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Pandemic times:
Social enterprise and mutual aid during COVID-19

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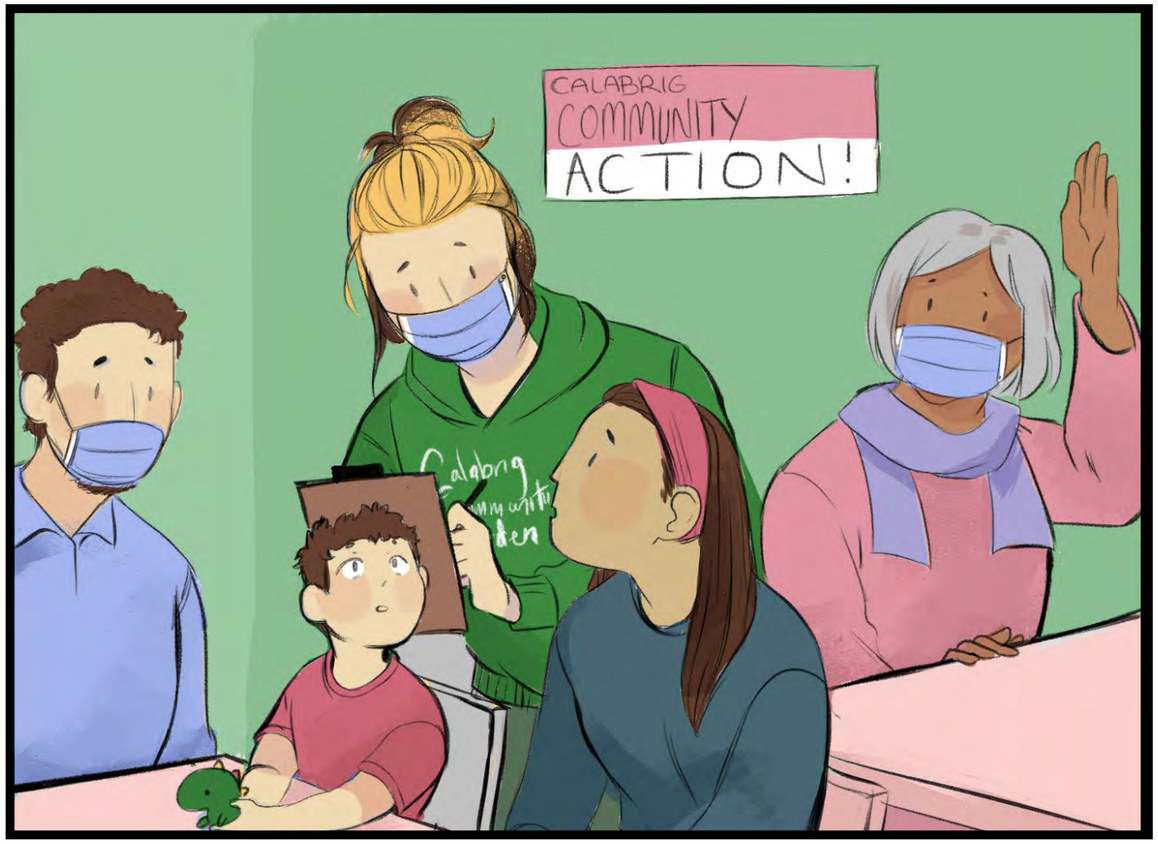


The 'stay at home' orders introduced across the UK as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic between March and May 2020, and January and April 2021, created unprecedented challenges in everyday life and a crisis around how best to support individuals and families at this time. Both informal community groups and more formalised third sector organisations like social enterprises were praised for how they came together to support their communities. Some early reports on the sector's pandemic experience were optimistic that this action led to an increased understanding of the 'contribution and value of the third sector'.[1] Moves away from siloed ways of working within the community and voluntary sector, and across sectors, were also praised and even cited as the impetus for the formation of initiatives like Scotland's Strengthening Collaboration Partnership. However, it remains unclear to what extent this recognition, or the various initiatives it has inspired, will result in longer-term change in how voluntary and community action is valued and supported in Scotland.

This briefing paper brings together research from two projects based in the Yunus Centre for Social Business and Health. Solidarity in a Time of Crisis, explored the ways mutual aid groups - formed in response to the COVID-19 crisis- developed during the pandemic, and this briefing draws upon findings from this project published in *Public Management Review*. Recovering Scotland, used oral history to document the experiences of social enterprises during COVID-19. The testimony presented here is based upon interviews recorded with people based across several Scottish local authority areas, who continued to work in social enterprises throughout the pandemic. The initial findings presented here will also inform a chapter in a forthcoming monograph *Scotland's Social Economy, 1970-2020*. The briefing outlines how social enterprises and mutual aid groups have been adapting their services since the beginning of the pandemic, making points of comparison between their responses, and describing occasional challenges social enterprises and mutual aid groups experienced when working in partnership. The paper also highlights anxieties in the sector that productive and collaborative ways of working initiated in response to COVID-19, that could be valuable for addressing the cost of living crisis and fulfilling Scottish Government commitments to Community Wealth Building and a Wellbeing Economy, are regressing to 'business as usual'.

Crisis responses

Interviews with social enterprise practitioners outlined how some organisations had started to move towards digital and flexible working in the years preceding the pandemic, in recognition of the benefits to staff and service delivery. This meant the foundations for home working were already in place, maximising the number of services that they could continue to run through lockdown. However, for those who had not begun this shift, it meant they had to make changes, that would have usually taken 2-3 years to plan and implement, in 2-3 months. Even social enterprises that reported feeling relatively prepared for lockdown, described some restructuring of their staff teams as they moved people from services that were no longer running to crisis-support services. Social enterprises reported that shifting to build teams around projects rather than departments facilitated a 'less silo-ed' way of working, where 'solutions were prioritised over systems'. As part of these shifts, a reduced amount of physical office space and an increase in hybrid working has reportedly become established practice, with organisations keen to maintain a focus on staff wellbeing. This was under consideration as a permanent change by most of the organisations that had made this shift at the point of interview (Autumn 2021).

In contrast, rather than overhauling how they operated, mutual aid groups were establishing systems and organisations from scratch. During the first lockdown, mutual aid groups were quick to mobilise and develop social media channels for internal coordination across all volunteers, projects, and neighbourhoods. Mutual aid group members who reflected on the help they provided to vulnerable people early on often said things like, 'I wonder how they would have managed, especially in the early weeks before the council arrangements were in place'. Compared to their ability to organise quickly, for some mutual aid group organisers, local authority services were slow or mismatched.
One participant likewise commented that Third Sector Interfaces (TSIs) and other volunteer coordinating bodies 'couldn't get themselves organised...events overtook them and much like the council, [they] were playing catch-up from that point onward'. Importantly, more informal community-based organisations like community enterprises and some social enterprises often found themselves operating more like and alongside mutual aid groups because they had similar philosophies around 'getting things done' that perhaps more formalised third sector organisations could not fully embrace (Rendall et al, 2022). The Third Sector Interface Scotland Network have reflected and reported on their role during the pandemic, and what helped and hindered their ability to respond. Comparing these experiences indicates that no matter how rapidly local authorities and larger social enterprises felt they were adapting their services, at times, this still felt slow to those on the ground who were receiving requests for support from individuals and families in crisis.

Food delivery

The distribution of food was a crucial element of supporting communities through lockdown. As one interviewee from a social enterprise described, 'needs changed so organisations adapted to meet those changes'. For example, social enterprises adapted their cafes to run meals-on-wheels services instead. Several of the interviewees reported having to overcome the limitations of existing foodbanks for new groups of people facing loss of income and increased vulnerability to poverty. They therefore set up services complementary to the existing foodbank, with food supplied by private businesses, local authorities, and FareShare.

As part of this adaptation, social enterprises also provided a food delivery service for people shielding, using crisis funds to cover the cost of vans and extra fridges. Similarly, mutual aid groups set up local food points even after most other mutual aid group services were winding down, because the need for food was so significant. Mutual aid food-delivery services ranged from responding to smaller requests – like providing a particular condiment for a family in need to help their kids eat – to doing full shops for people who were shielding. One group in the study also developed a more complex hot meal provision on top of a food box service when it became clear that many people in the community didn't have the knowledge or tools needed to cook.

Moving out of crisis, organisations worried about individuals and families who were dependent on the greater availability of free food during the pandemic and the risk of a sudden drop off if services closed. Attempting to mitigate this, one social enterprise started charging a small amount for use of this service, with a new emphasis on 'addressing food waste'. This model was inspired by a council-run service in another area, but COVID-19 provided the impetus to get the service off the ground. The theme of adapting to changing needs was

also highlighted by another interviewee, who reported that they had worked far more closely with the Department of Work and Pensions, foodbanks, and Citizens Advice than pre-pandemic as unemployment increased in previously affluent areas. In one case, the food point service initially established by the mutual aid group without any formal legal structure, constituted as a SCIO where the volunteers became trustees. This ensured that they could access funds from organisations like the Big Lottery who had been unwilling to give money to the mutual aid group previously due to their lack of official bank account and formal operating procedures. Other mutual aid groups had been more successful in receiving grants, particularly if they operated more as a coordinating body of many existing community-based organisations. Regardless of their status or ability to access money, mutual aid groups across Scotland expressed concern around the exit of their services and one organiser even hoped that with the slow decline in service provision by mutual aid groups that social enterprises would step in to fill gaps (Rendall et al, 2022). What began as a response to changing needs during lockdown has, in some cases, shifted into permanent services as the cost of living crisis leaves people struggling to pay food bills.

Digital Poverty

As social enterprises attempted to move services online in order to operate safely through the pandemic, organisations became increasingly aware of the extent of digital scarcity in remote and rural areas, and digital poverty in some of the communities they operated within. Organisations reported that they were working 'hand to mouth' to tackle issues of digital poverty ntil the Scottish Government made resources available in August 2020. Social enterprises worked not only to deliver mobile phones and laptops to people who needed them, but also to ensure these pieces of technology were set up with the apps and programmes people required and provided written instructions and doorstep tutorials on how to use them. Maintaining contact required social enterprises to use whatever technology was most accessible to their beneficiaries, for example, using Xboxes rather than mobile phones in some instances. It was also necessary to mix digital contact, with short but frequent socially-distanced meetings. Social enterprises did report some advantages to moving services online. The ability to meet digitally meant that it could be easier to engage with people in remote and rural areas. As it became possible to re-start face-to-face work, social enterprises were grappling with how to maintain elements of online delivery for both rural beneficiaries and those who were anxious about resuming face-to-face contact.

Since mutual aid groups were largely developing services from scratch, there was less focus on how existing services could remain accessible to users. Nevertheless, one group did develop a technology programme where community members could donate old devices that would then be refurbished - if necessary- and then redistributed within the community, similar to the work of many social enterprises across Scotland. Services addressing digital poverty were not as common among mutual aid groups as food provision was, but since the groups generally responded to different types of requests, they would, for example, help top up phone cards so that individuals could use data to get access to more formalised support that was being delivered remotely. In terms of supporting those who were experiencing social isolation, which is discussed further in the next section, many mutual aid groups simply had a phone line and used the phones for isolation support calls and other ongoing services.

Mental Health

Social enterprises supporting mental health, not only adapted services to digital delivery, but increasingly recognised the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on mental health, and that increased support would be required going forward. Interviewees roundly regarded the second lockdown as more damaging than the first on mental health, and worried that while critical issues were addressed during the pandemic there had been a storing up of long-term issues. One organisation reported that in March 2020 they had employed one youth counsellor to support mental health in young people; by August 2021, they were employing five youth counsellors. Uncertainty surrounding the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on mental health meant the resources created to support mental health during lockdown also aimed to build resilience for the future. One interviewee commented that it was impossible to know 'how long the ripple effect is going to be felt.' For this reason, one mutual aid group also set up a bereavement service recognising that there would be a transition from immediate isolation support to ongoing community support to process all the loss. Further, multiple mutual aid groups coordinated campaigns in their communities about pulling together and reaching out to ask for help when needed.

From the perspective of many third sector organisations, mutual aid groups were not equipped to handle complex mental health challenges. For example, one manager from a formal voluntary organisation said in an interview that the, 'irony is that the organisations that are best set up to [address these complex mental health issues] were the pre-existing ones... but they're the very ones that have been constrained.' At times, mutual aid groups acknowledged that formal organisations could be better positioned to handle certain cases. However, the needs for support were so significant that one mutual aid group coordinator said they 'often had requests referred to [them] from the council/social services, with no corresponding material support to do the work, and often for people with very complex care needs.' From the perspective of the mutual aid groups, they would have appreciated some acknowledgement of the ways in which their support in communities was vital, beyond what they perceived as tokenistic mentions from public sector actors. At times, mutual aid groups felt councils were actively combative, trying to, from the perspective of mutual aid groups, 'nitpick' over certain issues, often claiming mutual aid groups who were proceeding without guidance were doing harm within communities. In response to the criticism that volunteers within the mutual aid groups could not responsibly provide the services they were engaged in, one local coordinator said: 'We had two, three retired social workers, we had trained counsellors that were volunteering, so we actually had the skills already there...there was an enormous amount of experience that we already had' (Rendall et al, 2022). These frustrations suggest that, despite a high volume of work to adapt working practices during COVID-19, local authorities, the third sector, and mutual aid groups were all experiencing a high level of demand in this area, putting stress on the systems they were working within, and relationships between the sectors. Furthermore, the deterioration of collaborative relationships points to a lack of mechanisms to make best use of skilled community volunteers.

Long term challenges

Funding

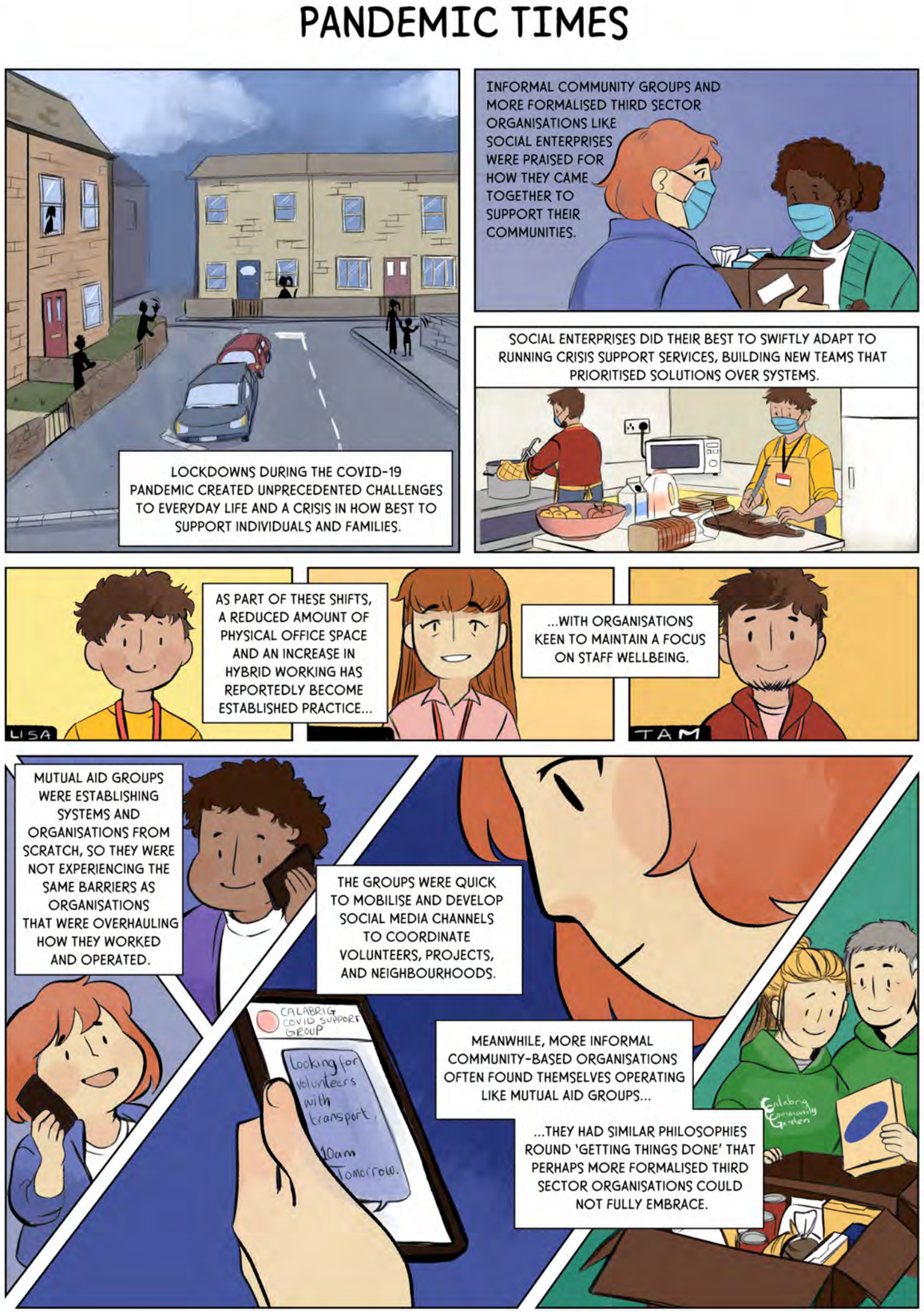
The interviewees reported a mixed picture in terms of how social enterprises had adapted to the changing funding landscape during COVID-19. Social enterprise support organisations felt their work was crucial in the initial weeks of lockdown and were reluctant to furlough staff essential to supporting communities through the crisis. However, the loss of income streams during the pandemic meant many social enterprises found it increasingly difficult to pay staff wages. The Adapt and Thrive fund, announced by the Scottish Government in September 2020, was mentioned by several interviewees as crucial to the survival of the sector. There was consensus among those interviewed that furlough, and Adapt and Thrive funding had saved the sector, with one interviewee commenting: 'if we hadn't had furlough, our sector would be gone'. Interviewees involved in putting these funding packages together described how programmes that ordinarily would have taken months to develop were put together far more quickly because everyone was available and prioritised engaging with the meetings necessary, creating a greater momentum.

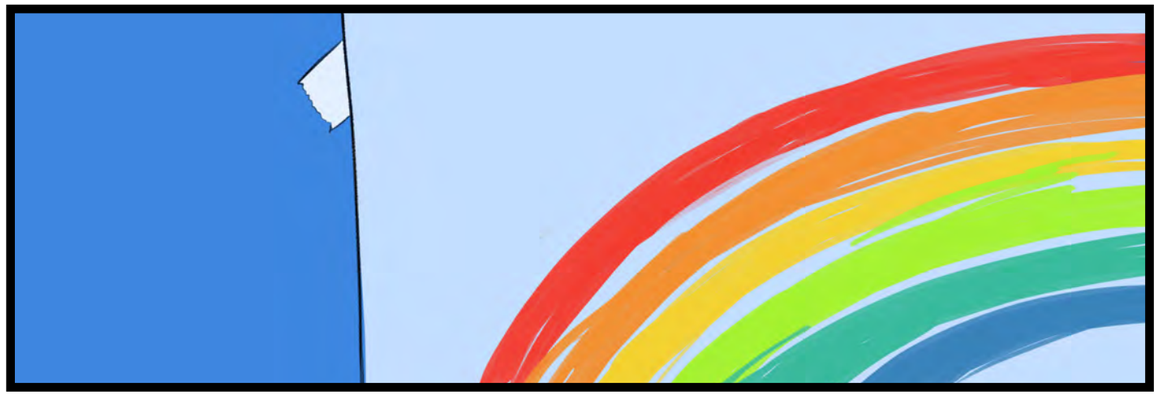
In addition to the government funding provided through furlough and Adapt and Thrive, several interviewees discussed the greater flexibility that funders allowed through the pandemic as crucial to keeping services running. This included being less prescriptive about what funds could be spent o and signposting to other sources of support. This allayed initial concerns over capacity to meet funder requirements and ability to complete paperwork. In some cases, mutual aid groups benefited from flexible funders who were interested in supporting a broad array of community activity. Perhaps intuitively, mutual aid groups were also propped up by community members' donations, but due to their structure, formal funding from government or other bodies was not often the key focus of their work. Many of their volunteers were on furlough so instead of figuring out how to pay staff, they were figuring out how to maximize available donations and respond to requests. Collaborating with formalised charities on joint grant applications allowed some mutual aid groups to receive grant funding they would not have been able to access independently. Some interviewees expressed anxiety that the most challenging time for social enterprise had not yet arrived, especially for organisations that had to attempt to resume trading without emergency grant funding (Adapt and Thrive and The Community Recovery programme closed at the end of 2021).

Networks and partnerships

A number of the social enterprise interviewees reflected on increased contact and collaboration with other social enterprises throughout the COVID-19 crisis. This was partly motivated by the desire to make sure they were all coping with the challenges of lockdown, but also to discuss how to better coordinate services. In the case of mutual aid groups, while they sometimes found partnerships difficult to forge, many groups did describe productive collaborations with other organisations and social enterprises due to the breakdown of siloes and the urgency of action. Some of the most important learning from the mutual aid groups arose when notions of competing interests could be removed from collaborative arrangements, resulting in fast-paced engagement. There was a hope that collaborations between existing organisations and groups in the community would continue. Interviewees also reported that an increased level of collaboration meant that organisations, in particular social enterprises, started to raise bigger questions about ways of working, issues of equality and diversity, and levels of community engagement. However, the interviews reflected a sense of frustration that state services had initially shut down during the pandemic, which, from their perspective, felt like local authorities were leaving communities to deal with the crisis. Commenting on how communities had increased their activity over the course of the pandemic, one interviewee said, 'I think they've stepped up because they've had to'. Further research is required to understand the pressures local authorities were working under. The sheer range of experiences reported when describing relationships between local authorities, social enterprises and mutual aid groups -from highly collaborative to highly antagonistic- suggests potential for better ways of working, and the difficulties of maintaining consistency across all local authorities.

Across the interviews, there was a sense that some of the flexibility opened up during COVID-19 was beginning to shut down. For example, resilience groups that had been crucial touch points for local networks during lockdown were beginning to 'fade away'. Some interviewees connected these frustrations to longer terms shifts in systems of governance in Scotland, citing moves away from local authority based networks and an increase in bilateral





working between government and the third sector.
Thinking about the relationship between social enterprises and shifting community capacity during COVID-19, one social enterprise reported that the volunteers they recruited in the first lockdown included furloughed local authority workers skilled in community work. During the second lockdown, this shifted to include those with a longer-term capacity for volunteering and those people have shaped the new services adapted to meet the needs of the community as the pandemic has continued. Some of the interview participants put this capacity for community work in broader historical context, reflecting on cuts to the community development posts within local authorities in the 1990s, which they described as the 'bonfire of community development'. For this participant, the community volunteers celebrated through COVID-19 fulfilled roles similar to local authority funded community development officers in the 1980s and early 1990s.
As research connecting austerity and rates of mortality begins to emerge, the insight of social enterprise practitioners, many of whom have worked within local authority and third sector posts across their careers, can provides crucial knowledge across social services for researchers and policymakers to consider.

Conclusions

Combining research into the experiences of social enterprises and mutual aid during COVID-19 reveals that while the experience of the pandemic was to some extent about adapting to a moment of crisis, it also further exposed acute and ongoing inequalities in Scotland's communities. In responding and adapting to changing needs, both social enterprises and mutual aid groups put in a huge amount of work in a relatively short space of time, and there are examples of extensive collaboration to ensure support to communities was maximised. However, this was far from a frictionless process, and it is clear that local authorities and larger third sector organisations at times felt constrained in their ability to act, to the frustration of smaller, more agile organisations.

Reflecting on the experience of COVID-19, the need for a third sector ecosystem that includes a plurality of formal and informal activity and an ability to work with local authorities is clear. What remains unclear is how the value of this plurality -that is so crucial for maintaining knowledge of community need and how best to shape and deliver community and public services- is translated into sustainable funding and infrastructure. There is an urgent need for clear discussion and planning on the roles and expectations of national government, local government, the third sector, communities - how they relate to each other and how funding and support flows between them. Reports from the social enterprise sector highlight how the pandemic provoked new thinking in how the sector could operate. Combined with reports that argue that community ownership promotes community resilience, the experience of COVID-19 has the potential to provide productive insight into how to implement current Scottish Government policy on Community Wealth Building and a Wellbeing Economy across the longer term. In the shorter term, as the cost of living crisis exacerbates community needs and the difficulties of small local organisations to stay operational, the capacity for community action that proved so crucial during the pandemic cannot be taken for granted.

Notes and References

[1] TSI Scotland Network: TSI COVID-19 Learning Project: A focus on the roles played by Third Sector Interfaces during COVID-19 (May 2021), p12.

Rendall, Jack, et al. "Relationships between community-led mutual aid groups and the state during the COVID-19 pandemic: complementary, supplementary, or adversarial?." *Public Management Review* (2022): 1-21. https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2022.2084769

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