

Children's Neighbourhood Scotland – Early insights into the COVID-19 response

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[Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland](#) (CNS) is based in the University of Glasgow, working in partnership with the [Glasgow Centre for Population Health](#). In collaboration with [Policy Scotland](#) and the [Network for Social and Educational Equity](#) CNS is undertaking a [programme of research and intelligence gathering](#) in high poverty settings across Scotland that seeks to understand how local responses are working in the current rapidly changing context and provide insights that can support the next phase of COVID-19 action at both local and national levels. This document is the first of a series that will share regular insights emerging from the research.

In areas where there are high levels of poverty and disadvantage the local level responses from the voluntary and community sector to COVID-19 vary in coherence and speed of response. Where there is already a high level of community connectedness, existing infrastructure and collaborative structures it has been easier to mobilise support for vulnerable children, young people and their families. There are some common messages emerging at the local level:

- The demand for support in high poverty areas is increasing day on day.
- Families in crisis are more obvious – there is no hiding place anymore. The boundaries between families that are coping and not coping are increasingly blurred.
- Families who were managing at the beginning of the lockdown period are now seeking support. Many of the families that were 'just coping' have now become 'chaotic' families.
- There is a demand for intensive and regular emotional support from families. This is being provided via the phone and video calls.
- There has been a big upsurge in the demand for food parcels.
- There are very significant concerns around the impact of the lockdown on households including overcrowding, job losses and access to financial support, the strain placed on relationships and the stress of dealing with additional support needs and caring responsibilities.
- Digital access, both to devices and to the internet, is an issue for many, including children and young people expected to access online learning.
- There is concern that volunteer groups established at the start of the lockdown may not have either the capacity or structures to continue supporting vulnerable community members in the longer term.
- The pace of change at a local level is extremely fast and frontline, local organisations are adapting their responses to meet local needs as quickly as they can, sometimes on a daily basis. This is placing significant additional pressure on staff teams, often operating with reduced capacity, to meet a hugely challenging and complex set of demands and needs.
- Some families are preferring to engage with the third sector rather than formal educational provision.



A recurring theme in discussions across different areas has been the challenge of consistently identifying vulnerable children, young people and their families across different services and organisations. Both public and third sector representatives have noted that there is not a consistent and shared definition of vulnerability or process that is used to identify families who may require support. This leads to a situation where lists can differ between organisations and services who are providing support to families so sharing these lists and other related intelligence is key.

The smaller local organisations who are working at the front line play a hugely significant role in helping to ensure that families in need of support are not missed. The relationships with the community and local intelligence found in small, third sector organisations are particularly valuable and important in ensuring the right support gets to the right families in high poverty areas. These smaller organisations face significant challenges in the current context, including precarity of funding and conditions attached to the funding which may not be flexible in allowing monies to be used differently.

Some third sector organisations who work with children and young people are thinking about what needs to happen when schools return and how intelligence can be shared and partnerships set-up or further developed with schools to ensure that children and young people's needs are met. In the longer term, the trauma resulting from the COVID-19 lockdown is likely to have very significant implications for the work of organisations and services working in high-poverty areas. The recurring question is *What will the new normal be?*

With regard to community planning, in some cases funding is being carried over to 2021, and for groups to use their funds in completely different ways, while still making sure there is accountability for how the resource is used. The emphasis in the new approach to funding is on rapid responses – for example, the community and voluntary sector need to be able provide food and support and digital coordination immediately regardless of the terms of their grant. This is a radical departure for community planning and offers opportunity for a long-term reshaping how they work with the community and voluntary sector. The COVID-19 response has enabled funding flexibility and agility that was not possible through the old CP structures. There is a debate between CP managers on how far to go in pushing the boundaries and rethinking how funded projects can use their grants

Many actors within the system are viewing the pandemic as an opportunity to rethink roles, responsibilities and service provision. Whilst it is important to attend to the immediate and urgent it is also important to grasp this opportunity. In a perverse way the pandemic is providing the disruption within the system that has the potential to accelerate the Scottish Performance Framework and ultimately, the successful implementation of the Christie agenda.

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