

COVID-19 highlights the need for local governance reform in Scotland



Despite much emphasis being placed on what the handling of the pandemic tells us about relations between London and the devolved governments, the situation has also exposed a number of neglected public policy areas within Scotland, writes [James Mitchell](#).

The prism through which we look at the world will determine what we see. In common with discussion of Scottish government and politics generally, much attention in Scotland during this pandemic has focused on relations between London and Edinburgh, on 'policy divergence' and the implications for the future of the union. A number of commentators who have seen the pandemic as either strengthening or weakening the union would, no doubt, have reached the same conclusion regardless of the phenomenon. But the pandemic offers other lessons if looked at from a different perspective: it highlights neglected areas of public policy and the need for reform of local governance *within* Scotland.

The manner in which both Edinburgh and London were caught off guard and were slow to act had little to do with intergovernmental relations or Scotland's constitutional status. While the Scottish Government may have performed better latterly in its response to the crisis, its record in prevention and preparedness has been no more impressive than that of the UK Government. And while grand policy statements are made by senior politicians and officials at the centre – whether that is London, Edinburgh, Cardiff or Belfast – the real test lies in the experiences of citizens and communities. The mechanistic image of a lever being pulled by someone in high office resulting in a flow of goodies and changed outcomes has been mercilessly exposed as misplaced during this pandemic.

COVID-19 has required collaboration across institutions and policy spheres, vertical and horizontal but not just between London and Edinburgh but far more importantly within Scotland. It has highlighted weaknesses that already existed as much as thrown up new challenges. One clear lesson ought to be that silo working makes no sense. This interdependence has highlighted key failings in multi-level governance and public health.

The Scottish care system (though *system* seems a misnomer) resembles a Heath Robinson contraption in which the moving parts do not join up. Add in under-resourcing and an under-regulated private care home sector that now seeks to blame government for its failings and we begin to see how the tragedy witnessed in care homes came about. A plethora of institutions are involved in care but the question of whether the current arrangements are appropriate needs to be addressed.

Too little attention has been paid to local governance in Scotland, how we engage with our citizens and ensure effective delivery of services. In this crisis, Scottish local authorities have played a significant role in ensuring the continuation of essential local services and responses to the crisis despite decades of weakened local capacity. The backdrop has been local government spending cuts that exceeded cuts experienced by the Scottish Government in its grant from London. The Scottish Government has engaged in a devolution of penury, reducing resources available to local government while increasing demands and responsibilities. Each of Scotland's 32 local authorities set their budget back in March based on assumptions that no longer hold true. Income to support services will be adversely affected with the economic impact of the pandemic. Income from fees and charges for a range of services have been lost and the economic impact on council tax income is difficult to estimate but will create challenges. At the same time, the demand for and cost of additional services have increased considerably. Scottish Government has been slow in providing additional financial support for local government. These challenges will not end with the flick of a switch. Income streams will take time to return to pre-pandemic levels. Local economies will have to be rebuilt, continuing support will be required for vulnerable citizens and communities including shielding those at risk into the future.

Local authority staff have been remarkably flexible in working practices with staff redeployed to assist where necessary. The Thursday 'Clap for Carers' was a belated recognition of the broader range of support that is being provided but even this still ignores the breadth and depth of public service support at local level. Work has continued and increased for carers, social workers with responsibility for vulnerable people, local resilience staff, staff administering grants available during the pandemic, administering and distributing a Food Fund, providing free school meals when schools have been closed, assisting with the early release of prisoners into Scottish communities, supporting the particular needs of groups including the travellers community, waste disposal staff, staff in the education service preparing for online and future teaching needs, staffing of hubs especially set up to assist during the pandemic to look after vulnerable children and children of key workers, working around a planning system designed for a very different context. The range of services can be all too easily passed over and taken for granted. Moreover, it will be easy to move on as the crisis eases, fail to learn lessons and address the need for reform of local governance that should have become obvious.

Progress on reforming local governance in Scotland had been moving slowly. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Scottish Government had been jointly consulting on reform and had identified the need for a comprehensive reform. Three 'empowerments' had been agreed to inform the reform agenda. **Community empowerment** would involve facilitating and encouraging more individual and community involvement, focusing especially on those seldom heard, in decision making from setting agendas to ensuring that implementation occurs. **Functional empowerment** would involve entrenching subsidiarity, integration and collaboration across institutions to break out of silos, creating more flexible and less complex institutions capable of delivering services. **Fiscal empowerment** would bring greater transparency sustainability and fairness to local decision making with less dependence on grant. The pandemic ought to push local governance reform up the agenda.

Every major party in Scotland has contributed to the process of centralisation and this has undermined local responses to the crisis. Scotland's constitutional status is an important issue but not at the cost of considering the need for reform of local governance. The need for major reform incorporating all three empowerments has been highlighted. The danger is Scottish politics will simply return to the lazy obsession with relations with London.

About the Author



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