

5 October 2021, 17:30-18:45

## **OVERVIEW**

This online event offered Forum members an opportunity to hear from John Swinney, Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for COVID Recovery, and Cllr Alison Evison, COSLA President, on their ambitions for Scotland's public services in the context of the national COVID Recovery Strategy. This session, hosted by SLF Co-Chairs, Sally Loudon, Chief Executive, COSLA, and Paul Johnston, Director General Communities, Scottish Government, gave participants the opportunity to ask questions, share reflections, and explore the key role of leadership in implementing the strategy. This event was attended by a wide cross-sector of members representing Local Government, Third and Voluntary sector, Health and Social care, Education, Sport, Transport, and Enterprise. A short note of the key themes from the session is noted below.

## **FORUM DISCUSSION & QUESTIONS**

### **General reflections on the strategy**

- The strategy received a broadly warm welcome from the Forum.
- There have been some excellent innovations in many different locations. Participants reflected on how these might be scaled/shared across Scotland more widely.
- Improved engagement with and across private and third sectors, in terms of thinking and planning, as well as delivery, will be critical.
- Local Recovery Plans have evolved collaboratively, but are often only aligned across agencies on a thematic basis, rather than been truly embedded in Local Outcome Improvement Plans.
- There is something about creating an `irreversible delivery culture` and also moving from basic collaboration to really using our collective expertise. Shared objectives are what brings us together - meeting like-minded partners to continue the good work.
- If we want to encourage wider collaboration then we need to be able to show we are operating really differently in delivering this strategy.
- Outcomes will be achieved by the approaches that we take - asset based, collaborative, designed, co-produced - not in `having more meetings and developing more strategies`.
- Sometimes in our striving for consensus we lose out on what real innovation can bring. We need that real innovation, especially when combined with closer partnership working, as well as a more strategic coordination of energies.

### **The pandemic has shaped how we work**

- Each Local Authority has evolved distinct governance arrangements in recovery. Participants thoughtful about how this freedom/flexibility to take an approach that works locally will be retained in the new Strategy.
- During the pandemic, the national direction from SG was very clear and that went hand-in-hand with the freedom to deliver by working nationally, regionally, locally in a variety of ways that matched that context. Normal processes and controls were relaxed.
- Is there something in this in terms of `normal` working in a complex statutory setting which prohibits the positive, collaborative actions we took during the pandemic which were free of process and control? Did the collective view and tolerance of the risk that we all faced enable the successes that we saw?

- During the pandemic the rules were changed and developed as we went along. As we move into recovery, what rules need to change/stay the same?
- Trust and empowerment were key and should remain so moving forward. Some areas feel they are seeing a retrenchment, where, for example, third sector organisations are `less trusted` and being asked to evidence the things they do and have always done.
- At the same time, others have built upon the partnership working which reached a new level of maturity throughout the pandemic. Relationships have never been stronger, and whilst there is still scope for improvement, some colleagues are already seeking to move to local multiyear funding arrangements to provide stability. This is often at leaders own risk, but remains `the right thing to do`.
- Many third sector organisations are continuing to take risks. `Stability can only aid recovery and wider change is needed for the challenges ahead`.
- In some areas, parties across the system just did what was needed without `endless discussion`, or layers of bureaucracy, with each playing to their strengths.
- It is easier when you have a single enemy - Covid - but it demonstrated what was possible and how we could be fleet of foot, if we really want it. The challenge is to focus in the same sustained way with inequality and poverty as the new enemy.
- The impact of Covid on poverty was very much the unspoken issue during the early waves of the pandemic. The response was delivered without breaking the rules but rather by changing them as we went along. We can do the same again – but what is our risk appetite? How do we sustain that appetite for risk and change?
- The public, whom we serve, both noticed and appreciated not just the collaboration and shared delivery through Covid but the value-led leadership, mutual support and respect which accompanied it - and they are looking for more of it.

### **Poverty crisis**

- We need to view poverty as a crisis - just as we did Covid - a crisis which has solutions - and sustain the energy and focus needed, and make brave, cross-sectoral decisions. Poverty is holding us back. What is it we need to do to make as much of a contribution to this effort as we can?
- Like Covid, poverty is also a health issue. Those living in poverty have lower life expectancy. Are we are using the same structures as pre-Covid to address the crisis of poverty. Despite best efforts, the old way of working took us to a place that none of us would have viewed as a success. What makes us think this time will be different?
- Prism of risk changed during pandemic – how do we keep the positives in responding to poverty. From a health perspective, the response to Covid has widened the inequalities that already existed. Need to look into the intergenerational nature of poverty and address wealth creation rather than income. Like-mindedness has kept us where we are and should be avoided at all costs. We need to understand where our differences are.
- We need to simplify, pivot and task in a very direct and sustained way. To address poverty, you need to address wealth - how it's generated and how it's distributed.
- What will motivate businesses to tackle poverty in our communities? We need to explore this more, and a greater overall alignment is needed with the private sector, especially on key issues such as labour market shortage and employability.

### **Support for business**

- How, as we develop fair work and good jobs, do we ensure banks support businesses? Business sustainment and economic growth seem to be fundamentally important foundations for the recovery.
- Businesses have an important role to play in leading recovery and we would want to `see and feel them shoulder-to-shoulder` alongside public services in delivering the Strategy.
- The impact of Covid on businesses was multifaceted. Many businesses continued, and indeed accelerated under Covid (for example, logistics). Others suffered sizeable system shocks (to role, culture and form) which will impact on current modelling and recovery.

- Covid has already led to lasting changes. We need to understand how we can build on this change (e.g. carbon footprints, 20 minute neighbourhoods) and adapt to a reality where public infrastructure developed for a 'pre-Covid era' is no longer relevant. The real scale of this change is yet to be determined.
- An example was shared of how a local business had changed its focus when recruiting staff to a more person centric, less rigid, and role driven approach. There is a new focus on collaboration, as well as a potential to deliver across sectors and for policy and delivery to be brought together.

### **Procurement**

- One of the key barriers to creating good quality relationships between the public and third sector is the rigidity of procurement. Processes which can seem logical on paper, but in practice actually undermine our ambitions to collaborate, to be asset-based and to be flexible and innovative. It would be interesting to explore new and different partnerships and approaches that can be used by the public, private, and third sector.
- Feedback from public sector colleagues is that they are often as frustrated by the rules as third and private sector counterparts. There are different approaches that can be taken - but public sector colleagues need given greater confidence that something other than "the normal" is legitimate. Outcomes in procurement tend to come after compliance - how do we ensure outcomes take precedence?

### **Young people**

- "Jeopardy of a lost generation" - a lot of urgency still needed beyond Young Person's Guarantee, and so it is positive to see the focus on young people and wellbeing.
- The example of digital skills and the pandemic demonstrates there is capacity to exceed expectations if the 'right chemistry comes together'.
- However, digital exclusion remains an important issue. We have seen the gap widening and futures for young people 'disappearing'.
- It was noted that the Joint approach to Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing is working well, and has utilised task and finish groups to deliver against challenging timelines, with young people central to both the board and working groups.

### **Audit & scrutiny**

- Although there is a need for urgent action, this is a long term project. There is scope for innovation on progress reporting and scrutiny and an opportunity to try new approaches – these might involve local communities, or at a national level our universities, the Scottish Parliament and Audit Scotland.
- An audit approach, that moves at pace and in partnership in its appraisal of the Strategy, rather than taking a retrospective lens, would be very helpful. This would also enable us to prioritise and pivot the work as we go.
- Important to strike the best balance between innovation and risk, and that we explore how audit and scrutiny partners can support the right environment to encourage more of the approach we saw in the early days of responding to the pandemic.
- Reflection that scrutiny partners get asked to look at things that aren't going so well - need to think about perhaps changing that focus.

### **Other general comments**

- The third sector and social economy can often be amongst the most innovative sectors, taking risks and challenging the status quo. We therefore need to keep the conversation broad - share the challenges and invite responses to harness that energy, creativity and skill. Sharing the opportunities to deliver these shared objectives also offers an opportunity to contribute to the third sector's overall resilience.
- It is really important to recognise the steps beyond collaboration, where genuinely collective leadership and action can emerge. Leadership in Scotland at the moment

contains so many people leading in non-formal roles, leading without title and one of the key things to consider is how do we move towards these leaders?

- The answers will not be the same across Scotland. We need to identify barriers; what is helping or hindering inequality to develop? There is a need to engage with other people, and not just the same people – and not just talking – doing. `A shared vision and willingness to collaborate from every person in an organisation is essential for it to work`.