LEADING THE LOCAL RESPONSE TO COVID-19: THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the response to Covid-19 evolved throughout 2020 local authorities rapidly adapted and demonstrated innovation across a number of areas. This research aims to highlight and support this response by both sharing information and learning from across Ireland and internationally, and informing longer-term practice and policymaking.

Five main themes were identified from this research, which cover broad areas of the local government response to Covid-19:

- Maintaining service delivery and business continuity.
- Coordinating community supports.
- Reopening society and supporting local economies.
- Operating in a system of multi-level governance.
- Maintaining local democracy.

These themes are discussed in detail in Chapter 3, and the main messages for the sector are outlined. A summary of the main messages arising from the research are outlined below.

MAIN MESSAGES

Essential services were maintained in an unprecedented environment

Local authorities responded very well overall to minimise the disruption to workloads and ensure the delivery of essential public services. Contingency plans and an established communications approach were vital to support the initial response. The close working relations between many local authorities and local statutory and voluntary bodies were also crucial in implementing additional social and economic supports.

Essential services provided by local authorities include water services, environmental services (e.g. parks and playgrounds, waste services, environmental regulation activities), roads maintenance (including public lighting and traffic management), flood defence works, provision and maintenance of social housing (including homeless services), certain community and economic development services, emergency services (fire, civil defence and building control), planning services and certain library services. Local authorities have continued to provide these services in some capacity during the pandemic.

Local government demonstrated capacity to adapt and innovate. However, gaps in support and mixed internal capacity and skills are areas that may need to be examined and strengthened accordingly

In the face of crisis, local authorities showed their capacity to adapt and rise to the challenge. Staff were willing to temporarily adjust and provide support where needed

across the organisation. ICT teams worked tirelessly to ensure that adequate systems and support were in place. While this level of response is not sustainable in the long-term, it demonstrates great potential for what local authorities can achieve.

There was good collaboration between local authorities to deal with different aspects of the response, with examples of local authorities sharing resources and working closely together at regional level. However, the crisis also showed that some local authorities were better equipped than others in terms of their capacity and skills. Particularly for smaller local authorities, increased support from the central level would be beneficial; this may take the form of financial support for investment in additional staff and/or ICT, or non-financial supports such as encouraging shared services or pooled resources between local authorities.

While it is too early to assess how working practices will change in the long-term, it is likely that how councils operate will be different post-Covid. This is not just as a direct result of the pandemic, but many initiatives that local authorities had already been working towards were accelerated during 2020, such as remote working, online streaming of council meetings and the greater use of digital resources for public participation. Adequate supports need to be available to both staff and elected members to adjust and adapt to new ways of working.

Local and regional emergency management structures and business continuity plans worked well, but should be reviewed in light of the Covid-19 response

After the pandemic, or when circumstances allow, it would seem necessary for many local authorities to review internal procedures and policies. Future-proofing and building resilience should be an organisational priority post-Covid. For example, public health emergencies may need to be included on more corporate risk registers.

Local and regional emergency management structures are well established, and proved useful in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. Consideration should be given to the democratic nature of these structures, particularly when responding to 'complex emergencies' (Rode and Flynn, 2020), as well as the alignment with national structures.

Financial uncertainty remains, and has proven challenging

Uncertainty remains about the state of the Irish economy and public finances post-Covid. Concerns were expressed by interviewees over a reduced future rateable base and the potential loss of other local income. Local authorities need greater certainty and longer-term assurances regarding central funding to compensate for any lost income and increased expenditure. A more general review of local authority funding and financing is warranted, particularly given previous commitments to review the Local Property Tax and the commercial rates system.

Local government acted as a leader and coordinator of community supports

Local government acted as a leader and coordinator in the face of a major crisis. The Community Call Response Fora, led by local authorities, facilitated coordination and collaboration between a diverse range of stakeholders, who were required to work together to respond to the crisis. This experience can be built upon to enhance community partnerships and engagement in local areas, particularly in anticipation of future crises, e.g. climate-related events such as flooding. Consideration should be given to the continuation of community supports structures, using the Community Call Response as a template.

Capacity building should be a key focus for local government to ensure the sustainability of any additional community support role post-Covid. This not only includes local government staff, but also elected members, Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) and Public Participation Networks (PPN) members, and all those involved in providing community supports. Local authorities and LCDCs should also review and reflect on Covid-19's impact in their areas and the lessons learnt. This could help inform the development of new Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs) and other relevant local authority plans for the future.

Local government acted as the local arm of the State and successfully implemented many new schemes

Local government effectively demonstrated its role as provider of local services through the implementation of national schemes introduced in response to Covid-19. One example was the roll-out of the Business Restart Grant by the Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs), which underlined the flexibility of the local government system in being able to quickly respond to policy demands from central government and effectively deliver a new national scheme at the local level.

A major strength of the local government system in Ireland is its proximity to citizens and knowledge of the local area. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, local government has acted as the local arm of the State in many aspects. In addition to providing services and access to Government-led schemes locally, keeping the public informed of official guidance and advice became a core role of local government. Local authorities launched communication campaigns aligned to national campaigns but targeted at local areas, including outdoor signage to encourage social distancing and adherence to public health restrictions.

Local innovation and collaboration was demonstrated

Local authorities are very experienced at dealing with emergencies and this lends itself to working in an innovative and practical manner when needed. 'We're pretty good innovators when we need to be, when forced into responding to a situation, you have that attitude and collective approach,' remarked an interviewee. From dealing with internal issues, to responding to local needs, innovative solutions were found.

A strong sense of urgency and collaboration, with local groups and stakeholders working together, characterised local government's response to the economic crisis brought by

Covid-19. The various plans and actions undertaken by local authorities were designed to support the Government's *Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business* by building confidence among business owners and the public. Local authorities listened to local concerns and needs, and responded in different ways to facilitate the safe reopening of local businesses.

The positive impact of the 2014 reforms in relation to local economic development was evident

There was a broad consensus that the structures introduced by the local government reforms of 2014 in relation to local economic development enabled local authorities to quickly and effectively support local businesses on the ground. LEOs were the main point of contact for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) at local level, with good networks and working relationships already in place before the pandemic. In addition, work to develop innovation hubs, hot desk facilities and to improve broadband coverage had progressed under the LECPs, all of which enabled members of the public to work remotely.

Central sectoral coordination is strong and provided consistency

The County and City Management Association's (CCMA's) central coordination role was positively viewed in general, by interviewees at both the local and central level. Some interviewees expressed the desire for better communication and more of a balance between top-down and bottom-up decision-making. This balance can be difficult to achieve, and is a common issue in systems of multi-level governance. Consistency in service provision and access to services no matter the geographical location is needed, with a level of discretion afforded to local authorities. A post-hoc review of experiences with regard to specific areas of service provision, and the overall communications and governance structures, would shed more light on individual issues and help local authorities to prepare for future emergency responses.

Central-local relations can be built upon

Further review and research of the central-local level relationship during the crisis is warranted, particularly in relation to the role of, and consultation with, the local government sector. Local government, as a sector, needs to build on the momentum gained by its strong response to the pandemic.

Responding quickly while respecting the need for transparency and accountability of decision-making

Achieving the balance between responsive and timely implementation of measures while respecting the need for inclusivity and transparency is difficult. Local authorities worked hard to respond to the Covid-19 crisis in a timely manner, introducing temporary measures (as discussed in section 3.3, for example) and operating in an uncertain and unprecedented environment. While the Covid-19 pandemic is still ongoing at the time of writing, and is likely to continue for some time, temporary measures (e.g. public-realm initiatives such as new traffic systems) should be periodically reviewed and adjusted as necessary.

1
INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 is the disease caused by a new coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2. The World Health Organisation (WHO) first learned of this new virus on December 31st 2019, following a report of a cluster of cases of 'viral pneumonia' in Wuhan, the People's Republic of China. By the end of 2020, there were over 79 million cases and sadly over 1.7 million deaths worldwide (WHO, 2020). Ireland confirmed its first case of Covid-19 on February 29th 2020, and the trajectory of the disease during 2020 followed a pattern of waves or surges, similar to international experiences.

As the response to Covid-19 evolved throughout 2020, local authorities rapidly adapted and demonstrated innovation across a number of areas. This research aims to highlight and support this response by both sharing information and learning from across Ireland and internationally, and informing longer-term practice and policymaking.

This research study was conducted in two phases. The first phase was completed in July 2020 with the production of four case studies (Shannon et al., 2020):

- Answering the 'Community Call': A case study of the establishment of community support initiatives during Covid-19.

- An overview of cultural life in Limerick during the Covid-19 pandemic.

- A case study of social inclusion in Cork during the Covid-19 pandemic.

- Transport mobility during Covid-19: A case study of national and international responses.

This report is the outcome of the second phase of the research, which took place between July and December 2020. The aims for this phase were to document the local government response, to identify and analyse what worked well and what could have been improved, and to inform policy and practice.

1.1 METHODOLOGY AND REPORT STRUCTURE

The methodology for this report consisted of:

- Review of international literature and practice to establish a framework for the study and to inform the analysis of the response in Ireland.

- Review and analysis of local and national government plans and policies, and other relevant material, to help determine how local government responded, and assess the impact of Covid-19 on the sector.

- Interviews with key stakeholders.

All 31 local authorities were invited to take part in the research. In total, 20 staff members from 13 local authorities were interviewed. This included chief executives, directors of services, and others with specific responsibility for elements of their councils' Covid-19 response. Interviews also took place with staff members from the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA), the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD). All interviews were held either online or by telephone due to the Covid-19 restrictions. An online focus group was also held with representatives from the Association of Irish Local Government to gather the views of elected members on key issues.

The interviews and focus group took place during October and November 2020. The views captured reflect the thoughts and experiences of interviewees at that point in time, and focus on the impact of the first wave of Covid-19 and the 'reopening' of society and the economy that followed.

A brief chapter outlining the general context in which local government operates follows. Chapter 3 then presents the main discussion of the local government response, identifying a number of broad themes and outlining the main messages for the sector.

2
CONTEXT

This chapter provides some background on the local government response to Covid-19. The national response is briefly discussed, as the national-level governance structures and policy response are relevant to how local government responded in turn. An overview of the sectoral response of local government is then provided, which may be useful for readers who are less familiar with the sector. Finally, a short section on the international response, with a focus on the experience of local and regional governments, concludes.

2.1   THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN IRELAND

Ireland confirmed its first case of Covid-19 on February 29th 2020. The situation evolved rapidly over the following weeks. On March 12th it was announced that all schools, colleges and childcare facilities were to close for a two-week period. By the end of March, all non-essential businesses were closed and everyone was told to stay at home, with case numbers quickly escalating, unfortunately the first fatalities were confirmed as a result of the disease.

The trajectory of the disease, similar to experiences internationally, has followed a pattern of waves or surges, where case numbers and associated hospitalisation and, sadly, deaths have increased. In response, strict public health measures and 'lockdowns' have been introduced by Government as deemed necessary. Following the first wave and lockdown, by mid-June, Ireland had effectively 'flattened the curve'. However, case numbers began to rise again by the end of July, and the first 'local lockdowns' were implemented in counties Kildare, Laois and Offaly in August. Ireland has since experienced two subsequent waves, and further local and national restrictions.[1] A timeline of events is provided.

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1 The most up-to-date figures for the spread of Covid-19 in Ireland and geographical breakdowns can be found at: https://covid19ireland-geohive.hub.arcgis.com/

Timeline of key events in 2020 during the pandemic

- **29th February**, First case of Covid-19 in Ireland announced.
- **9th March**, Government cancelled St Patrick's Day festivals across the country. According to the authorities, Ireland was in the containment phase. By now, 24 cases had been reported around the country.
- **11th March**, The first death in Ireland linked to coronavirus was announced.
- **12th March**, Schools, colleges and childcare facilities were initially closed until 29th March. Limits were placed on the size of indoor and outdoor gatherings. All public and cultural amenities were forced to shut.
- **15th March**, All pubs were asked to close until 29th March.
- **18th March**, The Temporary Assignment Scheme was introduced for the public service.
- **19th March**, Government asked those over 70 years of age, and people considered medically vulnerable to Covid-19, to 'cocoon'. In effect, this meant staying at home and minimising social contacts.
- **27th March**, Additional public health measures were announced. 'Local emergency response will be led by local authorities,' declared the Taoiseach.
- **27th March**, A waiver of commercial rates for an initial three-month period was brought in for businesses forced to close by the public health requirements.
- **2nd April**, The nationwide Community Call was launched by the Government.
- **14th April**, The Minister announced a mortgage payment break for local authority mortgage holders for an initial three months. This period was later extended.
- **1st May**, Roadmap for reopening society and business was launched. It extended the commercial rates waiver for affected businesses. A commitment was made to local authorities to make up the rates shortfall to enable the provision of local public services.
- **May–July**, The publication of local authority plans to support local businesses and stimulate economic growth.
- **27th June**, A new coalition Government formed, following the February general election. Darragh O'Brien TD was appointed the new Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage.
- **23rd July**, Government launched €7.4 billion Jobs Stimulus Plan to help businesses re-open, and get people back to work and promote public confidence.
- **July–September**, Under the Government's July Stimulus Fund, local authorities received extra funding to aid economic recovery, targeted at those most impacted by Covid-19.
- **15th September**, The Government published its framework for restrictive measures, *Resilience and Recovery 2020–2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19*. The strategy was to be reviewed in six to nine months.
- **13th October**, Budget 2021 was announced. The Government allocated a funding package of €900 million to cover the cost of the commercial rates waiver until the end of 2020.
- **20th October**, Minister O'Brien signed an order to allow county and city councillors to hold meetings and vote remotely.
- **21st October**, Ireland placed under Level 5 restrictions for six weeks.
- **29th October**, Taoiseach launched 'Keep Well' campaign to support people and communities with minding their physical and mental health. Local authorities were key implementers of the strategy.
- **1st December**, The country was moved to Level 3 restrictions with modifications.
- **24th December**, Level 5 restrictions were reintroduced nationally.

2.2   THE NATIONAL RESPONSE

2.2.1   National governance structures

Ireland's public health response is led by the Department of Health and the Health Service Executive (HSE). The response is based on established plans, which are generally in line with global strategies guided by the WHO and the European Centre for Prevention and Disease Control (ECDC).

The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) for Covid-19 was established on January 27th 2020. The NPHET is based within the Department of Health, and chaired by the Chief Medical Officer (CMO). The NPHET oversees and provides national direction, guidance, support and expert advice on the development and implementation of a strategy to contain Covid-19 in Ireland. It advises Government on the public health aspects of what is a cross-Government response to Covid-19.

The NPHET's membership is multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral. Membership comprises representatives from across the health and social care service, including the Department of Health, HSE, Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC), Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA), Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA) and others with relevant expertise in health and/or other related matters. The membership of the team is assessed and adjusted as required in response to the development of the pandemic. The NPHET's work is supported by an Expert Advisory Group and a number of sub-groups, the chairs of which are members of the NPHET.[2]

Under the *Resilience and Recovery 2020–2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19* (Government of Ireland, 2020a), launched in September 2020, a 'decision making framework' for the medium term (to be reviewed in March 2021) was established to include:

- Covid-19 Oversight Group, chaired by the Secretary to the Government: Its purpose is to provide advice to Government on the strategic economic and social policy responses to the management of the disease and to consider the NPHET's advice. This group is also tasked with overseeing and directing the implementation of policy responses. Membership includes relevant Government Departments, the CMO and the Chief Executive of the HSE.

- Cabinet Committee on Covid-19, chaired by the Taoiseach: The committee assesses the social and economic impacts of the potential spread of Covid-19 and oversees the cross-Government response.

- Senior officials' grouping and sub-groups: The Department of the Taoiseach convenes these groups as required to drive implementation of the *Plan for Living with Covid-19* and to support preparations for the Cabinet Committee and the Covid-19 Oversight Group.

2   For more, see:
   https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/de1c30-national-public-health-emergency-team-nphet-for-covid-19-governance-/

2.2.2 Emergency management framework

Ireland has an established framework for responding to major emergencies. This multi-level framework can be implemented at local, regional and national level. At the local and regional levels, the major emergency management structures are put in place as needed during certain phases of Covid-19 restrictions. For example, under Levels 2 to 5 of the Government's *Plan for Living with Covid-19*, the regional major emergency management structures are instituted (CCMA, 2020). The emergency management framework has not been utilised at national level in response to Covid-19. This is discussed further in section 3.4.

2.2.3 National policy response

As noted by Kennelly et al. (2020), Ireland has followed a multi-faceted approach to the Covid-19 crisis involving measures to:

1) Limit the spread of the virus in the community and specific institutional settings.

2) Test and trace suspected contacts.

3) Ensure that there are adequate healthcare services and equipment available for people who become seriously ill with the virus.

4) Limit the financial burden on individuals and businesses due to impact of the virus.

In terms of the economic policy response, key measures included the flat-rate Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and wage subsidy schemes, which enable employers who have been significantly affected by the pandemic to receive supports to continue paying their employees. Other measures introduced were payment breaks on mortgages and personal and business loans, liquidity funding for businesses, guaranteed loan schemes and deferred tax payments, as well as moratoriums on evictions and rent increases (ibid.). A report by the Economic and Social Research Institute in April 2020 (Beirne et al.) found that Government measures, most notably the PUP, reduced the numbers exposed to extreme income losses by about a third.

Kennelly et al. (2020) conclude that Ireland's response to the Covid-19 crisis has been comprehensive and timely in many respects, while noting key areas of challenge, including the insufficient attention given to nursing homes and residential settings during the first phase of the pandemic, and the complexities of having two jurisdictions with different public health and testing strategies on the island.

2.3   LOCAL GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

This section provides a brief overview of the sectoral response of local government to Covid-19. In Chapter 3, certain elements of the response are discussed in greater depth, including local-level responses and innovations.

Business continuity and ensuring the provision of essential services where possible were the immediate priorities for local authorities. Individual local authorities instituted their own business continuity plans, while also being supported centrally by the CCMA, who coordinated the sectoral response and act as the main point of contact for the local government sector in its engagement with government departments, agencies and other organisations.

A services framework is now in place for the local authority sector (CCMA, 2020) that identifies which services should operate during each of the five levels of public health restrictions identified in the Government's *Plan for Living with Covid-19*. Standard Operating Guidelines have also been produced by the CCMA and the LGMA to assist local authorities in providing these services during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Essential services provided by local authorities include water services, environmental services (e.g. parks and playgrounds, waste services, environmental regulation activities), roads maintenance (including public lighting and traffic management), flood defence works, provision and maintenance of social housing (including homeless services), certain community and economic development services, emergency services (fire, civil defence and building control), planning services and certain library services. Local authorities continue to provide these services in some capacity during the pandemic.

Local authorities have also supported individuals, communities and businesses as part of a national effort to respond to the economic and social challenges arising from the pandemic. A snapshot of such supports was given by the Minister of State with responsibility for Planning and Local Government, Peter Burke TD, in December 2020:

- €609 million in Restart Grants administered to businesses by the LEOs.

- A commercial rates waiver to eligible businesses for the nine months since the pandemic took hold in Ireland, supported by a €900 million special funding allocation from the Government.

- Handling approximately 59,000 calls through the Community Call helplines, with over 12,000 calls regarding collection and delivery, and over 11,000 calls regarding social isolation.

- Providing befriending and outreach services as part of the Government's 'In this Together' and 'Keep Well' campaigns, as well as arranging a variety of activities to keep community spirits lifted and the public active during the pandemic.

- Adaptations to services including library services, contributing to over 40,000 new members registering for access to eBooks and eAudiobooks between April and October – a 129% increase on the previous year.

2.4   INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

The WHO first characterised Covid-19 as a pandemic on March 11th 2020. At that time, there were 118,000 cases in 114 countries, and 4,291 people had lost their lives. By the end of 2020, there were over 79 million cases and sadly over 1.7 million deaths worldwide (WHO, 2020), and the virus continues to spread globally at the time of writing. The sharing of information and resources, and collaboration on research and innovation, are all notable features of the international response to Covid-19. This collective effort was evidenced by the accelerated development and roll-out of Covid-19 vaccines at the end of 2020.

As a globalised society, we are accustomed to learning from, and sharing with, other countries. Organisations such as the WHO and the OECD, along with the European Union and Commission, quickly responded to gather information and share learning on the virus and health measures. With regard to the local level, examples of responses were readily available from the aforementioned organisations, individual country organisations and peer networks. Indeed, international literature and practice helped inform the research and interview questions for this study.

While local context is key, some general lessons can be learned from the local responses and experiences globally. The Covid-19 pandemic has had a strong territorial impact within countries as evidenced by the necessity for regional and local lockdowns. The virus's impact is unevenly felt within countries, with different territorial areas locking down to different degrees, at different times. The OECD and the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) commissioned a survey of representatives of subnational governments during June and July 2020 to better understand and assess the impact of Covid-19 on regional and local governments. The survey focused on governance, finance and recovery plans. Some of the key findings include (OECD and European Committee of the Regions, 2020):

- The majority of respondents (63%) expected the Covid-19 crisis to have a significantly negative impact on subnational governments.

- Respondents reported that a lack of technical means and equipment ('very challenging' for 46%), a paucity of financial resources at the subnational level (39%) and a lack of coordination with other levels of government (27%) were among the biggest challenges they faced in managing the health crisis.

- Only about one-half of respondents stated that coordination within subnational governments or with national governments was effective.

- In the short and medium terms, most subnational governments expected the socio-economic crisis linked to Covid-19 to have a negative impact on their finances, with a dangerous 'scissors effect' of increasing expenditure and falling revenues.

- About 86% of regions and cities expected a negative impact on their expenditures, especially a large increase in expenditures in the areas of social services (64%), social benefits (59%), support to SMEs and self-employed, and public health. Meanwhile, 90% forecasted a decrease in revenue, in particular tax revenue and user charges and fees.

- At the time of the survey, about 24% of subnational governments planned to ask for new borrowing to cope with the crisis. 13% of respondents had already applied for additional EU funds and 49% were considering doing so.

- Most subnational governments were still coping with the public health emergency at the time of the survey and a few had begun to implement recovery measures, through public investment stimulus and direct support to the economy.

- The Covid-19 crisis presented decision-makers with an opportunity to reshape regional development policy. The top three priorities were ensuring affordable, accessible, and quality basic services, including health, across all territories (76%); increasing regional resilience (69%); and reducing the digital divide across regions (68%).

The interviewees for this study expressed many similar concerns to the survey findings above, which is reflected in the discussion of the main themes in the following chapter.

3
THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Five main themes were identified from this research, which are discussed below and cover broad areas of the local government response to Covid-19:

- Maintaining service delivery and business continuity.

- Coordinating community supports.

- Reopening society and supporting local economies.

- Operating in a system of multi-level governance.

- Maintaining local democracy.

3.1   MAINTAINING SERVICE DELIVERY AND BUSINESS CONTINUITY

Given the unprecedented nature of responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, local authorities reacted remarkably well to ensure business continuity and the delivery of essential services.

In terms of the governance arrangements for the response, local authorities were well prepared. Existing major emergency and pandemic plans were consulted as business continuity and staff safety came to the fore. Crisis management team (CMTs) were put in place in late February/early March – made up of senior managers and other appropriate officials. The membership of the CMTs was often fluid, with expertise brought in from other sections as necessary. Initial CMT meetings took place daily to organise its approach to the evolving situation. The flow of guidance coming from the Government and the CCMA fed into the decision-making for CMTs.

A Local Authority Business Continuity Working Group was also established in March by the CCMA in order to ensure that there was a consistent approach across the local authority sector. This group continues to meet regularly to continually appraise the sectoral response and to ensure consistency with the restrictions and associated regulations. The work of this group, including the development of the *Local Authority Resilience and Recovery Plan for Living with Covid-19* (CCMA, 2020), was critical to the coherent response of local government to the pandemic.

The services framework put in place by the CCMA (ibid.) identifies which services should operate during each of the five levels of public health restrictions in the Government's *Plan for Living with Covid-19*. Standard Operating Guidelines were also produced to assist local authorities in providing these services during the crisis.

3.1.1   New working arrangements

Like many organisations and businesses across the country, a major challenge was presented to local authorities in moving rapidly to new working arrangements. Local authorities deliver over 1,000 services, so the identification of the essential services to deliver during the initial lockdown was a priority. The profiling of statutory and non-statutory work across the different sections was a big undertaking. In some local authority service areas such as community, heritage and economic development, much of the work could be done remotely. However, given the

nature of certain services, in areas like corporate, emergency response, housing, roads, waste and water, it was necessary for some staff to either be in the office or to continue with their outdoor duties. Careful consideration had to be given to how these staff could work safely. In addition, there was a duty of care to protect vulnerable staff members. For many local authorities, the procurement of basic materials like hand sanitiser and personal protection equipment (PPE) proved a challenge early on.

Ordinarily such a fundamental change in how staff work would involve a consultative, phased and structured process. However, the gravity of the situation left little time for such preparation. As noted by an interviewee, their local authority was not well positioned at the start of the pandemic to enable staff to work remotely. However, others were better prepared. Cork County Council, for example, had a working group already looking at remote working before the pandemic struck, and its groundwork proved very helpful. This early challenge was largely overcome by the procurement of IT and the establishment of temporary arrangements to enable remote working.

3.1.2   Communications

The volume of guidance and information issued by the NPHET and the Government during the initial lockdown was high. In an uncertain context, clear communications from the CMTs to staff, councillors and the public were vital. Many of the interviewees spoke about this initial focus on communications. Being clear with staff on the local authorities response to the unfolding pandemic was a priority: details on the implementation of employee safety measures, the continuity plan for service delivery, and what new working arrangements would be put in place. Equally important was regular communication with councillors, particularly given the initial suspension of council meetings and the new operating environment for elected members (see section 3.5 for further discussion on this issue).

In addition, local authorities communicated heavily with the public directly. The experience of managing local emergencies was crucial as an established media approach was followed to quickly ramp up communications. A mix of online and traditional media was used. Interviewees spoke almost in terms of a mass communication campaign being undertaken: 'We did twice as many communications as normal'; there was 'constant messaging – our social media hits and engagement hugely increased.' Very practical information was disseminated to communities: what local services were available; how to contact each council department; updates on public health advice; useful local contact numbers; how to apply for the Restart Grant. Indeed, one interviewee noted how local government is uniquely placed to communicate locally, but on a mass scale: 'The thirty-one local authorities have the country covered. All local authorities know the local journalists, and media channels. So they're able to disseminate the national message.'

3.1.3   Finance and funding

An obvious element of maintaining service delivery is finance and funding. Many of those interviewed expressed deep concerns over their local authority's income post-2020. Some referred to lost non-commercial rates income, such as car park charges, whilst at the same time incurring additional costs such as those for PPE. Indeed, some local authorities

have been forced to use their financial reserves. Whilst the Government's commitment to make up the rates shortfall for 2020 was welcomed, uncertainty about future funding remained at the time of our research.

The ongoing restrictions associated with Covid-19, and the implications of Brexit, place much uncertainty around Ireland's economic outlook for the coming years. It is likely that many exposed businesses will not reopen in the aftermath of the pandemic and that this impact will be felt unevenly across the country (Daly, 2020). In turn, this will reduce the rateable base for councils and influence decisions around the delivery of public services. As an interviewee stated, 'There's no assurance for 2021. This made the budget process extremely difficult. Trying to present a balanced budget on an unknown/unstable income profile for 2021.' The recurring issue of how local authorities are funded has been again thrown into the spotlight due to the narrow local income-base and reliance on central government funding.

3.1.4   Main messages
Essential services were maintained in an unprecedented environment
Local authorities responded very well overall to minimise the disruption to workloads and ensure the delivery of essential public services. Contingency plans and an established communications approach were vital to support the initial response. The close working relations between many local authorities and local statutory and voluntary bodies were also crucial in implementing additional social and economic supports.

Gaps in support, and mixed internal capacity and skills are areas that may need to be looked at and strengthened accordingly

There was good collaboration between local authorities on different aspects of the response, with examples of local authorities sharing resources and working closely together at regional level. However, the crisis also showed that some local authorities were better equipped than others in terms of their capacity and skills. One interviewee, for example, remarked that their organisation, with a relatively small headcount, struggled to maintain service delivery without asking many staff to attend the office. This made the need to balance staff safety with business continuity/resilience a challenge.

Particularly for smaller local authorities, increased support from the central level would be beneficial; this may take the form of financial support for investment in additional staff and/or ICT, or non-financial supports such as encouraging shared services or pooled resources between local authorities.

Review and revise existing emergency response and business continuity plans
After the pandemic, or when circumstances allow, it would seem necessary for many local authorities to review internal procedures and policies. Future-proofing and building resilience should be an organisational priority post-Covid. For example, public health emergencies may need to be included on more corporate risk registers.

Financial uncertainty has proven challenging

Uncertainty remains about the state of the Irish economy and public finances post-Covid. Concerns were expressed by interviewees over a reduced future rateable base and the potential loss of other local income. Local authorities need greater certainty and longer-term assurances regarding central funding to compensate for any lost income and increased expenditure. A more general review of local authority funding and financing is warranted, particularly given previous commitments to review the Local Property Tax and the commercial rates system.

3.2   COORDINATING COMMUNITY SUPPORTS

There is a strong and rich history of community development in Ireland. In more recent years, local government has taken on a greater coordination role in this area, as well as having responsibility for a range of functions that contribute to community development such as libraries, community grants, and regeneration schemes. The coordinating role undertaken by local authorities to support communities during the Covid-19 pandemic was, however, innovative and unprecedented. The primary response was through the establishment of Community Call Fora and helplines by all 31 local authorities (see below). Other important initiatives/actions undertaken by local government to support communities included:

- Communicating with the public to provide up-to-date information, encourage cooperation with public health guidance and restrictions, and increase awareness of available supports for communities and businesses.

- Liaising with and supporting existing community and voluntary groups and structures (e.g. Age Friendly committees, PPNs), as well as developing new relationships via the Community Call.

- Administering special grants to local community and voluntary groups and businesses on behalf of government departments.

- Providing existing and additional library services during all stages of the pandemic response, both online and in person.

- Maintaining parks, playgrounds and outdoor spaces.

- Public realm works to provide space for social distancing, and to encourage active mobility (e.g. walking and cycling).

In terms of the wider response in coordinating and providing supports to the community, it is clear that changes to the local government system in recent years have proven beneficial. Closer links to the community development structures, and committees and networks mentioned above, were built on. Age Friendly networks, which have been established countrywide at local authority level since 2014, were mobilised to engage older people and support them while cocooning (see boxed text).

> **Age Friendly networks in action in Cork**
>
> In Mitchelstown, County Cork, the Age Friendly Committee used Zoom to promote physical activity and well-being. Online meet-ups allowed for communication between older people despite the limitations of 'cocooning'.
>
> In Bandon, the Age Friendly Committee supported the work of other community groups based out of St. Michael's Community Centre. A coordinator at the centre praised the Age Friendly Initiative for providing a network of Garda-vetted volunteers and businesses and organisations serving the community. This network has permitted the extension of services for the elderly, including the Bandon Meals on Wheels service and the town's Care Ring Conversations (Graham, 2020).

3.2.1   The Community Call

The Community Call is widely seen as a successful initiative. Since its establishment, it has continued throughout the year with enhanced supports and delivery during periods of heightened pandemic restrictions. There were two main aspects to the Community Call initiative at local level: establishing a helpline and bringing together key actors in a forum (see Shannon et al., 2020, for further details). The Community Call is a Government initiative, and coordinating and monitoring structures were also in place at national level, led by the DRCD. The National Economic and Social Council (NESC) conducted an evaluation of the Community Call initiative for the DRCD (McGauran, 2021). The evaluation makes suggestions for improvement to the Community Call initiative and outlines implications for national policy.

COMMUNITY CALL STATISTICS BETWEEN MARCH 31ST 2020 AND FEB 25TH 2021

Calls Received	Forum Meetings
63,577	**680**
Category of Calls	**Number Received**
Collection and Delivery Calls	13,009
Social Isolation Calls	11,195
Meals Service Calls	4,356
Other Health Service Calls	4,346
Follow-up Calls	24,254
Other Requests Calls	28,983

Source: https://community-call-covid-19-geohive.hub.arcgis.com

With regard to establishing the helpline, all local authorities successfully managed to set up an IT infrastructure and establish 'call centres' by redeploying existing staff. Each local authority overcame its individual challenges (e.g. suitability of existing infrastructure, availability of staff and equipment). This was a huge achievement, particularly given the very short time frame in which the helplines were set up (over the course of one weekend). The IT systems and accompanying mapping systems (GIS) were essential to the operation of the helplines, according to interviewees.

Secondly, the Community Call initiative required the establishment of a forum in each council area to lead the coordination of the community response. Local authorities built on existing networks and relationships in order to quickly establish the fora, whilst also forging new relationships. Many interviewees noted that existing emergency management structures and local authority committees, such as LCDCs and Joint Policing Committees (JPCs) and the PPNs, proved very useful. In addition, local authorities engaged with local development companies, volunteer centres and other local organisations (such as the GAA and local food banks) who had also mobilised and started providing supports to communities. It was noted by one interviewee that no other sector or agency could have achieved what the local authorities did, given the need to bring together a wide variety of stakeholders at such short notice. This showed the agility of local authorities, and a willingness to step up to the plate and take on a new role.

3.2.2   Challenges

While local authorities demonstrated agility and commitment in coordinating community supports, they were also presented with many challenges. The roles and responsibilities undertaken through the Community Call initiative were truly unprecedented for local government.

Establishing a structure for providing support to cocooners presented a particular challenge at all levels of Government and society. Many groups and organisations sprang into action on the ground in the early stages of the pandemic, anticipating the level of support that might be needed and the different types of support. At national level, a *Government Action Plan: To Support the Community Response* (DRCD, 2020) was announced in mid-March. Initiatives such as the 'Community Champions', coordinated by The Wheel and Irish Rural Link, also emerged during this early period, supported by the DRCD.

Notwithstanding the vital work done in these early weeks of the pandemic, it was quickly recognised that stronger coordination was required, and local authorities were asked to establish a framework for local authority community support, which then led to the Community Call Response. Challenges were identified by interviewees in relation to the central establishment of the structure and the coordinating role and in determining the appropriate role for elected members, as discussed in sections 3.4 and 3.5, respectively. Given the unprecedented nature of events, some teething problems can be expected. It will be important to reflect on and learn from this experience, both at individual local authority level and among those coordinating the response centrally.

Sustainability of the community response is also a challenge. Local government as a sector is already stretched in terms of resources, staffing and financial capacity. Provision of additional services and supports will not be sustainable without increased investment and support for local authorities. Staff burnout must also be considered; while many staff displayed an eagerness to be involved at the start of the pandemic – underpinned by a strong sense of public service – new working arrangements should be reviewed.

3.2.3   Main messages

Local government acted as a leader and coordinator of community supports

Local government acted as a leader and coordinator in the face of a major crisis. The Community Call Response Fora, led by local authorities, facilitated coordination and collaboration between a diverse range of local stakeholders, who were required to work together to respond to the crisis. Interviewees commented on the importance of existing relationships and structures, such as the LCDCs, JPCs and PPNs, in addition to bringing on board other organisations with local expertise and knowledge or volunteer capacity. This experience can be built upon to enhance community partnerships and engagement at the local level, particularly in anticipation of future crises, e.g. climate-related events such as flooding. Consideration should be given to the continuation of community support structures, using the Community Call Response as a template.

Capacity of local authorities to adapt and respond

In the midst of a crisis, local authorities showed their capacity to adapt and rise to the challenge. Staff were willing to temporarily adjust and provide support where needed across the organisation, or in the wider public sector through temporary role reassignments. ICT teams worked tirelessly to ensure that adequate systems and support were in place, initially within a very short time frame.

While ICT capabilities have proven crucial, so too has the capacity of local authority staff involved in all aspects of the response. Interviewees commented on their learnings from this experience, which were diverse, but many focused on the need to build on what has been achieved, with the proper resources and funding in place.

Capacity building should be a key focus for local government to ensure the sustainability of any additional community support role post-Covid. This not only includes local government staff, but also elected members, LCDC and PPN members, and all those involved in providing community supports. Local authorities and LCDCs should also review and reflect on Covid-19's impact in their areas and the lessons learnt. This could help inform the development of new Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs) and other relevant local authority plans for the future.

3.3   REOPENING SOCIETY AND SUPPORTING LOCAL ECONOMIES

The economic damage inflicted by the initial lockdown (March–April) was severe. Whilst Ireland's multinational sector continued to perform well, the shutdown of other parts of the economy saw a sharp rise in unemployment and put pressure on the public finances. To help the businesses forced shut by the lockdown, on March 20th, the Government announced that commercial rates could be deferred for a three-month period. But the longer that the public health restrictions continued, the deeper the economic pain would become. It was clear that businesses would need further support to cushion the impact of restrictions imposed due to Covid.

3.3.1   Local economic supports

From May onwards, the crisis moved from a phase of lockdown to one of gradual reopening. The Government faced the challenge of balancing the ongoing need for some level of restriction to curb the number of new cases with trying to stimulate economic activity. The *Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business* (Government of Ireland, 2020b) published on May 1st sought to strike this balance. As part of the phased reopening and to further support SMEs, a suite of measures were announced. These included a three-month commercial rates waiver for affected businesses and a €250 million restart fund for grants (up to €10,000 in value) to impacted businesses. LEOs were made responsible for the administration of the Restart Grants.

Later in the summer, after the formation of a new coalition government, further supports were provided under the July Jobs Stimulus Plan. As part of this, the Restart Grant fund was increased to €550 million, and the commercial rates waiver extended. Given the significant hit to the incomes of local authorities, crucially, the Government promised to cover the financial shortfall for the year, expected to cost around €600 million.

Local authorities received stimulus funding in different ways. For example, an additional €5 million was provided by the DRCD to the Community Enhancement Programme (administered by LCDCs); the National Transport Authority allocated €55 million to some councils for cycling and walking infrastructure projects. Many interviewees welcomed this additional funding – from national and European sources – for a mix of business and community supports, and public works. Short-term plans were drawn up by several councils on their approach to support the local economy.

3.3.2   Local implementation and innovation

With serious challenges facing many SMEs, local government worked collaboratively and quickly with local stakeholders to support businesses. In addition, making people feel safer against the Covid virus whilst being out and about was important to the reopening response. New and existing local fora agreed short-term plans focused on economic recovery and creating safe public spaces. In Carlow, for example, a forum of local representatives and stakeholders agreed on actions in a business support and economic recovery plan. It sought to maximise the contribution that national and local supports could make to Carlow businesses trying to operate in unprecedented times. Cork County Council's Project ACT (Activating County Towns) involved a programme of actions – a mix of capital works and

business supports – to reactivate the economies of 23 towns around the county, facilitated by a €6 million fund. While Galway City Council's City Mobility Team promised to 'work with and listen to all stakeholders to put in place quickly practical interventions to help kick-start our great city again in economic and social terms' (Galway City Council, 2020).

Local innovation to support economic recovery – The Safe Destination Kerry Programme

In Kerry, a priority after the lockdown was to set-up the Kerry Interagency Business Forum. Its membership included representatives of the council's economic development unit, the LEO, and local and regional stakeholders. The collapse in the overseas tourist market was particularly devastating for Kerry's economy, with research estimating that the overall financial impact on the county in 2020 from Covid-19 could be as much as €1 billion (Kerry County Council, 2020). Therefore, the forum sought to agree on, and implement, four to six practical measures to aid economic recovery in the county. One such initiative was the Safe Destination Kerry Programme, intended to reassure domestic visitors that Kerry's hospitality staff were trained up on safety and cleaning best practice.

The 'Safe Destination' badge will be displayed in premises where staff have undergone specialised training on cleanliness, hygiene and customer interaction in the Covid-19 environment. Up to 3,000 staff in the tourism and retail industries in the county have participated in this training, which has been devised and is being provided by the Kerry Education and Training Board.

https://business.kerrycoco.ie/safe-destination-programme/

During this reopening phase of the crisis, a priority for councils was on creating safe public spaces and implementing practical measures to help businesses reopen and become more resilient. Different businesses faced different challenges. Therefore, a raft of innovative measures were introduced by local authorities: from voucher and grant schemes to new street furniture, wider footpaths and dedicated cycle lanes, and online training and marketing campaigns.

Temporary mobility measures were perhaps the most contentious aspect of the Covid-19 response in terms of public and business support. As noted by Keane, 'The role of transport mobility in Ireland in reconciling economic activity and public health is essential and the precarious nature of this balance and its impact shall be seen in time to come' (Shannon et al., 2020, p. 25). The democratic implications of introducing temporary or emergency measures are discussed further in section 3.5.

LEOs reported a strong uptake of Covid-19 supports, as evidenced by increased funding being made available in response to the demand around the country. The successful

administration of these national schemes demonstrates the ability of local authorities to quickly and effectively deliver schemes at the local level.

The response was not all about the implementation of new initiatives, however, as some routine practices were adapted given the circumstances. One such example was the licensing process for temporary street furniture. Several different funding schemes were launched during summer 2020 to support local businesses to reopen safely and provide socially distanced outdoor seating for their customers. Local authorities worked proactively with businesses, and some waived application fees for street furniture licences to facilitate temporary arrangements.

3.3.3   Main messages

Local authorities and LEOs successfully implemented new schemes to support local businesses and communities

The very efficient and successful roll-out of the Business Restart Grant by the LEOs was widely praised by interviewees. It underlines the flexibility of the local government system in being able to quickly respond to policy demands from central government and deliver a national scheme at the local level.

Local innovation and collaboration was demonstrated

Local authorities are very experienced at dealing with emergencies and this lends itself to working in an innovative and practical manner when needed. 'We're pretty good innovators when we need to be, when forced into responding to a situation, you have that attitude and collective approach,' remarked an interviewee. From dealing with internal issues to responding to local needs, innovative solutions were found.

A strong sense of urgency and collaboration, with local groups and stakeholders working together, characterised local government's response to the economic crisis brought by Covid-19. The various plans and actions undertaken by local authorities were designed to support the Government's *Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business* by building confidence among business owners and the public. Local authorities listened to local concerns and needs, and responded in different ways to facilitate the safe reopening of local businesses.

The positive impact of 2014 reforms in relation to local economic development was evident

There was a broad consensus that the structures introduced by the reforms of 2014 in relation to local economic development enabled local authorities to quickly and effectively support local businesses on the ground. LEOs were the main point of contact for SMEs at local level, with good networks and working relationships already in place before the pandemic. In addition, work to develop innovation hubs, hot desk facilities and to improve broadband coverage had progressed under the LECPs, all of which enabled members of the public to work remotely.

3.4 MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE: EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AND CENTRAL-LOCAL RELATIONS

Ireland has an extremely centralised system of governance. The implications of this for managing a pandemic was a key theme highlighted during our research in a number of ways, with both positive and negative implications. This section firstly discusses the system of major emergency management, before considering central-local relations and consultation with local government more generally.

3.4.1 Major emergency management

Within Ireland, there is an established framework for major emergency management in place that enables the 'principal response agencies' (An Garda Síochána, the HSE and local authorities) to prepare for and make a coordinated response to major emergencies. Under this framework, each local authority must develop and periodically review a Major Emergency Plan.

A national structure and framework for Strategic Emergency Management has also more recently been published (Department of Defence, 2017), setting out national arrangements for the delivery of effective emergency management using a 'whole of Government' approach. These structures are intended for responding to national-level emergencies, whereas the major emergency management framework is more commonly used at regional and/or local level.

The Covid-19 pandemic can be categorised as a 'complex emergency' that may require a response beyond the established frameworks. Complex emergencies can be differentiated from routine (regular or daily emergencies) and non-routine emergencies that are predictable but have far greater impacts than routine emergencies (e.g. natural disasters) (Rode and Flynn, 2020). This was evidently the case in Ireland with ad-hoc structures put in place to manage the emergency at central level, as discussed in section 2.2, instead of instituting the national framework for emergencies.

At the local level, interviewees spoke of the benefit of having well established relationships with the HSE and An Garda Síochána through the major emergency management structures. This helped them react quickly and assist in implementing public health measures. Local authorities were therefore well prepared to deal with a major emergency situation and interviewees reported good cooperation with the various agencies involved. One interviewee commented that 'Our big advantage is that we're locally based … so when we've to work with other stakeholders in an emergency situation, we work very easily and quickly. Relationships built up with agencies and individuals in them that would be decades old.'

Local government worked closely with the HSE, as the agency leading the public health response. Some examples of this collaboration were making staff available for contact tracing, providing council-owned facilities for testing centres and preparing plans for temporary morgues. They also worked jointly with An Garda Síochána to reinforce and promote the public health message. Signage, for example, to remind the public to maintain social distance was put in place by local authorities.

The Covid-19 pandemic obviously brought with it new challenges and uncertainty but it is clear that the local government system was willing and able to respond within their areas of responsibility, and beyond. It was noted, however, by interviewees that the dynamic of the HSE being the lead agency was different to the norm. For example, in cases of severe weather emergencies local authorities are used to leading the emergency response. This presented particular difficulties for elected members in the early stages, as they sought to find their place and play their part in the response (see section 3.5 for further discussion).

3.4.2   Central-local relations

The Department of the Taoiseach took on a lead coordinating role in response to Covid-19. This introduced a new dynamic for the local government sector, and necessitated establishing new relationships and building knowledge of the local government system beyond the usual departments with which the local authorities frequently interact. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, as the lead policy department for local government, worked in collaboration with the CCMA and other key stakeholders in engaging with the Department of the Taoiseach. During the initial stages of the pandemic response, there was a period of learning and a reactive approach. Some interviewees expressed frustration at a perceived protracted and centralised decision-making process at this stage.

The CCMA, as the representative voice of the local government management network, played a key coordinating and leadership role. They acted as the main point of contact for the local government sector, supported by the LGMA. Local authority interviewees mentioned the Standard Operating Guidelines, and other guidance produced centrally, as being very useful for responding to the pandemic and ensuring a consistent approach at local level across the country. Others interviewed for this research, however, questioned the level of central control and the logic of some decisions (e.g. which services remained open and in what manner).

An official in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage commented on the pragmatic and speedy response from the CCMA and LGMA in producing guidance for the sector. It was also noted that this proved useful in informing other departments (such as the Department of the Taoiseach) of what was happening on the ground and about the day-to-day roles and responsibilities of local authorities.

Some interviewees also expressed the view that local government is generally not 'at the table' when it comes to central decision-making. The weak involvement of local government in national policymaking is a recognised issue (Callanan, 2018, p. 258). This is an important consideration given the vital role that the sector has played at local level in supporting vulnerable citizens and the local economy. While there are anecdotal reports that the relationship between 'the centre' and local government has been strengthened due to the pandemic, this warrants further review. The strong response from local government to the pandemic must be acknowledged, and provides a momentum on which the sector can build to ensure that its value in Irish society is recognised more widely.

3.4.3   Main messages

Local and regional emergency management structures work well

Local and regional emergency management structures are well established, and proved useful in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. The experience of the Community Call Fora and helplines should be considered in reviewing emergency management plans at local level, particularly with regard to working arrangements and membership of the forum. Consideration should be given to the democratic nature of these structures, particularly when responding to 'complex emergencies' (Rode and Flynn, 2020).

Central sectoral coordination is strong, with a need for balance

The CCMA's central coordination role was positively viewed in general, by local and central-level interviewees. Some interviewees expressed the desire for better communication and more of a balance between top-down and bottom-up decision-making. This balance can be difficult to achieve, and is a common issue in systems of multi-level governance. Consistency in service provision and access to services no matter the geographical location is needed, with a level of discretion afforded to local authorities. The experience of responding during the Covid-19 pandemic provides a template from which to work and develop in the future. A post-hoc review of experiences with regard to specific areas of service provision, and/or the overall communications and governance structures, would shed more light on this issue and help local authorities to prepare for any future emergency response.

Central-local relations can be built upon

Further review and research of the central-local relationship during the crisis is warranted, particularly in relation to the role of, and consultation with, the local government sector. Local government, as a sector, ought to build on the momentum provided by its strong response to the pandemic.

3.5   LOCAL DEMOCRACY

Local government is the democratically elected system of governance at the closest level to people in Ireland. As such, it is an important and vital element of our democracy. Following the immediate response to the pandemic, local governments across the world considered the impact of Covid-19 on local democracy.[3]

Local elected members have a very strong connection with their local communities. During the Covid-19 pandemic, they were at the forefront of the response on the ground in supporting their constituents. However, their role with regard to the structures and processes established to respond to Covid-19 at the organisational level was unclear at the beginning, and presented some challenges. Issues of transparency, public participation and the democratic nature of decision-making during a crisis are also discussed in this section.

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3 For example, see: https://www.uclg.org/en/media/news/local-democracy-aftermath-covid-19-pandemic

3.5.1   Role of elected members

According to interviewees, many elected members initially struggled to find their role within the pandemic response and with the challenge of having to adapt to new ways of working. Elected members in our focus group broadly agreed with this, while noting the vital input of councillors to the response and their willingness to step up to the plate.

During the early phase of the response, a significant oversight occurred in that elected members were not originally included in the membership of the Community Call Response Forum. This was quickly rectified following intervention from the Association of Irish Local Government, with the Cathaoirleach of the local authority being subsequently invited to sit on the forum. However, this was what one councillor described as a 'rocky start' to the pandemic response from the perspective of elected members. In addition, concerns surrounding the spread of the virus, health and safety, and how to engage with vulnerable people had to be addressed. The Community Call structure and processes were also new, and at times unfamiliar to elected members. The addition of the Cathaoirleach to the forum helped elected members become involved and share their local knowledge, based on their connections with local communities and colleagues on the council.

Elected members provide a key leadership role in their local communities. This was recognised by interviewees, who expressed the importance of two-way communication between the executive and elected members. As one interviewee stated, 'They are a very important conduit ... Would have been a very busy period for them ... Very important that they knew what services were being delivered and why, and they could explain that to the public.' Adequate and frequent communication channels were particularly important in the earlier response phase, as council meetings were postponed.

In addition to the practicalities of carrying out their representation role during a pandemic, the move to a remote working environment also affected elected members. These changes occurred at an unprecedented pace and training that would normally have taken place was not possible. Councillors are accustomed to being physically present in local authorities' offices to meet with officials face to face to address queries, as well as to attend briefings and council meetings. The new remote working environment thus impacts on the work of elected members as well as local authority staff.

3.5.2   Democracy and decision-making during the pandemic
Council meetings

The holding of council meetings during the pandemic was a major issue in terms of the impacts of the crisis on the workings of local government. The unprecedented nature of the pandemic response and public health guidelines necessitated the postponement of in-person meetings for a period of time. The holding of statutory meetings virtually was not initially possible, and required new legislation, which was passed in October 2020. Meetings were allowed to take place in person during certain periods of the pandemic but with strict protocols in place, such as a reduced number of people present, and time limits.

As noted by the CCMA, 'A core element of our action will be to preserve and maintain the democratic mandate of our elected councils and ensure that they continue to carry out their statutory functions in accordance with the sectoral Standard Operating Guidelines and relevant legislation' (2020, p. 3). Local authorities were innovative in how they responded to this challenge, while demonstrating commitment to democratic processes. The response varied according to local circumstances, but a common method of maintaining some level of engagement with councillors was through virtual briefings. South Dublin County Council, for example, provided elected members with pre-recorded videos of staff members outlining reports and issues, or responding to motions and queries, in advance of council meetings. This reduced the time necessary at physical meetings. Most, if not all, local authorities are also implementing hybrid meetings, with some attending in person and others attending virtually, to allow for social distancing and flexibility for those who cannot attend in person.

Sharing Innovation – The Remote Council Meetings Hub

The Remote Council Meetings Hub is a central pool of information, advice and guidance for elected members, hosted by the UK's Local Government Association in collaboration with a range of partners from across the sector, including the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

The hub highlights the work being undertaken by councils in responding to Covid-19 by sharing good practice. It also contains learning materials, guidance and up-to-date information on Covid-19 for councillors.

https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/guidance-and-resources/remote-council-meetings

It must be noted, however, that there was criticism from some elected members as to how meetings are being operated during the Covid-19 crisis. Practice varies across the country, and opinions will vary from person to person regarding the optimal solution. Some common issues that emerged were the added workload on councillors, the need for adequate training and support (particularly with regard to new technologies), and the need to ensure proper and meaningful debate on meeting items. Looking forward, it seems that many will want to return to 'business as usual' as soon as possible. It will be important to listen to the views of elected members, as well as consider the benefits of innovations, in deciding the 'new normal'.

Public participation and decision-making

The response to the Covid-19 pandemic requires the cooperation and mobilisation of the public. Balancing the need for urgent decision-making and ensuring inclusivity and transparency is an issue faced by governments at all levels globally, and one that was brought to the fore by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Innovation was shown in ensuring that statutory public participation could continue throughout the pandemic. Development plans are currently being updated by local authorities, and public participation is a statutory requirement for this. While all local authorities have the capacity to allow the public to engage online, others have more advanced or established platforms for digital participation (see Shannon and O'Leary, 2020). To respond to the added challenges of consultation in 2020, some local authorities created 'virtual consultation rooms' for members of the public to experience a drop-in type consultation from home. Digital innovations are to be welcomed, while being mindful of their limitations (e.g. unequal access to technology and broadband). Additional supports to smaller local authorities should also be considered to help ensure that as many members of the public as possible have equal access to participation.

Transparency

At national level, visits to official Government websites increased dramatically and access to information such as NPHET meeting minutes and up-to-date information on the spread of the pandemic has been noted for the level of transparency that it provided (Jacobzone and Ostry, 2020, p. 14). Individual local authorities should review their communications and transparency in respect of emergency management. It is often difficult for the public to access and/or understand information. Streaming of council meetings, which is now becoming more common, would also help to improve transparency.

Local elections

As the next local elections will not take place until 2024, the topic of elections was not a priority for this research. However, given the role of local authorities in the administration of elections, and the potential for Covid-19 or other emergencies or crises to disrupt future elections, it would be beneficial for local government to review national and international experiences where elections occurred, or were due to occur, during the pandemic.

In Ireland, policy and guidance related to elections is provided centrally by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Following the February 2020 general election and subsequent delays in forming a government, contingency plans for a general election in the midst of the pandemic were drawn up at central level. These plans, which did not have to be implemented, could be useful resources in planning and preparing for elections during future times of emergency or crisis.

Internationally, research is being commissioned and compiled by the Electoral Management Network and International IDEA.[4] Their research, which is still in the early stages, shows that 75 countries and territories postponed elections during 2020, but also that more than 100 national and local elections took place throughout the year. Across the United Kingdom, for example, a series of elections were postponed during 2020 and are now due to take place, along with other planned elections, in May 2021. The context for these elections is dependent on local circumstances and legislation; however, general lessons could be learned from their experience. Research from the LGiU, for example, highlights the need for good communication between central and local government, and early decision-making (LGiU, 2021). Given that, constitutionally, local elections must take place every five years, it is important to plan ahead and learn lessons from experience domestically and internationally during the Covid crisis.

4 See http://www.electoralmanagement.com/covid-19-and-elections/

3.5.3   Main messages

Elected members require support to adapt to new ways of working

While it is too early to assess how working practices will change in the long-term, it is likely that how councils operate will be different post-Covid. This is not just as a direct result of the pandemic, but many initiatives that local authorities had already been working towards were accelerated during 2020, such as remote working, streaming of council meetings online and greater use of digital resources for public participation. Adequate supports need to be available to both elected members and staff to adjust and adapt to new ways of working.

Responding quickly while respecting the need for transparency and accountability of decision-making

Achieving the balance between responsive and timely implementation of measures, while respecting the need for inclusivity and transparency is difficult. Local authorities have worked hard to respond to the Covid-19 crisis in a timely manner, introducing temporary measures (as discussed in section 3.3, for example) and operating in uncertain and unprecedented environments. While the Covid-19 pandemic is still ongoing at the time of writing, and is likely to continue for some time, temporary measures (e.g. public-realm initiatives such as new traffic systems) should be periodically reviewed and adjusted as necessary.

4
CONCLUSION

This report has broadly considered the local government response to Covid-19. The main themes discussed in Chapter 3 identify the strengths and challenges faced by local authorities during 2020, and also challenges that may lie ahead.

The overall response shows that local authorities are flexible organisations that can quickly adapt and innovate in times of crisis. There were several key elements to the response. For example, the CCMA, the LGMA and the Local Authority Business Continuity Working Group were pivotal for ensuring coherence in how the local authorities responded. The benefits of recent reforms were clear in terms of the ability to provide enhanced community and economic supports, and the network of relationships that local authorities can call upon. Experience of dealing with major emergencies as a lead response agency, and collaboration with the HSE and An Garda Síochána, has also been invaluable. Local government has shown effectiveness and efficiency as the local arm of the state in delivering services, administering grants and taking on additional responsibilities.

This response has been achieved in a challenging and uncertain environment. But the pandemic has also highlighted issues of capacity, resources and funding in the local government system. The centralised system of governance in Ireland has had implications for how local government can respond to a crisis. The unprecedented nature of the Covid-19 pandemic has also highlighted challenges of maintaining democratic decision-making structures, while also presenting opportunities for local government to enhance transparency of decision-making.

Covid-19 has had a profound impact on our society, which should not be understated. Many lives have been lost, and the social and economic impact will be felt for some time to come. In every crisis, however, there is opportunity. This research has considered the initial response of local authorities, but there will be more to learn as we continue to live with Covid-19 and plan ahead for a post-Covid world. A renewed light has been shone on the role of local government in our society, and the sector should seek to build on the momentum of how it responded to the Covid-19 pandemic.

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