



## Community response to COVID-19

### Research commissioned by Scottish Community Alliance

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#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

During May 2020, Scottish Community Alliance interviewed nine community led organisations, each based in different parts of the country, facing different challenges, and each having played a pivotal role in their community's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose was to identify any common themes and lessons that could be learned from their experiences, which might inform the collective approach of government, local government and communities during the continuing response, recovery phase and beyond.

#### **2. KEY FINDINGS**

[Community anchor organisations](#) have been able to react to the COVID-19 pandemic in ways that have ensured local needs were assessed and responded to quickly while simultaneously adapting their operations to cope with a fast changing environment. The particular role that anchor organisations play within their communities, coupled with their ability to adapt quickly, has enabled them to develop specific responses which are tailored to local needs and provide an effective means of ensuring that the emergency resources have reached where they are most needed. They have leveraged additional support for their community during the crisis both by drawing on their deep-rooted connections with the myriad local groups in their area and by drawing on the support of

wider, regional networks through which they have been able to funnel national funding down to the local level.

### **a. Preconditions for an effective local response**

The research suggests that the most effective and efficient responses were:

- where there was a well established local anchor organisation with confident leadership and governance, experience in tackling a broad range of local issues, strong connections to wider local networks, access to resources, and widespread recognition as the local anchor;
- where the local authority recognised the role of the anchor organisations, trusted them to respond to changing needs quickly and offered support to make best use of the available resources;
- where each organisation/agency that was involved in the response understood their role clearly and acted within their remit, whilst supporting and enabling others to respond within their respective remits;
- where the funding bodies in the public, private and charitable sectors understood and utilised existing national and regional networks, and trusted these relationships to distribute funding effectively to where it was most needed;
- where the myriad local groups - many informal, unconstituted, unfunded, and operating below the radar of public bodies but well known locally - were supported by local anchor organisations to access the necessary resources at an appropriate level.

### **b. Role of community anchor organisations**

#### **i) Direct service provision**

Anchor organisations quickly responded to the pandemic and provided a wide-range of direct support to households within their communities. The support they provided included food parcels, prescription deliveries, wellbeing packs, information and advice, online activities and hotlines for those in need.

*“We were able to respond instantly. We already had good partnerships in place. We’re already known and trusted by our community.”*

*Leah Black, WHALE Arts Centre*

Anchor organisations reported that the pandemic exacerbated existing problems in their community, deepening the issues faced by those already affected and increasing the numbers impacted. Anchor organisations were already aware of and addressing their community’s needs - including access to food, social isolation and wellbeing - which meant they were well placed to quickly respond.

*“We were already focused on the key needs of our community which have been exacerbated by COVID-19, but which existed beforehand – food, wellbeing, local connections.”*

*Martin Avila, Kinning Park Complex*

In the first couple of weeks of lockdown, demand for services rose very quickly. Bute Oasis food bank reported a 500% increase in demand for food parcels in the first couple of weeks, which has steadily reduced as friends, family and neighbours have stepped in to help.

*“That first week I thought I was living in a nightmare. Need increased dramatically almost overnight.”*

*Angela Callahan, Bute Oasis*

As the initial demand for food-related services gradually eased, concern rose about the impact of the pandemic on loneliness and wellbeing. These issues are starting to be addressed through community activities, distributing wellbeing packs, signposting those in need onto professional support services, providing befriending and youth work services remotely, conducting welfare calls, and moving activities such as choirs and art classes online.

*“Mental health is the next challenge... Some of our staff are vulnerable anyway and ....now they’re dealing with difficult situations on top of their personal response to coronavirus. They are doing phone calls and video calls, supporting the mental health of many who are really suffering, e.g. carers.”*

*Bridie Ashrowan, The Broomhouse Centre*

## **ii) Coordinating local provision**

In addition to providing services directly, some anchor organisations have been coordinating and supporting the activities of a wide range of hyper-local groups, many of which are informal and unconstituted, utilising their local knowledge and connections to avoid duplication and gaps in provision and thereby maximising the use of scarce resources. In some cases, existing networks have extended their geographical reach or brought new organisations in, and new networks have been formed where needed. This has enabled effective coordination of a localised response.

*“This pandemic has been an opportunity to discover how we should be working together and confirms that we can do so. We know what we’re good at, and we can do that, whereas others are good at other things, and can do those. We can meet as much of the need as possible, as effectively as possible.”*

*Fatima Uygun, Govanhill Baths*

Anchor organisations have also been able to help bridge the gap between groups that find it difficult to coordinate with others, or where they are struggling to make progress alone. For example, Tannahill Centre provided guidance on social distancing to volunteers and introduced a one-way system to improve the flow of people around their housing estate, thereby reducing the potential for unintended close physical contact with others. Providing this local leadership has made everyone safer whilst leaving space for self-organising, hyper-local groups to continue to meet other needs within their community.

*“We divided the building up so that each section has one volunteer group working within it, and the new pathways around the building reduce physical contact between people. Everyone’s been really positive and helpful with this approach!”*

*Jamie Mallan, Tannahill Centre*

The coordination of activity clearly needs to sit at a very local level. All communities have different needs and require different responses. For example, Galson Estate in the Western Isles tackled the complex issue of ensuring that deliveries reach the right place in a community where houses are not numbered at a time when deliveries have become much more important, whereas other communities have focused on food parcels or isolation. The needs of communities cannot be

assumed and need to be grounded in the reality of life for that place with the engagement of local people.

*“It is important to still engage and consult with your community... rather than assuming need that might not be there. We want to add value and support people to be independent rather than stepping in to rescue those who maybe don’t need rescuing.”*

*Lisa Maclean, Galson Estate*

Anchor organisations have seen this as an opportunity to strengthen their own networks and levels of cohesion across and within neighbourhoods. Groups who may traditionally operate within different networks to one another are being pulled together, finding common ground and offering mutual support which it is hoped will outlast the pandemic.

*“New groups have joined our network who we wouldn’t normally reach, such as church groups. It’s exciting to think what this group can deliver long-term. Some areas have less provision and this group is allowing us to build capacity rather than stepping in, which wouldn’t be sustainable.”*

*Leah Black, WHALE Arts Centre*

### **iii) Connecting upwards and accessing resources**

Anchor organisations have provided a key connection between the many formal and informal community groups and those with greater resources, such as network organisations and public bodies. This connectivity that community anchors have been able to provide between the hyper-local and local networks, and the regional and national efforts has ensured that resources have been effectively distributed and the specific needs of local areas are addressed.

*“The good working relationships we already have in place means we’re able to connect local groups with each other and with other organisations, such as HIE or the Highland Council. That helps everyone deliver more and information reaches the right people.”*

*Joanna Wawrzyczek, Kyle and Lochalsh Community Trust*

One example is regarding the distribution of funding. Scottish Government and other funding agencies have, in most cases, been able to quickly distribute funding to trusted national partners such as DTAS and SCVO, who in turn have been able to quickly distribute funding to key anchor and community organisations that they trust. These organisations have then been able to further distribute funding to a wide range of hyper-local groups, who may not have bank accounts or legal status, ensuring that funding gets to where it is most needed within a community.

*“These groups have a great reach into the community and contact with people we don’t otherwise know, but they can’t access funding and were finding it difficult to coordinate services effectively between them.”*

*Jamie Mallan, Tannahill Centre*

A degree of mutual trust has been the key to this effective delivery of funding with minimal bureaucracy being attached to the process. The cascading of funds through existing and trusted relationships means that not only has it been distributed quickly, but also that the people most in touch with what is needed on the ground have been empowered to make decisions about where to use the funds.

*“We’ve received funding from the Scottish Government which we can use in ways that we think is most useful during this emergency. We’ve set up a local helpline, are doing food collection points, food distribution, food vouchers, a range of online and telephone events, community newsletter and much more.”*

*Joanna Wawrzyczek, Kyle and Lochalsh Community Trust*

Unfortunately not all funding has been as well delivered and there have been issues of duplication. Several organisations reported frustrating efforts to apply for the Third Sector Resilience fund, which contrasted starkly with the ease of applying for other funds.

*“The Third Sector Resilience Fund has been a challenge, we had to apply three times to get £20k. Other’s gave up. Look at who is distributing the money - do they really have the community links to do it well?”*

*Fatima Uygun, Govanhill Community Baths Trust*

Some organisations also reported information overload, where several networking organisations and public bodies had sent out emails containing the same information.

*“The amount of emails from various sources containing the same information was quite overwhelming. I can understand that every organisation was trying to be useful but as a coordinator of a grassroots community response to Covid I was already extremely busy setting up measures to support our community. The time it took to wade through the emails from various organisations could have been used more usefully doing something else.”*

*Joanna Wawrzyczek, Kyle and Lochalsh Community Trust*

### **c. Ability of community anchor organisations to respond**

A number of factors were consistently referenced in the interviews as to why community anchors have been able to respond effectively to this crisis :

- **Organisational capacity.** Organisations with strong networks and trusted relationships were able to quickly self-organise and access resources. Those with experience in dealing successfully with social issues understood how to address the crisis and benefitted from competent leadership and strong governance built up over years.
- **Financial capacity.** Organisations with reasonable reserves did not need to wait for additional external funding to take action. Those with self-generating income sources and proven ability to fundraise were most able to respond and had greatest confidence in their ability to recover from the financial impact.
- **Independence.** Anchor organisations are able to be flexible and adapt their operations quickly and easily, especially if they possess reasonable levels of earned income. This allowed them to redeploy staff to where they were most needed and change services to meet needs quickly.
- **Experience.** Anchor organisations are relied upon to provide information and leadership at a community level and are experienced in meeting the needs of communities during the pandemic, which were predominantly an exacerbation of existing needs rather than new

needs.

- **Trusted organisations.** Anchor organisations enjoyed high levels of trust and credibility within their communities and individual members of staff had already established relationships with some of the most vulnerable people. The organisations felt trusted by funders and other partners which gave them confidence to adapt their approach and operations in whatever way they felt was required.
- **Access to resources.** Their pre-established networks and trusted relationships enabled them to access the necessary resources such as PPE, buildings, funding and food donations.

#### **d. Working with local authorities**

The experience of working with local authorities during the emergency response has been varied. Where there was a pre-existing positive relationship, communication was strong and the anchor organisations felt they were being trusted to deliver a response, there were many reports of highly successful collaboration.

*“The council applied for FareShare food delivery, they receive the delivery and their volunteers divide it up with our input to ensure the right items get to the right people, such as baby food going to the mother and baby group”.*

*Jamie Mallan, Tannahill Centre*

*“The council responded to a request for £60k to refurb old computers within a week! It can be done that quickly. Now children can do schoolwork at home. Why can’t that happen normally?”*

*Fatima Uygun, Govanhill Community Baths Trust*

Some local authorities have been able to adapt their services and provide additional support to communities, coordinating effectively with local anchor organisations. For example, the Tannahill Centre worked with the local authority to coordinate delivery of a new service. The local authority, as a trusted and highly visible partner organisation, provided the local helpline and then passed on information about newly identified needs to the Tannahill Centre. They in turn coordinated with a number of smaller groups in the area to decide who best should meet those needs.

*“The local authority set up a helpline and they pass down needs to local groups, which has been helpful. We’ve taken on more staff but couldn’t do more than we are.”*

*Martin Avila, Kinning Park Complex*

However, it was also widely acknowledged that staff within some local authorities have had difficulty in adapting to remote working practices and have been under significant pressure to deliver core services. In these cases there are lessons to be learnt about how local authorities engage with community anchors and other grassroots organisations.

*“We need to develop much more localised ways of working, bringing public bodies and communities together, so that when we need it we have the relationships, trust and ways of working we need in place already.”*

*Martin Avila, Kinning Park Complex*

Other local authorities have made decisions without engaging with communities which have had unintended impacts. For example, public buildings could have been used by community groups rather than being closed.

*“Public bodies were encouraging but slow to respond. They can’t meet needs the way we can. We’re able to be agile, from staffing to how we use facilities.”*

*Bridie Ashrowan, Broomhouse Centre*

#### **e. Impact on community anchor organisations**

The pandemic has placed significant additional pressures on local anchors and other community organisations through an increase in demand for services and a concomitant reduction in income. Consequently there is an increased level of uncertainty amongst anchor organisations about the future and their ability to continue meeting local needs in the longer-term.

*“Other needs haven’t stopped because of this happening. We have the potential to lose £58k of income across the year because the building isn’t open to the public. We need to ensure we have funding in place for when we can get back to normal.”*

*Leah Black, WHALE Arts Centre*

Although they have been able to access new sources of funding in the short term, and there has been great flexibility from most existing funders, there are few opportunities to apply for funding which is unrelated to the pandemic. Funding for projects to be delivered later this year or in future years would normally be in the development phase at the moment, but that has not been possible due to these funding streams being diverted, paused or closed, and because of reduced internal capacity. Self-generated income sources have been necessarily reduced or closed, such as building rental or training programmes.

*“We usually fund the need through the [charity] shop, but obviously it’s closed. I’m very worried about money now. The community has been amazing and donated loads, but they’re not wealthy.”*

*Angela Callaghan, Bute Oasis*

Another significant impact has been on the mental health and wellbeing of frontline staff. They are dealing with the impact of the pandemic upon themselves and with the emotional impact of the pandemic on those they support. Many have been redeployed to areas of work they are less familiar with and where they are putting their own health at some risk. In many cases their jobs have also become less secure due to the financial pressures facing their organisations.

*“Mental health is the next challenge, both in the community and with our staff who have been... dealing with difficult situations on top of their personal response to coronavirus.”*

*Bridie Ashrowan, Broomhouse Centre*

One benefit of coordination at a local level has been to ensure those working at grassroots have themselves been to some extent supported emotionally and practically to cope with the pandemic and the impact of the work they are doing, but this requires ongoing consideration.

*“We have great networks locally through a new network we set up in SW Edinburgh, called Go Beyond, and that’s been essential... for getting advice and support from each other. We’ve used a distributed leadership model and as a result, we don’t feel alone.”*

### **3. RECOMMENDATIONS**

In order to move forward and capitalise on the role that community anchors have played thus far, key themes/asks to come out of the interviews are:

- **Provide anchor organisations with secure and sufficient operational core funding.**

Funding bodies across the public and charitable sectors should continue being flexible with existing funding allocations and should identify how they can best support these key organisations in the immediate and longer term future, including the reopening of non-pandemic related funding streams. The impact of the pandemic upon the ability of anchor organisations to generate their own income as well as on their financial reserves needs to be recognised and addressed.

- **Work with communities to make decisions and allocate resources.**

Communities should be enabled during the recovery phase to make their own decisions and develop tailored responses which meet their needs and enable local economic and social recovery. It is important that those involved in responding to the crisis, including public bodies and funding organisations, are seen to be working with, and not doing to, communities.

- **Continue building trust and working in partnership at a local level.**

The recovery phase response should build on the current localised decision-making approach, led by anchor organisations with public bodies playing an enabling role. Trusting and understanding the mutual benefits that this approach brings will ensure an effective response as well as contributing to increased social cohesion, local capacity and greater resilience for the future.

- **Devolve decision making and resource allocation to the lowest practicable level.**

Decisions should be taken and activities coordinated at the most local level practicable. The pandemic has demonstrated that decisions taken by those who understand the needs of their communities lead to better outcomes. For the same reason, responsibility for allocating resources should be as close to communities as possible. This requires relationships based on trust between national government and local authorities and between government at all levels and community organisations.

- **Continue to build resilience at a local level.**

Community anchor organisations and other local groups need to be trusted to make decisions, take risks and manage failure in order to build the experience and resilience needed in times of crisis. Communities can respond to difficult issues if they are properly resourced and trusted to do so. They need to be financially secure enough to employ skilled long-term staff who can develop the personal relationships and local experience needed to address serious issues.

### **4. CONCLUSION**



Anchor organisations appear well placed to play a leading role in the recovery phase of the pandemic if they are given the appropriate resources, trust and support. They can and do meet the needs of their communities beyond the immediacy of food and heating including growing mental health needs, promoting wellbeing, providing access to trusted information, tackling social isolation and building social cohesion. However, many are currently at some financial risk as we move beyond the crisis phase because their sources of income have significantly reduced. At the same time, local needs have increased in scale and complexity. Providing the appropriate support for anchor organisations at this point means we will not only support the pandemic recovery efforts but build resilience and capacity for the future.

## **June 2020**

### Appendix 1

With thanks to the following organisations who gave their time to be interviewed :

Broomhouse Centre

WHALE Arts Centre

Kinning Park Complex

Bute Oasis

Galson Estate

Govanhill Community Baths Trust

Tannahill Centre

Kyle and Lochalsh Community Trust