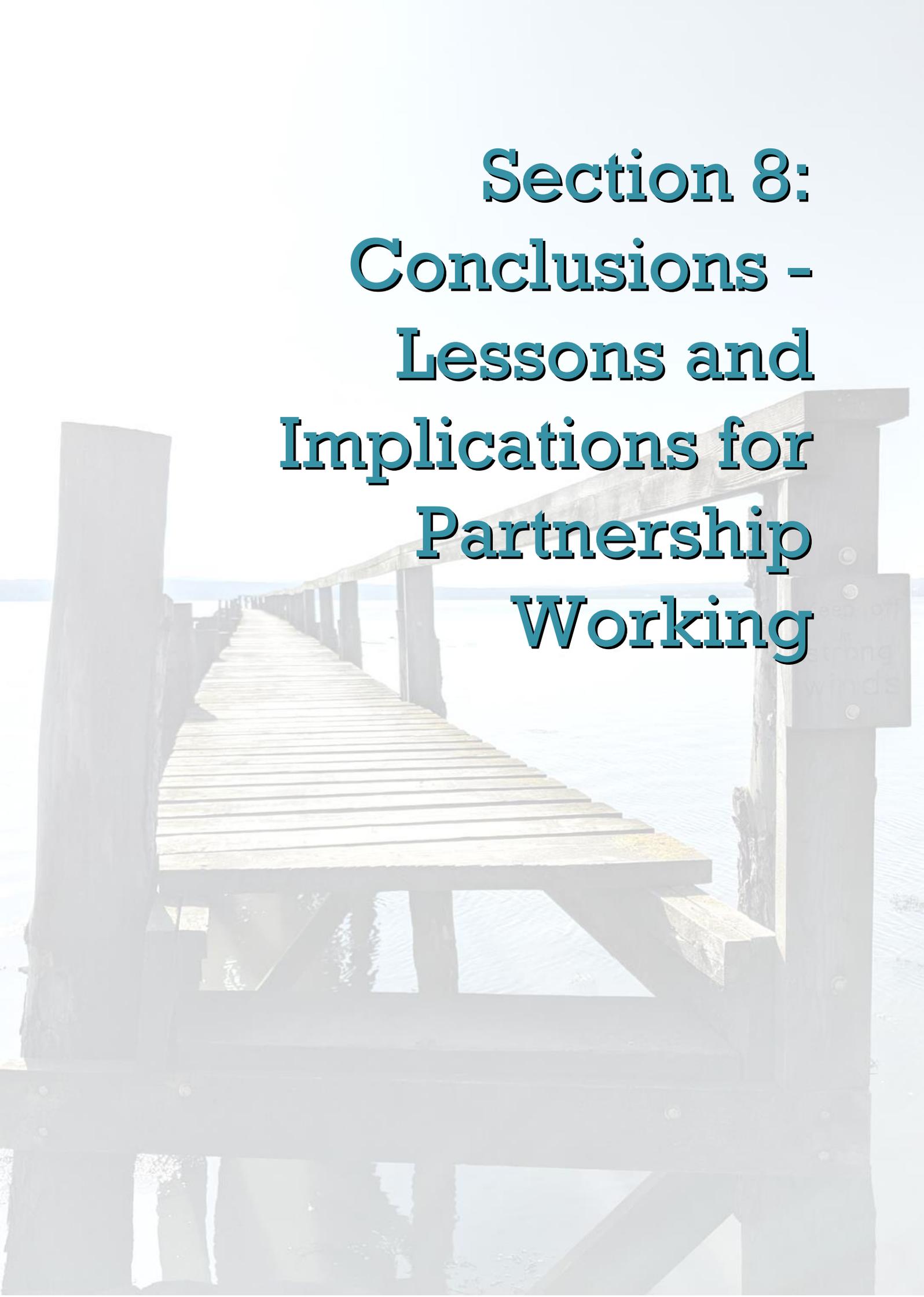
Section 8: Conclusions - Lessons and Implications for Partnership Working

This research has highlighted how partnership working evolved and adapted throughout the pandemic, and in so doing, has illustrated both the strengths and weaknesses of partnerships both prior to and during the pandemic. Our findings also allow us to reflect on the implications for partnership working in the future as they prepare to deal with the next challenge to face communities – the cost-of-living crisis. This brief section summarises some key lessons and implications from partnership working, drawing on the findings of Sections 1-7.

Local authority partnerships held up a mirror to many of the societal impacts of Covid-19, and this research has outlined the impact on largely rural communities, and inequalities in particular. For example, the increase in rural poverty, much of this caused by the closing down of tourism during this time, and the ripple effects this had. National lockdowns resulted in greater isolation for everyone, but this was perhaps especially pronounced in more remote and rural areas. This isolation resulted in an increase in mental health difficulties and challenges for services to support those who live over diverse and scattered communities. Relatedly, this research has also confirmed the importance of digital connectivity to be able to access services and highlighted the digital divide which remains deep-seated in some communities across Scotland.

During this research, partnerships were still dealing with the aftereffects of austerity, following a long period of working under the context of increased demand combined with reduced funds to meet them. However, this financial climate will now give way to something arguably more challenging as the cost-of-living crisis deepens, having effect on both the funds available to local authorities but also on the needs of the communities they seek to support. Sadly, at the time of writing, the financial context of the near future looks likely only to further entrench existing inequalities as poverty increases.

Partnerships will once again be at the frontline of responding to, and seeking to allay, the difficulties communities face. Our research suggests the need for both strong and active partnerships (and properly funded services), and efforts to foster community resilience to face these challenges.

Community Resilience

The benefits of community resilience lie not only in the way communities (in practice, groups and individuals) can adapt and respond with speed to new challenges which may

be ad-hoc and unique from each other, but also the way that resilience is 'baked in' to the structure and operation of services operate across local authorities, which can help mitigate the challenge in the first place. This research has highlighted examples of both. In the former, we heard how groups and individuals sprang up to support their communities by, for example, purchasing food or collecting medicine for those who were isolating. Some of this was in part facilitated by partnerships (e.g., providing people with local authority spending cards to enable them to buy others' food), though other elements of this seemed to be organised entirely organically and without any action from partnerships. In the case of creating more structural and proactive resilience, the agenda to promote food resilience in Benross (see above) provides a good example.

Their approach to food procurement means they buy food from local, as well as national producers, even if at times this is more expensive. Doing so means they can support local economies whilst sourcing good quality food. As participant N stated:

> We try to think about in that whole food systems approach where we can use leverage in the public sector food chain, to really deliver wider benefits, both for our pupils who benefit from the meals, from our elderly in our care homes, again who benefit from the meals, but also using that food for community wealth building and help to support community growth and economic, you know, employment opportunities in those places, etc, etc. So we try to have a more holistic food systems approach, where we have to balance all of those things.
>
> Participant N [Food procurement, Benross]

According to this participant, the other benefit of sourcing local food is that it shortens supply chains thus removing the insecurity around moving food to often more remote areas during times of disruption, a need which had first been highlighted in the preparation for leaving the EU in 2019 (both in community and in 'capital R' resilience). The example of action to create food resilience therefore illustrates the benefits of initiatives like these beyond the initial focus. This more holistic approach to policy development, with wide and diffuse benefits, is one key way to promote more resilient communities.

The promotion of strong and resilient communities should not be motivated by a wish to diminish the role of the state or reduce costs. Both are required for communities to flourish, although our research also highlights examples where more resilient communities have arisen in the context services being more 'distant' than others. The balance between 'leaving' communities so they develop greater resilience, and

'abandoning' them to deteriorate, is a fine one, as evidenced by the Westminster 'Big Society' agenda in the wake of post 2008 austerity (Dowling and Harvie, 2014). In our research, we tended to find examples where partnerships supported moves *towards* resilience, rather than leaving them to develop this themselves.

This research has highlighted some of the tensions in the balance between assisting communities in an emergency, and in supporting them to develop resilience. The suddenness of the pandemic prompted many partnerships to take rapid action, often disregarding prior strategy towards developing community resilience. As one participant reflected on the creation of foodbanks at the start of the pandemic:

> We found a little bit that all the work we've done trying to stop people just accessing food parcels all the time, rather than trying to budget, has slightly been blown out the water, and we'll be left to pick up the pieces when everybody else stops doing it.
>
> Participant O [Third sector, Cullenshire and elsewhere]

As discussed in the report above, community resilience is not easy to define, but at its core lie principles of self-sufficiency and an ability to respond to challenges, perhaps underpinned by community mutual support and collectivist action (Magis, 2010). In this research, participants spoke about factors which both promote and hinder resilience, some of which included the work of local authorities and partnerships. Our participants highlighted that community resilience depended on connection and a sense of belonging among the members of a community; hence, alleviating social isolation is key to promoting community resilience. In their view, social isolation was caused by factors including geographic isolation, neighbourhoods of poverty and wealth located in close proximity, and individuals who found it hard to leave their home for reasons of health or mobility. For some of our respondents, reducing social isolation was key to the promotion of resilient communities. For example, Participant M argued:

> I think that the thing about social isolation, it eats at the heart of the resilience of not just the community, but the individual, because it's the social connections and sense of belonging that's missing, and the ability to, when something happens, their ability to tap into support for what they're, you know, for what they're dealing with.

For this participant, this made these communities especially vulnerable once the pandemic hit:

> And then of course, once the pandemic has arrived, it's actually a pandemic within a pandemic – that we have massive issues around social isolation that are preventing people from living well. And, in fact, it's actually adversely affecting their ability … to flourish and to thrive.
>
> Participant M [Third Sector Interface]

Measures taken to previously allay social isolation (e.g. in-person befriending schemes) were no longer tenable during the pandemic so participants recounted a range of schemes which sought to reduce isolation including volunteers knocking on doors to check in on the vulnerable. Our report also highlighted the wide variety of digital connectivity throughout Scotland, and in so doing, also demonstrated the ongoing the 'digital divide', and 'digital exclusion' still affecting many. While some services will always be better delivered in person, reducing the digital divide will also help to alleviate social isolation and its associated problems.

One final point to be made in relation to efforts to increase community resilience is in relation to the physical way that services are located within partnerships. As outlined above, one authority in particular (Abertairn) made good use of the ability to remobilise the use of their working spaces during the pandemic, which helped both in terms of the effectiveness of partnership working and in making resources and support available to the community. Flexibility of support and resources is key to supporting community resilience.

Partnership Resilience

One of the issues this research sought to explore further was the extent to which partnerships themselves were resilient during the pandemic. A 'resilient partnership' can be understood being able to withstand the various pressures it might find itself in, whether foreseen or (most likely) unforeseen. Although this research did not focus solely or even primarily on this question, our findings do suggest some key lessons in relation to partnership resilience during this time. These relate to the support and wellbeing for those working in partnerships and their modes of working, but also for the structure and funding of partnerships. These will be discussed in turn.

Firstly, this research has clearly documented the very challenging working conditions of staff working during the pandemic, especially, though not limited to, in the early days. The impacts of the pandemic on 'frontline' staff are rightly much discussed, but less

attention has been paid to the impacts on staff in local partnerships who have worked largely behind the scenes to coordinate responses and maintain service delivery.

The sustained increase in workload and uncertainty of working conditions over the initial periods of the pandemic led to some participants working twice their contracted hours or more, with considerable cumulative effects on staff wellbeing in terms of stress and burnout. Importantly, for some respondents, these effects continued well after Covid lockdowns, due to still having to deal with the legacy of Covid on top of their 'standard' workload, or not yet being able to have an adequate break. Partnerships cannot continue to rely on goodwill to get their staff through these times due to the 'blitz spirit' of facing a shared adversary together. There is a need for partnerships to have policies in place to support staff during periods of high pressure, such as a maximum number of hours to work before they must have time off. If this does not occur, then there is the danger of significant impacts on wellbeing and/or staff needing to take extended time off or resign.

As the report has outlined, working flexibly was just one aspect of the changes to working practices during this time. It proved convenient for many people and was particularly beneficial for fostering partnership working between physically distant organisations and people, fostering community participation online, and reducing journey times to meetings (and hence economic and environmental impacts). Online working remains essential for people who may be shielding, or clinically vulnerable. However, there were also problems with flexible working, beyond merely the technical 'teething' issues common at the start of the pandemic. In particular, there is a clear consensus that personal and social connections valuable to building successful partnerships are diminished by relying on videoconferencing and remote working. Furthermore, flexible working can lead to the stresses of home and work lives encroaching on each other, particularly in the context of abnormally high workloads, with further implications for staff wellbeing. A more explicit and structured hybrid model (or models) of working may be needed to achieve the 'best of both worlds' - the flexibility and reach of online working alongside the team spirit and organic innovation of in-person work.

Our interviewees also highlighted the need for 'space' and flexibility to allow for innovative and flexible approaches to local challenges, particularly in the context of rural partnerships which are dealing with specific problems around poverty of access and social isolation. The suspension of bureaucratic norms and barriers during the pandemic

allowed for innovative practice to flourish and this is now the time to learn these lessons and develop an approach that improves on the pre-pandemic 'business as usual'. This might entail giving these partnerships more space to develop their own approaches, even where this might conflict with the requirements of financial efficiency and perhaps even the preferences of central government. What appears as inefficiency in the system may serve as spare capacity to build resilience and enable communities to thrive in times of crisis.

The Prevention Principle

This project was inspired to some extent by the tenth anniversary of the Christie Commission (2011) report and particularly its 'prevention principle', advocating the reorienting of services to prevent rather than react to adverse outcomes. This idea has become a key element of local partnership working in Scotland as well as a significant challenge (Cairney and St. Denny, 2020).

We heard of a range of examples of preventive work in local authorities, including partnerships between Justice Social Work, health and others to prevent reoffending and substance misuse; with young people's services and education to prevent mental ill-health and antisocial behaviour; and between local authorities and organisations across a range of sectors to alleviate the impacts of food poverty.

These examples highlight not only the work being done by Scottish local partnerships to embed prevention, but also the links between community resilience and prevention. Resilient communities, people and partnerships have more capacity to adapt and react in changing circumstances. Efforts to embed prevention may therefore include building capacity and resilience in the community.

Unfortunately, but perhaps inevitably, the need to react in the short term to the impacts of the pandemic has drawn attention, time and resources away from the work done to embed long-term prevention in local partnerships. As we transition out of the pandemic, it is essential to ensure that Scotland does not lose sight of long-term and strategic prevention.

Prevention is essentially counterfactual and thus difficult to measure; the impacts of preventive work may not become apparent for years after resources have been

committed to them. Hence, preventive approaches may sit uneasily with post-austerity budgetary pressures (Cairney and St. Denny, 2020).

Our findings and years of statistics on inequalities and deprivation suggest that for many people in Scottish communities, the pre-pandemic 'business as usual' was not working anyway. Scotland and the wider UK are now heading into an extremely uncertain economic future amid the climate emergency and rising global instability. Partnership working to build resilience in communities will be essential, but for them to do more than mitigate these social problems may require more concerted and radical changes in the political sphere.

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