THE CHANGING FACE OF POVERTY AND COMMUNITY STORIES

COVID-19 has had a major impact on all of our communities throughout our region since March 2020, as it has throughout the rest of Scotland. With the anticipated ending of the Furlough Scheme at the end of October 2020, many employees are deeply concerned about their future employment and many businesses are facing choices in relation to if they can continue to operate.

Any form of crisis affects our most vulnerable families and individuals more as they are less resilient to emergency situations. Without the cushion of financial security, anyone who is struggling and on the brink of poverty can easily fall into serious financial difficulties, especially when services which they rely on are affected by changes.

The Trussell Trust in Scotland has cited unprecedented increases in the utilisation of food banks since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes an 89% increase in the need for emergency food parcels during April 2020 as compared to the same month last year, and a 107% rise in parcels given to children.

Within Dumfries and Galloway by the end of August 2020, 61,463 Food Parcels had been distributed and 77,013 people had been provided with food.

The Poverty and Inequality Commission addressed the Scottish Government's advisory group on economic recovery in this document (PDF), which also includes the issue of food insecurity as a central aspect of recovery. The initial suggestion that a 'V-shaped' recession and recovery would be possible is now seeming unlikely, raising concerns over the long-term economic impacts of coronavirus (COVID-19) on vulnerable groups such as children from lower-income families, BAME populations, women, and those with disabilities among many others. They urge the Scottish Government to more centrally consider the needs of these and other vulnerable populations when considering how to distribute public funds.

The Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit detail the local actions being taken in Scotland to address food insecurity during the coronavirus in this report (PDF). Four out of five frontline providers of food support are concerned they aren't reaching everyone they need to, and the vast majority of these organisations have reported a higher demand for emergency food support during COVID-19.

Reports written during the COVID-19 pandemic detail how free school meal (FSM) provisions are being delivered as children made the transition to home-based learning. A 2019 estimate using the School Healthy Living Survey suggested around 124,000 of children in Scotland receive Free School Meals, with numbers climbing as COVID-19 widens wealth gaps. There are a variety of approaches which local authorities have taken in distributing these funds to families, and how much these

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distributed funds vary from location to location (minimum to maximum payments per day are between £2-£4). Providing cash support to families to replace FSM provision has been identified as the most dignified way to address food insecurity among this population. Within Dumfries and Galloway, our Council provided cash payments of £17.50 per week to cover the costs of School Meals for each pupil registered for Free School Meals. This process will also be delivered during both the October School Holidays 2020 and the Christmas School Holidays 2020.

The Scottish Government have completed a detailed study on Coronavirus (COVID-19): Impact on Communities and Priorities for Recovery.

This report has been produced through gathering evidence from consultation based research about changes to organisations' work during the pandemic and the impact of the pandemic on a range of themes including economic security, social interactions and loneliness, community cohesion, safety, trust in government, and skills, learning and development.

The research findings show many organisations moved quickly at the start of the pandemic to adapt their services to remote and digitally based models. This ensured continuity of operations and supported them to respond to new demands created by the lockdown measures, for example providing food, counselling and befriending services. Many organisations established new partnerships with organisations to support collaborative approaches to new demands. This period also involved new challenges, including financial pressures on organisations' resources, and a lack of accessibility of some remote and digital-based services for some users, and the overall pressures of a situation that could be characterised as a 'survival' time, with uncertain and damaging impacts.

Participants in this research raised a number of negative consequences for the people and communities they are working with. These included economic and financial insecurity, worries about employment, damage to the skills and education of young people, the availability and affordability of food and basic supplies. They also highlighted social harm including reduced mental health, increased loneliness and addiction. Although some positive impacts were noted, particularly new offers of community and neighbourhood

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Organisations' priorities for the short and longer terms focused on mental health and financial issues for different groups, and particularly for the most marginalised and vulnerable groups. Organisations suggested that priorities for the longer term should focus on creating a sustainable and inclusive economy, tackling inequalities, and for more integrated and sustainable models of services in places and across sectors.

Alongside the direct and immediate health harms from coronavirus, the pandemic has caused negative impacts in communities, increased levels of poverty and financial pressure, social isolation, and limited access to education and employment.

As well as the financial impact in relation to food, participants also recognised the household budget pressures on energy and digital access bills as people spend more time at home, and as their employment, education, and social connections needs increasingly depend on their household internet and mobile services.

The research also highlighted the indirect consequences of the pandemic pressures on community sector organisations' ability to provide support. Some participants expressed concern about their organisation's continued viability as they try to manage increased demand caused by the pandemic, with reduced opportunities for fundraising, and with fewer staff than usual where people have been furloughed through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme.

In terms of priorities for the future, organisations recommended a greater general focus on developing an inclusive social economy that more explicitly focuses on wellbeing, gender-equality in economic planning, a focus on tackling existing inequalities in recovery, a recognition on the interconnectedness of the environment and economy, and more adequate systems for social security, wages and contracts.

The impact of the pandemic on mental health was a clear priority. Nearly all participants noted that the pandemic had negatively impacted physical and mental health. This was the most commonly reported short, medium and long term priority for the people and communities who participants work with.

There are related concerns regarding the wide range of other pressures including housing, financial problems and addiction. This is also a focus for organisations who are supporting people within different settings and the research picked up concerns about the mental health of older people, young people, disabled people, refugees and asylum seekers, and those with existing health conditions. Participants also noted that feelings of anxiety were compounded for particular groups, for example: people with learning disabilities or limited English proficiency finding it difficult to understand public health messaging; people with pre-existing health conditions; and those unable to access regular care and support.

A small number of participants noted that the coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the importance of work to acknowledge and support mental health, specifically through more flexible working arrangements, and opportunities for physical activity outdoors.

Loneliness and isolation were prominent themes in responses where organisations were asked about the impact on the people they work with. This was often also where people were unable to use digital substitutes for their usual interpersonal interactions, for example people living in residential care and who have restricted access to technology, older people without digital literacy, households without few or no digital devices, homeless people, and people with family members in prison.

"This pandemic has shone a light on loneliness and isolation like never before, with huge numbers of people experiencing it to a greater or lesser degree, we need to capture this awareness and also that of all those who have volunteered during the pandemic for the first time. We need to harness this awareness, protect and develop community-based services, properly support and resource volunteering and tackle societies inequalities if we are to move forward to a better more equal society."
Befriending charity

As well as the negative impacts, there was also evidence reported of some people who may have felt more connected than usual through the pandemic, because of increased formal and informal food and medication deliveries, and more contact with their neighbours.

"We have noted that clients that we had been working with prior to the lockdown restrictions are coping better than we would have anticipated. We believe that this is due to the fact that clients are focusing on their immediate basic needs (food, warmth, shelter) and generally getting by and the fact that loneliness and isolation, for example, is the new 'norm'. It is of note that people do not feel 'different' from others in relation to stress and anxiety levels but rather perceive that everyone is stressed and anxious."
Mental health charity

Although quantitative research shows evidence of higher levels of loneliness and isolation through the pandemic, organisations also provided examples of positive impacts on neighbourhood support and relationships.

A number of participants noted that they had seen evidence of communities or neighbourhoods coming together, and of the common and shared experience of the coronavirus pandemic being a catalyst for neighbourhood connection. This included things like people supporting their neighbours by shopping for food or collecting prescriptions, increased donations to food banks, people waving to their neighbours on Thursday evenings during the 'clap for carers' events, and isolated older people feeling more connected to others.

Some organisations expressed a desire to consider further how to develop and continue the local and neighbourhood goodwill and support beyond the immediate collective response to the coronavirus pandemic. A couple of organisations highlighted the importance of local democracy and participation, and the need to include a range of voices in decision making, and the devolution of power to local communities to be in control of financial and policy decisions to enable communities to recover.

"A consistent theme has been the impressive performance of under-resourced community organisations, acting effectively and in collaboration to meet immediate challenges."
Development organisation

Social infrastructure was the main focus in some of the responses. Organisations noted the risk of losing meeting places due to the closure of community centres and schools, which also affected the availability of respite care for families of disabled children and support with early learning and childcare.

To access the full Report, please click on the link below:

http://www.gov.scot/publications/impact-covid-19-communities-priorities-recovery-perspectives-organisations-working-communities/

Organisations which have supported clients throughout the COVID-19 pandemic have supplied video clips which highlight the support provided and the difference which this has made to their lives.