Impact of Covid-19 for Community Safety Partnerships, Elected Members and Community Council Chairs: A Summary

Introduction

In June/July 2020, SCSN contacted Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs) and other partner organisations to follow up on our initial survey from April/May 2020, which had enquired about the initial response, reaction and emerging themes around the Covid-19 pandemic.

As part of our follow-up, we were keen to find out how things have changed and begin to think collectively about the recovery and rebuilding/renewal phases and what this meant for community safety and those working in the field. From conversations with our networks we discovered that citizens and local democracy were playing a crucial role supporting communities and partners at this time. To explore this theme further, SCSN widened the scope of respondents to Elected Members (EMs) and Community Council (CC) Chairs.

In total we conducted three surveys, which can be found on a dedicated page on our website here.

In this short summary paper, we aim to provide some key findings, comparisons and conclusions from all three surveys, however we encourage reading the full suite for more in depth analysis.

We would like to thank everyone who took the time to complete these surveys and share with us their experiences over the past months. We hope these analyses give you a sense of the work being done across Scotland by Community Safety Partnerships; and the insight offers some reflections to guide all partners, local and national, as we recover and rebuild together.

Method

The three surveys consisted mostly of multiple choice and open-ended questions where respondents were free to write openly about their experiences and perspectives. Questions in each survey were similar and focused on: key issues and themes; the impact of the virus and ensuing legislation on services and communities; changes for the positive and negative and future considerations. The analysis of the survey results is a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods.

Key Findings

- A major, overarching theme found throughout the analysis was the **effectiveness of collective action and community responses** when overcoming some of the immediate community safety issues related to Covid-19.

- The nature of how CSPs, other Local Authority committees and Community Council meetings **conduct business has changed greatly as are now mostly online/virtual**. Issues around technology have, in the main, significantly progressed since the early days of the pandemic however it is not yet fully working for all areas which could pose a threat to future engagement, partnership work and scrutiny.

- Local Authority community safety-related **service delivery is still mostly remote** however some authorities are beginning to start up face to face services again. Nevertheless, for many, **little to no face-to-face contact remains challenging** for workforces and community members, and digital exclusion in more vulnerable groups could further exacerbate inequalities.

- In many cases, partnerships and inter-agency work continues to adapt under the 'new normal', with respondents sharing how **strong partnerships and close working practices, whether formal or informal, have made the biggest difference and had the best outcomes** for people and communities. It is striking how many examples of innovative work practices and community responses can be found within the arena of community safety.

- Traditional community safety concerns such as **antisocial behaviour, environmental issues and unintentional harm and injury** are still major concerns, however **domestic violence, impact of loneliness and mental health and inequality** have been highlighted as long-term issues. New community safety concerns around citizen behaviour and non-compliance with Covid-19 legislation are also of major concern. We know that the **economic and social repercussions of Covid-19 will have implications longer-term** for crime and community safety.

- Changes to the 'new normal' that respondents wish to **keep hold of going forward are greater partnership working, less bureaucracy and more flexibility and responsiveness.** The greater connectivity and new ways of working that EMs and CC Chairs have established, is worthy of keeping hold of.

- Local and citizen led services and initiatives were cited as being the most effective and flexible when responding to community safety issues during the pandemic. There is an opportunity to **keep hold of the new relationship** between public service partners and communities and this mutual aid that emerged in communities.

- The spread of information, **rigid and inflexible bureaucratic processes and decision-making and the differences between national and local efforts** are areas that were highlighted as particularly difficult. It is also worth noting that there was **variation in experiences** – not all areas saw greater partnership working, less bureaucracy and more flexibility and learning from this together will be key in these areas.

- **New demands** around managing the mental health of the workforce, such as supporting people who had to work at home or on the frontline and providing some 'decompression/debriefing space', have emerged.

Future Considerations

- While many areas have similar experiences, there nevertheless remain a lot of variation in experience of the pandemic, for example, levels of anti-social behaviour, issues with IT and the connectivity of partnerships. This will require tailored support from national partners.

- It would be it would be valuable for all partners, alongside citizens, to undertake some collective reflection on these past months and capture learning for the future work together.

- The uncertainty around future funding and potential cuts remains a concern, however the worth of partnerships, community action and the community safety workforce has undoubtedly been showcased and proven more than ever during the continuing crisis.

Conclusion

The people who responded to these surveys have shared their experiences and insights working in and with communities at an unprecedented time. Their voices collectively echo a narrative of change, for the better and, in some circumstances, for the worse. The task the sector now faces is to maintain momentum when adapting to this change. Capturing learning and bridging the gap between research and practice will help ensure that no person, service or community is left behind in the recovery phase.

Undoubtedly, the Covid-19 pandemic and resulting economic impact will have huge implications for community safety. Rising crime, unemployment, poverty, homelessness, antisocial behaviour and increased inequality are a few of the potential impacts of lockdown and economic recession. Observations from Community Council Chairs already document the closing of businesses, isolated families, frustrated people and increasing health and mental health concerns of the communities they represent. As already seen, local, collective, transparent and citizen-led initiatives are key to overcoming current and future community safety concerns.

Going forward, those in the sector and in communities will be using the rich information collected and their own experiences to make preparations to prevent and anticipate the likely impact on community safety that Covid-19 and ensuing further restrictions will have.