

Local government in Scotland

Overview 2021



ACCOUNTS COMMISSION 

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Who we are

The Accounts Commission

The Accounts Commission is the public spending watchdog for local government. We hold councils in Scotland to account and help them improve. We operate impartially and independently of councils and of the Scottish Government, and we meet and report in public.

We expect councils to achieve the highest standards of governance and financial stewardship, and value for money in how they use their resources and provide their services. Our work includes:

- securing and acting upon the external audit of Scotland's councils and various joint boards and committees
- assessing the performance of councils in relation to Best Value and community planning
- carrying out national performance audits to help councils improve their services
- requiring councils to publish information to help the public assess their performance.

You can find out more about the work of the Accounts Commission on our website:

www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/about-us/accounts-commission

Chair's introduction

In 2020, Covid-19 changed the world and will have a profound impact on our lives in the years ahead. The public services we all receive and many of us depend on each and every day have adapted, in some cases transformed and will certainly continue to change.

Covid-19 has laid bare and exacerbated existing **inequalities** such as health, work, income, housing and education across Scotland's communities. The multiple impacts of these inequalities have affected the most vulnerable, minority groups and women.

Reporting on how inequalities are being tackled is, and will be, a core priority for the Accounts Commission in our future reporting. The recovery from Covid-19 isn't going to be quick, again exacerbating the impact on the lives of those already most affected. The recovery plans and priorities need to recognise this.

Councils must put robust and realistic plans in place and work alongside partner organisations best placed to help. They must work with and for their communities, focusing on the needs of local people.

This will have to be achieved against an increasingly challenging **financial outlook**. There is rarely financial certainty for councils beyond the current financial year. For many years the Commission has reported on the importance of long-term financial planning for our councils and they need the certainty of a multi-year financial settlement to do this. Without this Scotland is faced with a clear risk to the financial sustainability of our councils. During the last few years we have seen increasing amounts of funding provided by the Scottish Government being ring-fenced for specific purposes and this limit on local flexibility

has also emerged through the funding arrangements for Covid-19. Councils have also been impacted by the significant loss of income and additional costs caused by Covid-19 which will have a consequential impact in the coming years. Support for councils will be needed to allow them to take a comprehensive and holistic approach as they look to stimulate economic recovery, address inequalities and build back communities.

Of course, this complex and difficult set of circumstances will, inevitably, mean that councils must make difficult decisions about the services they deliver, and indeed how these services are delivered.

A key issue will therefore be reaching agreement between the Scottish Government and COSLA to achieve a funding model for local government that targets and supports those most in need.

Throughout 2020 and beyond, the ways in which councils and communities have worked together to deliver services and support the most vulnerable has been incredible. Many communities and individuals continue to step in to provide crucial local services, empowered to do so by councils. Those local areas where partnership working was already strong and embedded were able to respond and react more quickly to the developing needs caused by Covid-19. This brought into focus the value and importance of **partnership working** and empowering communities to deliver services that meet very local needs.

Chair's introduction continued

The Accounts Commission will look to ensure that the significant amounts of funding given to councils to deliver and provide support to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 achieved value for money. **Following the 'pandemic pound'** will be central to our future work.

Our audit work has already seen so much positive work in councils, not least the swift and vital move to delivering services remotely and digitally. This new way of working needs to be harnessed and consolidated, with **lessons learned, shared and improved upon**. It is vital that councils do not default to previous ways of working in areas where new approaches are having positive outcomes.

This latest Local Government Overview is the first in a series of reports that will reflect on the evolving and long-term nature of the impact of Covid-19. Here we consider the initial response of councils. And our future reporting will give a more detailed analysis of the impact and lessons learned from the pandemic, including an assessment of progress being made in early phases of recovery in 2022 before looking ahead to how councils have supported their local communities to begin recovering.

Elma Murray

Interim Chair of the Accounts Commission

Key messages



**Communities
and people**



**Service delivery
and partnership
working**



**Resources and
governance**



1. The Covid-19 pandemic is having a profound impact on all aspects of society, including the economy, jobs, and the physical and mental health of the public

The negative impacts have been greater for those already experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, and existing inequalities have intensified. Councils have been at the centre of the response to the pandemic, supporting communities through these difficult times. They responded quickly and put their initial focus on maintaining service delivery and protecting communities.



2. Relationships with communities have been vital

Councils and communities have worked well together to manage local responses to Covid-19. These included supporting initiatives to promote wellbeing and support people who were shielding and facilitating community support hubs. Existing partnerships that were stronger before the pandemic made a smoother transition into the response phase, as there were fewer barriers. Moreover, some communities were able to offer a faster and more targeted response and deliver some vital services as a result of having fewer formal decision-making structures. In some cases, Community Planning structures have been strengthened and community groups have been able to work more flexibly, demonstrating the value of community empowerment.



3. Levels of service disruption have varied

Services such as education, social care and culture and leisure were badly affected, while other core services continued on a reduced basis. Services that could be delivered by people working from home were most resilient. The disruption to services had significant negative impacts on vital areas and on some client groups. These included carers who lacked access to respite care, people with learning disabilities who lacked access to important services and wider support, and school children, who experienced significant disruption to their education. Communities experienced significant service disruptions alongside the wider impact of the pandemic. This created further challenges including job losses and increased economic uncertainty, the impact on people's mental health, and increased child protection risks during lockdown.

Key messages continued



4. Some services were delivered virtually

For example, education continued where students were able to access learning materials online. Councils worked fast to enable homeworking for staff and to provide innovative IT (information technology) solutions. There were challenges for some councils in the early days of the move to homeworking, including limited internet connectivity and insufficient supplies of IT equipment to enable the required numbers of staff to work remotely.



5. The workforce demonstrated the versatility to take on new roles

Staff were redeployed from services that were closed or reduced into services facing increased pressure while working at pace under challenging circumstances. There will be an increased need in future for staff to be agile as services continue to evolve in line with the pandemic and the recovery phases. Councils must also manage the pressures on staff to ensure their people are not put at risk of burnout as the pandemic continues.



6. There were significant changes in council governance structures and processes

At the onset of the crisis, councils suspended or revised their meeting schedules, and adopted different approaches to decision-making. Virtual meetings were established in growing numbers of councils, and all councils now hold remote meetings. There is now less reliance on delegation to officers or emergency committees than in the early stage of the pandemic, but councils must continue to balance the need for urgent decision-making with transparency.

Key messages continued



7. Councils continue to face significant financial challenges, and these have been exacerbated by the pandemic

The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) estimated that the total net financial impact of Covid-19 in 2020/21 would be £767 million. This includes forecast financial pressures of £855 million, with loss of income accounting for around £400 million of this total. The financial pressures have been offset slightly by estimated cost reductions of £88 million from a range of areas such as lower property costs and reduced school meal costs.



8. The Scottish Government has provided substantial additional financial support, but the nature and timing of funding has created further challenges for councils

Funding announced by the Scottish Government by February 2021 is likely to support councils in covering the net financial impact of the pandemic for 2020/21. This additional funding includes a significant element of one-off grant funding, therefore this may present financial sustainability risks for some councils in future years. Furthermore, funding announcements have been frequent but not regular, and in some cases specific conditions are attached. This has created an additional administrative burden for the Scottish Government and councils arising from awarding and accepting grants and completing the related reporting requirements.

Key messages continued



9. Councils have started to plan for longer term recovery from the crisis

While restarting services is led largely by national guidance, and the response to a second wave of Covid-19, councils are beginning to think about how to rebuild local economies and support communities in the long term. Councils will play a pivotal role in this, and as they progress through the recovery phases, there must be recognition that a return to 'business as usual' will not be possible and that the negative impacts of the pandemic will be felt for years to come. Councils' recovery plans have signalled this kind of thinking, focusing on areas that were already priorities before the pandemic, such as digital, tackling inequalities and climate change. We are still learning about the significant long-term challenges, and councils' recovery and renewal plans should address the longer-term implications of the pandemic for local economies, communities and individuals. Recovery plans must also recognise the longstanding issues of inequality that exist and set out actions to address the differential impact of Covid-19 on different groups.



10. There has been some ongoing learning resulting from the emergency response to the pandemic

Councils' service delivery arrangements and working practices changed at an unprecedented pace and on a scale that would have been considered impossible in the past. The need to respond quickly with simplified procedures has allowed councils to operate more flexibly and achieve outcomes that would previously have taken much longer. For example, the use of digital technology, to support changes to service delivery and councils' governance arrangements, has accelerated at a greater pace than many councils had planned for or thought achievable. It is important that councils now consolidate and build on the factors that allowed this level of change and innovation to take place so quickly. Councils should also identify the positive developments to take forward into renewal planning to maintain this momentum. It is also important for councils to avoid the risk of reverting to 'business as usual' in areas where new ways of working are having positive outcomes, for example flexible working and an increase in digitally enabled services. We will consider further lessons learned in more detail in future local government overview reports.

About this report

Our local government overview this year is taking place amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, which has created an unprecedented set of issues and challenges for councils, their partners and for communities. The shape of the recovery and renewal curve is not yet clear, nor are many of the longer-term impacts on the economy, communities, and public services.

This report

- is the first in a series of reports that reflects the evolving and long-term nature of the impact of Covid-19
- considers the initial response phase of the pandemic from March 2020, and includes financial data correct as at the end of February 2021
- provides case study examples of council responses to new challenges.

Future reporting

- will give a more detailed analysis of the impact of the pandemic and lessons learned from it, including an assessment of progress being made in early phases of recovery in 2022
- will cover further progress, with renewal and recovery reported on in 2023.

Timeline of key events

18th - £350m funding announced for councils, the third sector, and community groups

20th - Closure of schools

24th - Scotland goes into 'lockdown'

30th - The Scottish Gov. announce that local authorities' August 2020 deadline to deliver 1140 funded hours of Early Learning and Childcare will be removed

6th - Coronavirus (Scotland) Act receives royal assent

20th - Covid-19 deaths peak in Scotland

5th - Scottish Gov. announce that £155m in Barnett Consequentials will be passed to Local Government

7th - Announcement of the 'Connecting Scotland' Initiative

29th - Scotland enters phase 1 of Scottish Gov. route map

16th - Summer provision of free school meals announced

19th - Phase 2 of Scottish Gov. route map begins

23rd - £257.6 million of additional funding for councils to help tackle Covid-19 is approved (includes £155m consequentials)

10th - Phase 3 of Scottish Gov. route map begins

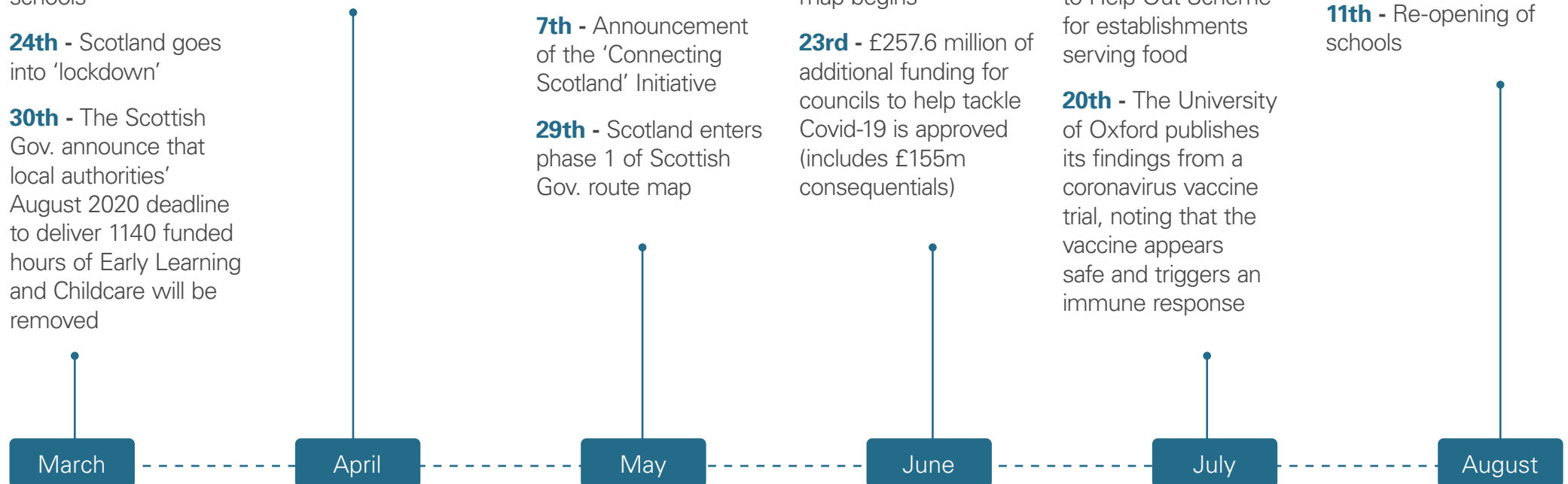
13th - UK Government announce the Eat Out to Help Out Scheme for establishments serving food

20th - The University of Oxford publishes its findings from a coronavirus vaccine trial, noting that the vaccine appears safe and triggers an immune response

5th - Local restrictions in Aberdeen following rise in infections

4th - Scottish pupils receive SQA results

11th - Re-opening of schools



Initial response phase, March to August 2020

Timeline of key events

1st - New restrictions introduced in the West of Scotland

22nd - New national restrictions and hospitality curfews introduced

24th - Scottish Gov. publish 2020/21 Autumn Budget revision. Covid-19 guaranteed consequentials reach £6.5bn

7th - Further temporary restrictive measures for hospitality, particularly in the central belt

20th - Further funding announced for free school meals and additional flexibility for councils to use the £20 million welfare fund

2nd - Local Authority protection levels take effect

5th - UK Gov. announce furlough extended to March

20th - 11 local authorities move into Level 4

24th - UK wide relaxation of restrictions over Christmas announced

8th - Covid-19 vaccination programme commences

14th - It is confirmed that the ELC expansion deadline has moved to August 2021

19th - The Scottish Gov. announce tightening of festive period restrictions

26th - National lockdown in Scotland begins

5th - Mainland Scotland goes into lockdown with a new legal requirement forbidding anyone from leaving their home except for essential purposes.

11th - The rollout of the Oxford/Astrazeneca coronavirus vaccine begins

29th - Scottish Gov. announce the Western Isles will move to Level 4 due to rise in cases

22nd - Children in early learning and childcare and primaries 1 to 3 return full-time to classrooms

25th - Scottish Gov. announce Scotland's vaccination programme has delivered first doses of the Covid-19 vaccine to a third of those eligible

28th - Scottish Gov.t announce three cases of a Covid-19 Variant of Concern first identified in Brazil, have been identified in Scotland



Initial response phase, September 2020 to February 2021

Key facts/Context

About local government

Councils in Scotland operate in a complex and challenging landscape. The scale of Covid-19 has created an unprecedented set of issues and challenges for councils, their partners, and communities. These include unprecedented economic and social impacts, additional financial pressures and increased service demand, the need for new service delivery models and negative impacts across communities and groups, particularly those who were already vulnerable. For several years, councils have been dealing with increasing challenges and uncertainty while continuing to address the needs of local people and national priorities. The Covid-19 pandemic has put into clear focus the pivotal role of councils in delivering not only the day-to-day services that communities rely on, but also in responding to risks. It emphasises the essential importance of effective leadership, good governance and good financial management for all councils.

Additional Covid-19 actions and responsibilities

- support to communities
- business support grant administration and distribution
- infrastructure amendments
- advice services
- staff redeployment
- virtual service delivery

32 councils



£12.6bn net expenditure budget in 2019/20



Workforce of **206,000** local government staff



Providing services to **5,463,300** people in Scotland

431,000

claims for the Self-employment Income Support schemes

£0.8bn

estimated additional Covid-19 costs in 2020/21

180,000

people shielding in Scotland

£0.4bn

estimated loss of income in 2020/21

9,000

households receiving kit through 'Connecting Scotland'

£1.02bn

administered in business support grants

[Our Local government in Scotland: Financial overview 2019/20](#) and [Digital in Local Government](#) reports explore some of these issues in more detail.

Key characteristics of the response

We have organised our analysis of the local government response to the pandemic and the wider risks that have emerged under the following themes. Early lessons learned relating to each theme are highlighted in the following sections of the report.

Each characteristic can be navigated to by the tabs at the top of the pages.



Communities and people

Community wellbeing and the role of communities in responding to the crisis

- differing impacts of Covid-19 on demographic groups
- the impact of the pandemic on inequalities
- communities' contributions in responding to the crisis



Service delivery and partnership working

The adaption of service provision and working with partners

- reduced service provision and prioritised services
- innovation and digital delivery
- enhanced collaboration and more positive working relationships



Resources and governance

The financial impact of responding to Covid-19, use of resources and changes to governance arrangements

- challenging financial outlook– additional spending and lost income
- new funding and financial flexibilities
- staff redeployed to fulfil essential roles
- virtual decision-making
- changes to governance arrangements



Communities and people

The adverse effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on different communities will last for years to come. Some people have faced greater hardship than others, and inequalities have increased in areas such as health, deprivation, employment and digital access. Communities have been integral in supporting councils and their partners' responses to the pandemic. Covid-19 recovery planning needs a sustained focus on addressing inequalities with community empowerment at its heart.

Covid-19 has had a profound impact on society and the economy

- The impact of Covid-19 on society has been hugely disruptive. Social distancing measures have markedly changed people's daily lives and, for many, have had a detrimental impact on mental health and wellbeing.
- Covid-19 has created significant uncertainty for many sectors of the economy. The national restrictions have forced many industries to shut down completely, resulting in substantial job losses and reliance on the national furlough scheme. At November 2020 the unemployment rate was 4.4 per cent, compared with 3.8 per cent for the same period in 2019.¹ The Improvement Service has created a Covid-19 economic impact dashboard² which shows the current uptake of government support at a Scottish local authority level. This uses publicly available data and includes details of the types of employment furloughed, the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme, unemployment benefit claims, and the Covid-19 Business Support Fund Grant Scheme.
- Covid-19 will also bring longer-term impacts on the economy and labour market, potentially leading to structural changes and the risk of long-term scarring for those exposed to extended periods of unemployment. The pandemic has created unequal effects on the economy so far, with digital and tech industries thriving whereas retail, hospitality, tourism, and creative industries have been the worst affected. Many of the workers within these worst affected industries are among the lowest paid and include groups such as young people, women, those with disabilities, and minority groups. This creates a risk that existing social and economic inequalities will be exacerbated. There is also the potential for some areas to be disproportionately affected, for example in economies surrounding city centres relying on footfall and in rural economies relying on tourism. The Improvement Service comments on these issues in more detail in its Covid-19 Supplement to the Scottish Local Authorities Economic Development Group (SLAED) Indicators Report 2019-20.³

1. [Labour marker in the regions of the UK](#): Office for National Statistics, March 2021

2. [COVID Economic Impact dashboard \(shinyapps.io\)](#)

3. [Covid-19 Supplement to SLAED Indicators Report 2019-20](#)

Covid-19 had a significant impact on children and young people

- Significant disruption to education has had an adverse effect on children and young people. The move to home learning has been challenging for many families and has led to loss of learning and loss of school experiences. Our report [Improving outcomes for young people through school education](#) looks at these issues in more detail and notes that the negative impacts of the pandemic may affect children and young people across a range of outcomes, and has had a detrimental effect on mental health and wellbeing.
- Covid-19 has also had a significant impact on young carers, many of whom have had to take on additional caring responsibilities during lockdown. These young people provide essential care for their families, often 24 hours a day, and this can lead to challenges in maintaining their social, educational, and economic wellbeing, as well as their physical and mental health. The pandemic and associated lockdown restrictions and social distancing measures have had far-reaching implications for young carers. These include increases in the complexity of the care provided, the withdrawal of some aspects of external support, difficulties associated with home learning and increased stress and anxiety levels as care loads grow.

Covid-19 has had a disproportionate impact on some communities and groups in society

- Covid-19 has had disproportionate effects on peoples' health, particularly those with existing health conditions, but the pandemic and society's response to it is also having an unequal impact on disadvantaged and vulnerable people and communities.
- Those living in areas of high deprivation in Scotland are twice as likely to die from Covid-19,⁴ and structural inequalities, for example poor access to good-quality education, employment, health and housing, place black and minority ethnic groups at much higher risk of becoming severely ill with Covid-19.⁵
- One-third of 18-24-year-olds have been furloughed or lost their job, in contrast to just over one-sixth of working-age adults overall. A cause for concern is prompted by further analysis by the Resolution Foundation which suggests that those currently on furlough have an increased risk of later unemployment when the job retention scheme ends.⁶
- The financial impact of Covid-19 has been substantial for many individuals and families. Over half of families in receipt of Universal Credit or Child Tax Credit in Scotland have had to borrow money since the start of the crisis.⁷ The economic impact has also affected some groups to a greater degree than others, for example young people and women in low-paid job sectors that have faced service closures. Women have historically been exposed to labour market inequality, through comprising more underpaid and undervalued work and are also more likely to have caring responsibilities, making it harder to balance work and care commitments. These issues have been heightened through the response to Covid-19, as women have been disproportionately affected by job disruption and the need for more unpaid care.⁸
- In addition, digital exclusion has been exacerbated, resulting in reduced access to information, goods, and services for some. In the 20 per cent most deprived areas in Scotland, 82 per cent of households have access to the internet, in comparison with 96 per cent in the 20 per cent least deprived areas.⁹

4. [Deaths involving Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) in Scotland, National Records of Scotland, December 2020](#)

5. [Supporting community recovery and resilience in response to the COVID-19 pandemic: a rapid review of evidence, Glasgow Centre for Population Health, May 2020](#)

6. [Getting Britain working \(safely\) again, The next phase of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, May 2020](#)

7. [A stronger Scottish lifeline in the economic storm, Joseph Rountree Foundation, July 2020](#)

8. [The impact of COVID-19 on women's labour market equality, Close the gap: Disproportionate disruption May 2020](#)

9. [Scottish Household Survey 2019: annual report](#)

New vulnerabilities have also emerged as a result of Covid-19

- Covid-19 has created new vulnerabilities and exacerbated existing inequalities and exposure to risk factors.¹⁰ The response to the pandemic has had a huge impact on vulnerable adults and children, for example through care services being removed from people with disabilities and elderly people, children with additional support needs having reduced educational support, and increased child protection risks as a result of children being less visible to support services.
- These services provide important streams of both practical and social support for those in need. The reduction or cessation of services has had a significant impact. For example, the Care Inspectorate found that children and young people, whose school education and building-based social activities had been suspended, were particularly adversely affected.¹¹ Similarly, parents in some situations became quickly exhausted. The Care Inspectorate also note the risk of hidden harm being a concern.
- The disproportionate impact has also been reflected in the challenges for those with caring responsibilities, including carers who have faced reduced access to support services and respite care.

Case study 1

East Renfrewshire Council



East Renfrewshire Council's multi-layered approach to shielding.

The council contacted those on the shielding list to assist with essential tasks such as delivering food and medicine. Further support was provided to other groups by cross matching the shielding list with the lists of those accessing other services, such as homecare, telecare, housing, learning disability, food hubs and young mums' services. This allowed the council to co-ordinate various elements of support and contact people who had not used services before. It also helped to identify wider issues that were emerging during the pandemic, such as communities being at risk of food poverty.

10. [A brief summary of some issues and potential impact on those living in socio-economic disadvantage, The Improvement Service: Poverty, Inequality and Covid-19](#)

11. [Delivering care at home and housing support services during the COVID-19 pandemic, September 2020](#)

Councils were innovative and worked at pace to provide support to those most at risk

- In the initial phases of the pandemic, councils identified vulnerable people using sources such as databases of those accessing food banks, households receiving free school meals and people on the shielding list. This allowed for a targeted response to those at greatest risk.
- Councils have been at the forefront in adapting services and providing support to communities. Diverse approaches were taken to respond to the changing circumstances and to support the most vulnerable. For example, innovative solutions to provide accommodation for homeless people were established. The rapid response to housing the homeless, through additional funding and using private sector resources, is unprecedented.
- Councils are also contributing to national efforts to minimise the negative effect of digital exclusion on vulnerable communities, working with the Scottish Government and third sector to distribute digital devices through the 'Connecting Scotland' initiative.

Case study 2

The City of Edinburgh Council



The City of Edinburgh Council private sector leasing scheme to tackle homelessness.

The council increased its provision to homeless people by using private sector resources, such as hotels, B&Bs and rented accommodation through the private sector leasing scheme. Working with Link Housing, the council is looking to enhance the scheme in the longer-term, where landlords can lease their properties to the council for up to ten years at guaranteed rents. The council began a new contract for the scheme in April 2020 and, despite the challenges of Covid-19, the scheme has increased by 89 properties, and 321 new tenancies were established between 1 April and 6 November 2020.

Councils were innovative and worked at pace to provide support to those most at risk

Case study 3

Scottish Borders Council



Scottish Borders Council's 'Inspire Learning' programme:

'Inspire Learning' is an ambitious digital learning programme developed in July 2019, through which all secondary pupils and teachers received their own iPad. A range of partners have contributed to the programme's success by adopting a 'one vision' approach. The initial phase was completed six months ahead of schedule in March 2020, providing an invaluable tool for remote learning in response to Covid-19. In the first week of home learning, over 90 per cent of secondary pupils were using their iPads at home. The programme has also now been extended to all primary pupils in P4 and above and primary teaching staff. It also aims to aid collaboration between schools, enhance delivery of the curriculum, and address future employment challenges, by teaching young people digital skills such as coding, working with Apple's education initiative.

Councils will continue to play a significant role in addressing future inequalities

- The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) has recently prepared a [Blueprint](#), based on the empowerment of people and communities, that outlines the steps local government needs to take to overcome inequalities which increase the chances of contracting Covid-19, and longer-term impacts of the virus. However, it is too early to assess councils' progress in applying the blueprint or to understand the full impact of the pandemic on inequalities.
- Councils will play an integral role in Scotland's recovery from Covid-19 and putting communities at the centre of recovery will be vital. As well as managing the specific impacts of the pandemic, councils will also need to address the challenges that existed before the pandemic, many of which have been heightened.
- The impact of the crisis will require targeted interventions to ensure that people can be supported to overcome its damaging social and economic effects. Councils have demonstrated early signs of this kind of thinking, for example by developing virtual skills programmes for young people, and job-matching websites to help people find employment.

Case study 4

Falkirk Council



[Falkirk Council's Employment and Training Unit.](#)

The council's Employment and Training Unit has ensured that more than 800 people could continue to develop employability skills during Covid-19 by providing virtual support, replacing typical face-to-face learning. The team supports young people in Falkirk who wish to develop skills outwith traditional higher or further education settings. The service offers a range of support, from specific training and qualifications to wider life skills in wellbeing, health, and finance. The team has signposted people to other services to help with challenges arising from Covid-19. It has been successful in securing jobs for some despite the fragile employment market, in areas such as health and social care, retail, food and administration.

Lessons learned

The impact of Covid-19 has been extremely detrimental for many of Scotland's most vulnerable people and communities. The impact will be long-lasting and will significantly increase inequalities. Recovering from the pandemic will require tackling inequalities to be a priority.

As councils may look to embed longer-term changes to service provision as seen during the pandemic, it is important that they are adaptable in their approach, to ensure that services are reaching communities in the right way. Councils need to understand the needs of those experiencing digital exclusion and put

a strategy in place to ensure equal access to services for all citizens and communities.

Communities were an asset in councils' response to the pandemic

- As councils worked at pace to adapt service provision and provide additional support to vulnerable people, community groups made significant contributions, for example local people helping to coordinate the shielding response.
- Community-led responses were delivered through initiatives such as Community Planning Partnerships and third sector volunteering. Communities made important contributions to delivering these support systems.
- The establishment of community hubs was a common approach to coordinating local support by providing emotional support and services such as deliveries of food and medicines.

Case study 5

North Ayrshire Council



[North Ayrshire Council's 'Three Towns' Community Hub.](#)

The council established community hubs around its localities, one being the three towns of Saltcoats, Stevenston, and Ardrossan. Existing community engagement work provided a robust base for developing a collective response from different services, and from community groups that acted as volunteers.

The hub linked together expertise from the community, health, social work, libraries, community development and voluntary organisations. The hubs provided a local telephone point of contact for community need arising as a result of Covid-19, also helping to distribute food, medicine, mental health support, and books. Holistic working provided an efficient response to serving communities with various services 'under one roof'.

Communities experienced increased levels of activity and collaboration

- As a result of reduced levels of governance and decision-making protocols, communities embraced the opportunity to take charge in responding to the crisis. For example, communities quickly organised themselves to help councils to provide essential supplies to vulnerable people, often in a matter of days.
- Before the pandemic, this type of innovation and activity from local people faced barriers, including limited opportunities to influence or take control of decision-making processes, poor relationships and a lack of trust between communities and the public sector, continued financial pressures and austerity measures, and leadership and cultural challenges. However, the need for more streamlined processes allowed communities to make significant contributions in response to the pandemic. Our report [Principles for community empowerment](#) outlines the benefits of community empowerment in more detail.
- Collaboration was more effective where pre-existing relationships with communities were strong. Shared values and trust were important in helping councils to target support and achieve buy-in from community groups.

Case study 6

East Lothian Council



[East Lothian Council Connected Communities Resilience Bases.](#)

The council established six bases (one in each ward) across the local authority area to support vulnerable people or those who are self-isolating and have no other local support. Staff coordinated the despatch of essential goods including food, sanitary products, and hearing aid batteries. They proactively contacted those on the shielding list and worked with community groups to tackle concerns over wellbeing and isolation.

Lessons learned

Action taken by communities has been vital in supporting councils and their partners to deliver an emergency response. Partnerships that were well-established before the pandemic had a smoother transition into the response phase and acted more quickly than others.

The importance of strengthening relationships with communities has been apparent. Greater flexibility in decision-making structures has been an effective tool for communities, empowering them while allowing the council to operate more efficiently. Giving communities

more scope to use initiatives like this will be important in the future but must be balanced with the return of robust governance arrangements and continued openness and transparency in decision-making.



Service delivery and partnership working

Councils were central to the national Covid-19 pandemic response to supporting communities and vulnerable groups, alongside partners in health and social care and voluntary sectors. They responded quickly to the pandemic, placing their initial focus on maintaining essential services and protecting communities. Levels of service disruption varied during the early stages of the spring 2020 lockdown. Some councils worked well with their communities to respond to the challenges.

Councils proved agile in adapting service provision, by redirecting resources and using digital technology

- In their initial response to the national lockdown in March 2020, councils had to take quick decisions on their priorities to maintain key services while changing the way they delivered services and pausing some altogether.
- Generally, the most resilient services were those that were able to embrace home working, particularly administrative, support and processing functions.
- The impact of the pandemic and disruption to services varied. Services such as education, social care, culture and leisure, and housing repairs were significantly disrupted, and it is likely that these impacts will have longer-term consequences for communities and councils.
- Our report [Improving outcomes for young people through school education](#) found that those involved in planning and delivering school education and their partners had developed a strong foundation of working together before the pandemic. That foundation helped them deliver a quick response to the crisis. However, the move to home learning was less effective for children and young people living in already challenging home circumstances. This has exacerbated learning and development inequalities among pupils.

Case study 7

Aberdeen City and East Dunbartonshire



Councils including [Aberdeen City](#) and [East Dunbartonshire](#) distributed digital equipment to school pupils.

Aberdeen City Council's Education Service provided laptops and internet access for children and young people to support their access to the curriculum and continuing their studies at home. Teachers came up with interactive ways to provide more engaging learning for students. Guidance on delivering a digital curriculum was also issued to parents and staff.

- The pandemic impacted on councils' ability to carry out their social care functions, and the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020 temporarily relaxed many of the usual statutory requirements on councils. These changes had significant negative impacts on some vulnerable groups and communities. In its review of care at home services, the [Care Inspectorate](#) found that health and social care partnerships effectively prioritised support for people with critical needs; but the impacts of this prioritisation on other people using services was very variable across the country.
- The suspension of day care and respite services had a particular impact on children and young people with additional support needs, learning disabilities or challenging behaviours. Children and young people whose school education and social activities had been suspended were particularly adversely affected.
- The Care Inspectorate also found that social isolation, disruption of daily activities, limitations on physical activity and the suspension of reablement services had an adverse impact on the health and wellbeing of people who experience care and carers.
- All councils and partner providers closed their leisure centres, libraries, museums, and cultural centres to the public.
- Councils initially restricted housing repairs to emergencies and essential repairs only, and the right to repair timescales were suspended in cases where landlords and contractors could not meet them because of the disruption caused by Covid-19.

Case study 8

Midlothian Council



Midlothian Council's Registrations service moved to a seven-day service, to make sure that deaths would be registered on time, and in line with social distancing requirements.

The service adapted to enable remote digital registrations, coordinating the early stages of each registration before completing it in the office. The council's library support team provided administrative assistance to the registrations team.

- Other services such as waste collection and administration functions continued on a reduced basis in the early stages of the spring 2020 lockdown. For example, in waste management, most councils continued kerbside bin collections, but recycling centres were temporarily closed. Most planning services were moved online with site visits suspended and a focus on responding to urgent matters.
- Councils made creative use of digital technology, responding to challenges across services. For example, school pupils were given access to learning materials online while learning at home (the 2021 report [Improving outcomes for young people through school education](#) looks at councils' responses to the pandemic and their impacts in detail). In addition, fitness classes and library collections moved online; some care homes provided virtual visiting for residents; and some councils live-streamed funeral services privately for family and friends.
- The [Digital progress in local government report](#) found that the pandemic has had a huge impact on council workforces, resulting in a large-scale shift to homeworking and remote working. Getting the right technology, skills, and support in place to give staff the confidence to use new cloud-based tools has been a key challenge. Councils' digital and information communication technology (ICT) teams have responded with unprecedented speed, agility, and resilience.

Case study 9

Perth and Kinross Council



[Perth and Kinross Council](#) live streamed funeral services from Perth Crematorium, to allow families to say goodbye to their loved ones safely while following social distancing guidelines.

The webcam service was made available privately to relatives, and the feedback received from families has been overwhelmingly positive.

Councils rapidly changed service delivery arrangements

- Councils reacted quickly to take on new responsibilities brought about by the pandemic, including distribution of business support grants ([see Resources and governance section](#)) and involvement in the shielding response.
- Councils have also experienced an impetus for digital change from the challenges of the pandemic, with some taking the opportunity to accelerate their digital transformation plans by, for example, adopting online meetings and reducing staff travel. [The Digital progress in local government report](#) provides more details on how councils met these challenges.
- Data sharing between councils and partners enabled resources to be directed to those in need. [The Digital progress in local government report](#) highlighted the example of the Helping Hands platform which councils and third sector partners jointly developed to coordinate support for citizens who were shielding or otherwise vulnerable. This allowed councils and partners to identify and support those at greatest risk. However, the Improvement Service found that a lack of data sharing in some cases created challenges, for example relating to councils and Public Health Scotland sharing Test and Protect data from households required to isolate.
- Our review of the 32 council websites found that councils took similar approaches to communicating with the public and staff through their websites by providing periodic updates on most services. But some councils' websites had gaps in information on key services such as homelessness and social care in the early stages, creating the risk of people not being kept fully informed about the services they needed.

Case study 10

Perth and Kinross Council



[Perth and Kinross Council staff such as parking attendants worked with NHS Tayside to collect and deliver prescriptions and other medical equipment to patients.](#)

This followed the suspension of parking charges, to allow key workers to get to their places of work more easily. The council's Public Transport Unit also worked with businesses that normally take pupils to school to instead take key workers to and from work back home.

Council workforces demonstrated versatility by adapting quickly, taking on new roles and working under pressure to maintain key services

- Councils redeployed staff from closed or reduced services to services that faced increased demand or pressures. Staff have had to work at pace and under significant pressure.
- Homeworking and staff redeployment have created challenges for council workforces. The additional pressures created by new and changed ways of working reinforce the need for the workforce to be versatile now and in the future.
- The impact of the pandemic on staff wellbeing and mental health means that there is an increased need for leaders to be aware of staff wellbeing and their role in supporting staff, as well as ensuring the effectiveness and accuracy of councils' workforce data and planning. These challenges have been highlighted by the [Improvement Service Organisational Development Local Authority Network \(ODLA\)](#).
- There is an increasing and ongoing need for council workforces to be agile as services continue to adapt to the impact of Covid-19, and as recovery moves into renewal. But councils must also manage the pressures on their staff to ensure their people are not at risk of burnout as the pandemic continues.

Case study 11

North Ayrshire Council



[North Ayrshire Council](#) redeployed staff to its community support hub network to work with volunteers in supporting local communities.

The hub network was established in March 2020 providing services including support to vulnerable residents and people in isolation to access emergency food supplies, and connecting with people struggling with money worries, social isolation, and poor mental health. The links to a wide range of disciplines allowed the hub to respond quickly in the initial phases of lockdown by taking a multi-agency approach. In one week, the hubs answered over 2,200 calls, carried out 2,153 food deliveries and 746 prescription drop-offs, and provided advice and signposting to over 400 residents to key statutory services.

Lessons learned

Councils must closely monitor the impacts of service changes and disruptions on people and communities. There are growing concerns about the effects of service disruptions on different groups, for example the impacts of moving school education into homes and online on disadvantaged and vulnerable children

and young people, and of reduced or paused care services on people who rely on them and their carers. Councils must develop targeted responses to tackle both the immediate negative impacts of the pandemic and the long-term inequalities that have been exacerbated.

As councils embrace longer-term digital service provision, they must balance the efficiencies digital services bring against the needs of communities and the workforce. Citizens must be at the heart of decisions about the services they rely on.

Councils have worked effectively with community partners to respond to the impacts of Covid-19. Partnerships between councils and community partners have developed and strengthened in some areas

- Councils play a key role in leading and coordinating partnerships focused on supporting and improving the lives of people in their communities. This role has been crucial as councils have coordinated and managed local responses to the pandemic. There have been many positive examples of these partnerships - including in mandatory Local Resilience Partnerships, through data-sharing responses to support shielding - and community resilience responses.
- During the early stages of the spring 2020 lockdown, it was not always clear how councils identified those in need of additional support. Some councils outlined their approaches on their websites, for example in providing additional support to individuals and families by coordinating data on those accessing other support such as food banks, households receiving free school meals, and those on the shielding list. Not all councils detailed their approaches publicly. This created a risk that people were not fully informed about the services they could access and were entitled to, particularly those in vulnerable groups, or about the council's response to Covid-19 in their local area.
- Partnerships with the third sector and communities have been particularly important in protecting people's wellbeing and supporting community hubs. As noted in the [Communities and people](#) section, partnerships that were well established before the pandemic had a smoother transition in the response phase. Many councils set up community hubs, and some communities were able to offer a faster and more targeted response to deliver vital services as a result of having fewer formal decision-making structures.

- Councils played an active role in national initiatives such as [Connecting Scotland](#), working with the Scottish Government and third sector to distribute digital devices to people in need.
- Collective action from Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) had a significant positive impact. CPPs provided a much-needed way of coordinating local support activities and communications. Work carried out by the Improvement Service highlighted how CPPs have added value, through emergency resilience planning and by providing an immediate response involving key partners and communities.
- CPPs' impacts highlighted the value of Community Planning, in coordinating local and national responses, mobilising communities to take charge of supporting vulnerable people, developing existing relationships within Community Planning, and marshalling third sector resources. Following this initial reactive phase, there is evidence of CPPs now looking to join councils' efforts in recovery planning.

Case study 12

East Renfrewshire Council

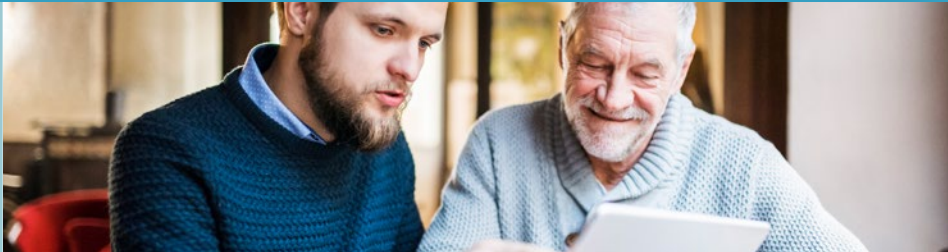


[East Renfrewshire Council](#) contacted the 2,500 people on the shielding list to check whether they needed any assistance, for example in obtaining food and medicine provision, digital support, or financial help.

The council also carried out a social care needs assessment at that point to determine what support was already in place, for example district nursing or home care, and then worked with Voluntary Action East Renfrewshire to meet the additional needs.

Case study 13

Fife Council



Fife Council worked with Fife Voluntary Action to deliver the Helping Hands initiative.

This aims to support local communities across Fife, providing a range of essential services, including delivery of shopping and prescriptions, and providing transport and befriending services. There are eight active community resilience groups in Fife, six of which were established before the pandemic. These linked directly with the Emergency Resilience Team which provides advice on and support for developing local resilience arrangements and community-led responses. The groups have been key to providing a foundation for building capacity and additional resources to respond to the impacts of Covid-19 and support communities.

- The Improvement Service has worked with COSLA and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) to develop a local government Covid-19 dashboard, to help councils to coordinate and draw insights from the significant volume of Covid-19 data they hold. The dashboard has been created to put greater focus on evidence-based service arrangements and to help councils use timely data to inform their decision-making. It is too early to assess the overall effectiveness of the dashboard, but the early signs are positive, and councils now have access to current data on key figures and emerging trends analysed nationally and at family grouping level. Further consideration will be given to the dashboard in future local government overview reports.
- More broadly the Improvement Service has played a key role in sharing good practice examples of effective ways of working by councils during the pandemic, preparing a paper on the role of Community Planning in the response to the crisis and producing economic dashboard outputs on its website to show differences in councils' uptake of the furlough schemes. COSLA's Recovery Special Interest Group is currently reviewing lessons learned and developing policy on the national recovery from Covid-19. The group is chaired by the COSLA vice-president and includes COSLA's president and five policy spokespersons. Its aim is to develop political direction from local government to shape the medium- to longer-term recovery work.

Councils' approaches to restarting paused services have varied, but they have been guided by the Scottish Government's national guidance

- As well as recovery planning, early action has already been taken in some councils to address the profound and immediate economic and social consequences of the pandemic. Some councils are working with partners to develop skills programmes to tackle future employment issues and using place-based approaches to address wider economic challenges.
- Councils have also maintained their focus on key challenges that they faced before the pandemic, and progress has been made in some areas despite the unprecedented pressures that emerged. For example, in March 2021, the Improvement Service¹² noted that data returned by local authorities indicated that 114,222 children were accessing funded early learning and childcare services as at the end of February 2021. Of these, 98,474 children (86 per cent) were accessing more than the statutory entitlement of 600 hours, and 74,096 children (65 per cent) were accessing 1,140 hours, despite the legal obligation to do so being suspended for a further 12 months.
- But there are significant challenges facing councils as they move from the response to recovery from the pandemic. As we highlighted earlier in this report, there are longstanding and wide-ranging inequalities in children's and young people's education outcomes that have been exacerbated by the impacts of and actions taken in response to Covid-19. The impacts of reduced services for pupils and for care service users for example, may not be known for some time and will require long-term efforts to address them.
- Services that were paused or reduced during Covid-19 restrictions will have built up backlogs of demand that may take some time to become clear. Councils' responses to these backlogs and the restarting of services will need to be effectively resourced and managed.
- Looking to the medium and longer term, councils recognise the challenges of repairing the damage to communities caused by Covid-19. Recovery planning began in many councils early in the pandemic, primarily focusing on recovery and renewal. The priorities that demanded councils' attention before the pandemic have become even more pressing, such as tackling inequalities, improving outcomes for young people, and tackling climate change.

12. [Early Learning and Childcare Expansion Delivery Progress Report, March 2021](#)

Case study 14

Glasgow City Council

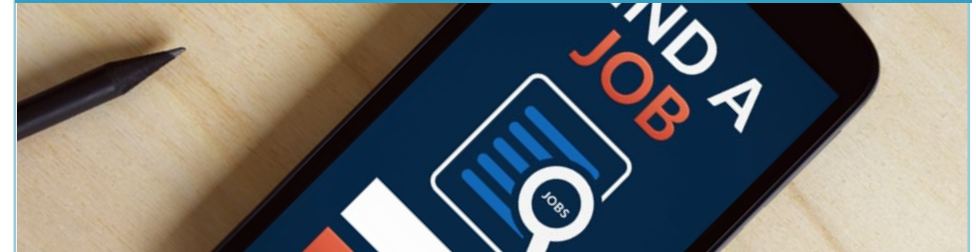


Glasgow City Council acted promptly in establishing its Covid-19 Recovery Group to tackle the economic and social consequences of the pandemic by looking at economic impact data.

At the end of this process, the group will publish a report containing recommendations on the actions that will guide the economic recovery of the city and city region. The group consists of members of the Glasgow Economic Leadership, the Glasgow Partnership for Economic Growth, the Glasgow Economic Commission, and some external advisers. Members include representatives from the public sector, academia, the voluntary sector, and the tourism, retail, financial services, and energy sectors.

Case study 15

Edinburgh and South East Scotland



Edinburgh and South East Scotland City Region Deal partners, through the Integrated Employer Engagement workstream of the Integrated Regional Employability and Skills programme, launched a new job matching website, c19jobs, as a rapid response to promote key worker roles and to help reduce unemployment caused by the pandemic impacts.

The site offers vacancies in key sectors such as the NHS, supermarkets, and take-away services. The site also provides information and guidance for both employers and employees.

Case study 16

North Ayrshire Council



[North Ayrshire Council](#) launched its [Community Wealth Building Strategy](#) in May 2020 which is the first of its kind in Scotland.

The strategy underlines how the council and other 'anchor' organisations – including NHS Ayrshire and Arran, Ayrshire College, and wider partners - will support more local business to bid for public sector contracts. The council seek to continue to enhance its strategy, recognising that Covid-19 has had a negative impact on inequalities to ensure that the recovery is strong, resilient, and fair. It aims to 'keep wealth local' and provide more sustainable solutions to tackle Climate Change.

Lessons learned

Councils and their staff have been at the centre of unprecedented efforts to protect and support people and communities through the Covid-19 pandemic. Demands on people have been intense, and both council staff and the citizens they serve will need continued targeted support through the move to recovery and renewal. Councils' recovery and renewal efforts must be informed by comprehensive understanding of the issues that affect all those who live and work in their communities, and the positive partnerships built on during their initial response should be a core element in this.

The impacts of the pandemic, particularly its unequal impacts on groups in society and the awareness it has raised of issues of fairness and equality, the importance of community and the value of local services are all key to deciding future priorities for public services and what 'building back better' might mean for communities.



Resources and governance

Councils have been dealing with the unprecedented economic and fiscal consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic alongside other challenges. Significant changes were also required to governance arrangements in the early stages of the pandemic.

Councils face significant financial challenges as a result of the pandemic

- Our [Local government in Scotland: financial overview 2019/20](#) report explains how the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdown has affected many aspects of councils' finances and created significant financial challenges and uncertainty.
- As part of COSLA's cost collection exercise carried out in July 2020, councils estimated that the total 2020/21 net financial impact of Covid-19 would be £767 million. This includes financial pressures totalling £855 million, offset by cost reductions of £88 million from a range of areas such as lower property costs and reduced school meal costs. Loss of income accounted for around £400 million of the forecast financial pressures. Other areas forecast to come under increased pressure include the costs associated with delaying capital projects, underachievement of savings and the additional costs associated with delays in the redesign and reconfiguration of services.
- The closure of sport and leisure facilities is likely to result in a significant loss of income for councils. In summer 2020, COSLA estimated that this could be around £75 million for 2020/21, however this was based on assumptions in line with the Scottish Government's route map out of lockdown at that time. It is likely that the further lockdown restrictions implemented in December 2020 will exacerbate this challenge, resulting in a greater loss of income than first anticipated. This also applies to other areas of lost income for councils, including from the closure of other buildings and services, reductions in fees and charges and the impact of school closures on income from food and drink. In addition, the council tax reduction scheme and loss of council tax revenue continues to put significant pressure on revenues, alongside similar challenges faced by councils in collecting housing rent payments. Councils also projected that they will miss out on over £50 million in savings as a result of opportunities forgone and the pressures faced in response to Covid-19.
- Councils' auditors also reported wider financial consequences of Covid-19 in the 2019/20 annual audit reports. These include the suspension of capital programmes, delays in bad debt collection and the uncertainty of capital receipts.

Case study 17

Projected loss of income – ALEOs

Several large urban councils have arm's-length external organisations (ALEOs) that were set up to manage commercial activities and provide income back to councils. These include conference facilities and transport services.

Councils' projected loss of income from these organisations in 2020/21 is £39 million. This includes Lothian Buses, Edinburgh Trams, the Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre and the Aberdeen Exhibition and Conference Centre.

The UK and Scottish governments have provided substantial additional funding to support the pandemic response

- Scotland has had guaranteed additional funding from the UK Government of £8.6 billion. As at February 2021, over £2 billion of Scottish Government Covid-19 support for councils had been either allocated or announced. This includes the following:
 - **£800 million of non-ringfenced revenue support, including £200 million (estimated) of dedicated funding to compensate councils for loss of income**
 - **£267 million to support education recovery**
 - **£255 million to support individuals, families and communities**
 - **£434 million of NHS funding to be passed on to health and social care partnerships**
 - **£63 million of capital support for Regeneration Capital Grant Fund, Town Centres Capital Fund, School transport support and Digital Inclusion funding.**
- As part of their new responsibilities resulting from the impact of the pandemic, councils have administered funding of over £1 billion under the Covid-19 Business Support Fund Grant Scheme. These grants are administered by councils on behalf of the Scottish Government, and funding is made available to councils to finance the costs incurred. Councils reported that over 106,000 applications were received for the Small Business Grant Scheme and the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Business Grant Scheme across Scotland. Of the applications received, over 90,000 were successful with grants of over £1 billion awarded by December 2020.¹³

Covid-19 Business Support Fund Grant Scheme (December 2020)

- Total number of applications: **106,662**
- Number of grants awarded: **91,258**
- Value of grants awarded: **£1,019,526,016**

13. [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): business support fund grant statistics - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/covid-19/business-support-fund-grant-statistics)

More councils added to their revenue reserves in 2019/20. Further increases may occur in 2020/21 as a result of carry-forward of late grant funding and allocations of cash from the Scottish Government

- In 2019/20, 22 councils reported increases in their revenue reserves balance (13 in 2018/19), with a net increase of £65 million (or three per cent) across all councils. Reserves play an important role in effective financial management. They provide a working balance to smooth out uneven cashflows, protect against the financial impact of unexpected events, and enable funds to be built up for known future commitments. With continued uncertainty around available funding and additional costs resulting from Covid-19, increases in revenue reserve balances may help councils to deal with short-term cash-flow challenges in 2020/21.
- Some elements of funding announced by the Scottish Government in late 2020/21 may need to be carried forward by some councils. This, along with late allocations of cash that are unlikely to be spent before the year-end, is likely to have an impact on councils' year-end reserves. Although an increase in revenue reserves would provide some additional flexibility for councils at a time of significant financial challenges, this is more likely to reflect the timing and nature of funding allocated rather than favourable financial positions resulting from strategic decisions made by councils. Late funding carried forward from 2020/21 is also likely to be earmarked for specific purposes rather than being available for general use. It is important that councils continue to recognise the sustainability challenges of using reserves to fund recurring expenditure, particularly as the impact and challenges of Covid-19 continue to develop.

COSLA is working closely with the Scottish Government to obtain additional financial support for councils

- Discussions continue around an additional package of spending powers and financial flexibility that the Scottish Government claims could be worth up to £600 million for councils. This figure would apply if all councils were able to use all the new flexibilities, but COSLA does not consider this to be a likely scenario. Councils will need to consider the increased costs that may arise in future years and the impact that Covid-19 may have on some areas, for example expected capital receipts. The additional spending powers being discussed apply to Covid-19-related pressures only and to the years 2020/21 and 2021/22 and include:
 - enabling the use of capital receipts to meet one-off revenue funding pressures, including Covid-19 related costs
 - extending debt repayment periods over the life of the asset rather than the contract period
 - allowing councils to take a repayment holiday in either 2020/21 or 2021/22 to defer internal loan fund repayments.
- The Scottish Government has also provided flexibility in its guidance on how councils use specific education and early learning and childcare funding. This includes Pupil Equity Funding and deploying early learning and childcare funding flexibly to deliver critical services for children and families. The extent of how these individual flexibilities may be used by each council is as yet unclear. Each council will need to consider the flexibilities available and decide how funding is used. This may depend on the extent of unavoidable commitments already made, for example in early learning contract commitments to parents.

The total net cost of Covid-19 in 2020/21 will be challenging for councils but is likely to be managed through savings, use of reserves and additional funding provided by the Scottish Government. Nevertheless, significant uncertainty remains around future financial planning and support

- The report [Local government in Scotland: Financial overview 2019/20](#) estimated that funding announced by the Scottish Government by November 2020 would meet 60-70 per cent of the revenue cost pressures identified by councils, with total costs and funding still uncertain. Councils have taken steps to manage this position in-year through delivery of savings and use of reserves. Subsequent announcements of additional funding by the Scottish Government at the end of February 2021 indicate that the total net cost of Covid-19 in 2020/21 may now be fully covered. However, a significant element of this additional funding is non-recurring and ringfenced for specific purposes. Councils may still have cost pressures in other separate areas, including in core services, which may not be met by this specific funding. This therefore puts increased pressure on councils to identify ways to close remaining budget gaps with limited flexibility in some of the funding allocated.
- Funding of councils beyond 2021/22 remains uncertain. Currently, funding is being provided incrementally, and this presents challenges for councils in planning effectively. Significant levels of grant support have been provided by the Scottish Government in 2020/21, but it is not yet clear whether this will continue in future years as the impact of the pandemic develops. COSLA anticipates that the impact on council finances will be felt for years to come, particularly in relation to recovery of income streams and collection of council tax debt. Furthermore, the flow of funding in late 2020/21 has created an additional administrative burden for the Scottish Government and councils in awarding and accepting grants and completing the related reporting requirements. This may have an adverse impact on councils' ability to respond to local needs should a large proportion of future funding come with similar conditions.

Lessons learned

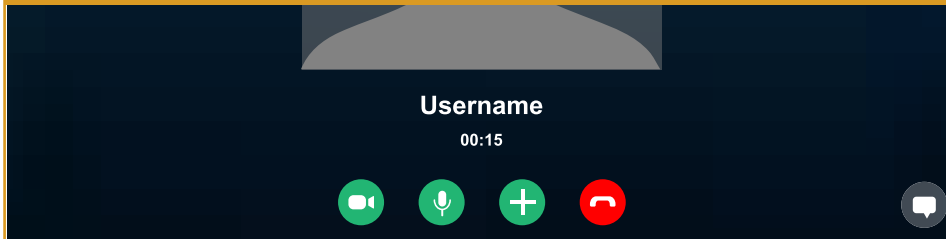
The timing and nature of funding for local government is creating pressure and uncertainty for councils beyond the current financial year. Funding is being provided incrementally and the lack of certainty regarding future budgets makes effective short- and medium-term planning very difficult for councils. Covid-19 will have long-term impacts on councils and the communities that they serve. Councils are likely to require additional support to address the challenges of remobilising services, and supporting social and economic recovery. If additional funding is provided with specific conditions or is ring-fenced for specific purposes councils will then be forced to make difficult prioritisation decisions with potential negative impacts on other services. A lack of flexibility in future funding may lead to a differential impact on service delivery and exacerbate existing financial sustainability risks.

As reported in Local government in Scotland: Challenges and performance 2018, services such as planning, cultural services, environmental health and roads have borne the brunt of service cuts in recent years. The trend has been one of larger reductions to relatively smaller service areas with no change in real terms to social care and education spending. The increased financial constraints created by Covid-19 are likely to create a further risk to recovery should smaller services face further cuts. This will adversely affect councils' ability to provide importance services that people and communities rely on.

Councils made swift changes to governance arrangements

- Councils moved quickly to a revised/suspended schedule of meetings. Many councils held only meetings dealing with urgent business, while some councils maintained other committees. Several councils established a Covid-19 committee, which was helpful in providing key information and updates in relation to council business during the pandemic.
- Some councils have since moved to virtual committee meetings, while others have operated blended or socially distanced meetings. There was some initial inconsistency in how councils made decisions, with some establishing 'emergency' or 'special' committees to take key decisions that would otherwise have been taken by other committees, and others delegating key decisions to senior officers. All 32 councils now have arrangements in place for remote meetings and are not relying on delegation to officers or emergency committees to the extent seen early in the pandemic.
- The Improvement Service notes in its November 2020 paper ['Transitioning to the new normal: Political Governance'](#) that around half of councils are now livestreaming meetings or allowing members of the public to participate. Many of the councils that do not currently livestream or allow the public to participate are exploring options for doing so. Microsoft Teams is the most popular platform, and some councils are using it in conjunction with other technology. Although not in breach of the provisions in the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020, a lack of public participation restricts the openness and transparency of decision-making.
- The new governance arrangements introduced by councils have created greater flexibility and safer conditions for officers, elected members, and the public. However, councils will be required to decide on the longer-term sustainability of these arrangements. Some feedback gathered by the Improvement Service notes that remote meetings are taking longer and need additional support staff to facilitate them, placing greater strain on resources. Councils will face difficult decisions in resourcing governance arrangements that are flexible and safe but that also enable effective scrutiny and decision-making.

Case study 18

Aberdeenshire Council

Aberdeenshire Council was able to ensure minimal disruption to democratic processes from the beginning of the pandemic as it already had the technology in place.

This enabled a smooth transition to virtual meetings by Skype and remote working – ahead of other councils. One committee meeting was postponed, but otherwise all council meetings continued as scheduled. The council produced guidance for elected members, chairs, committee officers and board members to ensure proceedings ran as smoothly as possible. Guidance was also available to help the public understand how meetings would be conducted and recorded, and how they could participate in meetings and access those recordings.

Lessons learned

Councils have reacted well to the changing environment and have acted quickly to implement new governance arrangements that are safe and flexible. Although delegation to officers and emergency committees was undertaken at some councils in the early stages, it is welcome that all 32 councils now have arrangements in place to support remote meetings. It is likely that the requirement for remote meetings will continue for some time, therefore all councils should ensure that public participation is facilitated as soon as possible to provide openness and transparency in decision-making.

The pandemic created significant challenges for councils in financial planning and reporting

- There was inconsistency in the pace at which councils prepared financial updates during the initial response phase of the pandemic. Early monitoring of councils' websites found limited reporting of financial considerations. A few councils prepared detailed financial analysis papers in the early months of the pandemic, but most were slower to make this information available to the public. There has since been an improvement in the pace at which councils are providing financial updates, but the cost projections and assumptions included remain uncertain as the situation continues to develop.
- Councils will need to revise their medium-term financial plans. The wide range of financial and service demand pressures councils faced before the pandemic still exist, alongside a new set of future challenges created by the pandemic. These include restarting services and dealing with backlogs, developing new services and strategies to address the long-term harm caused to communities by the pandemic. In 2019/20, auditors reported greater uncertainty in current financial planning arrangements at councils due to Covid-19. Medium-term financial plans will now need to be revised by all councils to consider additional financial pressures and updated funding arrangements, as well as updated savings requirements and financial assumptions.
- The strategic uncertainties around Scotland's public finances and fiscal plans may also create challenges for councils in updating their own financial plans. Prioritising services such as the NHS may have an adverse impact on local government funding levels. In the [Local government in Scotland: Financial overview 2019/20](#), we reported that between 2013/14 and 2019/20, local government funding underwent a larger reduction than the rest of the Scottish Government budget over the same period. The Scottish Government will have to make difficult fiscal decisions in response to the pandemic and this may exacerbate the financial uncertainty challenge for councils.
- The differential impact of Covid-19 on some groups and communities has implications for the Scottish Government's approach to the distribution of funding. It needs to be targeted to those most in need. As reported in the [Local government in Scotland: Financial overview 2017/18](#), we recognise that a review of funding distribution is difficult in times of reduced budgets and financial challenges, as there will inevitably be some councils that end up with smaller allocations of funding, putting further strain on already tight budgets. Nevertheless, as the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic develop it is increasingly important that the Scottish Government and COSLA assure themselves that the funding formula remains fit for purpose.

Case study 19

Inverclyde Council

Inverclyde Council prepared a 'Covid-19 Financial Considerations' paper in late March 2020.

This paper was used to highlight the financial pressures and supports relating to Covid-19 and to seek delegated powers where required to release funding. All councils are now preparing regular Covid-19 related financial updates for elected members and the public.

Lessons learned

Councils' medium-term financial plans will need to be updated to reflect the significant financial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although considerable challenge and uncertainty still exists, it is important that councils have a plan in place that identifies medium-term impacts so that steps can be taken to manage risk and plan effectively. Good medium-term financial planning, based on modelling various future scenarios and focusing on clear priorities, is more important now than ever.

Local government in Scotland: Overview 2021

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