

Transformation in localities

Refresh for October 2020

In partnership with District
Councils Network



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Summary



Districts delivering through collaboration

This short report has been commissioned by DCN as a follow-up to our 2018 [“Transformation in Localities Toolkit”](#). It recognises the role of District Councils as practical collaborators, delivery agents and system leaders, and illustrates what this has meant in practice as they respond to the most significant challenges facing our country today.

The report also shows that where big government and centralised control have struggled under exceptionally challenging circumstances, District Councils have continued to be the first line of local accountability, support and protection for the communities and businesses they serve.

The many examples in this report highlight how District Councils continue to work across organisational and geographical boundaries making innovative use of their key statutory, regulatory, licensing and benefits levers to protect and support local communities and economies.

For example:

- Districts have been integral to the community response to lockdown; collaborating closely with local partners to protect and inform residents whilst also maintaining access to crucial mental health lifelines such as open spaces,

leisure and cultural services. This crucial role will continue as we enter a further six months of restrictions, with districts set to provide Test and Trace Support Payments to self-isolating households

- Districts have innovated to support local businesses and high streets, drawing on close connections and local knowledge and their partnerships within the wider system. They also have a key strategic role to play in planning for and delivering economic recovery and growth and managing the impacts of climate change
- Districts have continued to build resilience within local partnerships including through close work with neighbours, County Councils and local voluntary and community sector organisations
- Districts are open to change and reform and are on the front foot in creating dynamic local growth partnerships that deliver investment and work with the grain of local economies.

There is no sign that things will get easier for public services in the short term. Whatever the future brings and whatever the next crisis may be, responsiveness, agility and accountability at the most local level will continue to be crucial.

Key recommendations

Collaborating for better lives:	<p>Place-based partners and national government must recognise:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The importance of close local connections between district councils and communities in supporting the most vulnerable residents• The role districts play in their Leadership of community, voluntary and third sector agencies bringing them together to provide delivery of locally focussed services• The substantial part played by districts in the health of communities and the early interventions provided by districts in the wellbeing of residents• The foundational nature of housing responsibilities which are the bedrock from which other agencies (e.g. health and DWP) can provide their services to maximise the full potential of each person.
Collaborating for stronger economies:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There is a need for targeted investment from government to recognise the vulnerability of economies within shire areas and help close the gap between rural and urban economies• This should be accompanied by a commitment to finally realise the devolution of powers and budgets to the most local level, enabling local public services to support recovery and growth with the best possible set of tools at their disposal• Government and LEPs should recognise the importance of local knowledge, capability and responsiveness offered by district councils as a crucial part of their toolkit for supporting, informing and engaging with local businesses and employers
Collaborating for resilience and impact:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Relationships with voluntary and community sector partners have been galvanised by the response to Covid-19 and lockdown. Maintaining these relationships and continuing to build strength and resilience within the third sector will be critical to an effective social and economic recovery• Districts should continue to consider how to increase resilience and impact through dynamic local partnerships and shared services, thinking carefully around combining around functional economic areas and strategic geographies. These innovations can deliver investment, improved outcomes and savings without the disruption and distraction of reorganisation
Collaborating for devolution and reform:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Government and local partners must carefully consider the risks in dismantling a tried and tested local planning and delivery infrastructure that has the potential to accelerate delivery on recovery and growth without the disruption of reorganisation• Government must also recognise and support existing and new dynamic local partnerships based around strategic economic geographies• In areas where there is local support for reform, all partners should work collaboratively and openly on proposals to avoid damage to relationships, disruption and wasted time• Districts should be on the front foot in thinking how positive change can improve outcomes for communities and local economies

Introduction

Background

District Councils Network (DCN) and Grant Thornton published the “transformation in localities toolkit” in May 2018, with the aims of:

- supporting District Councils to achieve their ambitions for the areas they serve through collaboration with local partners
- showcasing the many ways in which Districts are already acting as pragmatic collaborators up and down the country.

A lot can change in two years. The original toolkit was written in a challenging context for local government, but in the last two years these challenges have intensified beyond any reasonable expectation. For example:

- economic, social and political change was already happening at pace in 2018, but like so much else Covid-19 has accelerated these changes significantly
- climate change and carbon reduction – a growing national and international debate for decades – has now landed firmly on the local agenda
- the end of the beginning of Brexit passed almost unremarked upon as the world headed into a global pandemic, but as negotiations on a trade deal reach crunch point in the coming weeks there remains very significant uncertainty around the future impact on local economies and communities.

Purpose of this report

Recognising this challenging context, the purpose of our short report is to revisit the key findings from the 2018 toolkit and give a qualitative picture of the collaborative role that district councils have played in response. The report focuses on the four key themes of the 2018 toolkit:

- Collaborating for better lives
- Collaborating for stronger economies
- Collaborating for resilience and impact
- Collaborating for devolution and reform

The membership of District Councils’ Network has kindly provided a wide range of case studies to update their role in the current context. We only have space to include a representative sample within this report, however the full set will be available at the DCN website shortly.

About Grant Thornton UK LLP

Grant Thornton is a well-established supporter of the public sector and has been working with local authorities for over 30 years. Our national team of experienced local government specialists, including those who have held senior positions within the sector, provide the growing range of assurance, analytical and advisory services that our clients require.

We are the largest supplier of audit and related services to local government and count 40% of local authorities in England as external audit clients. We also audit local authorities in Wales and Scotland via framework contracts with Audit Scotland and the Wales Audit Office. We have over 180 local government and related body audit clients in the UK and over 50 local authority advisory clients.

We are currently working with dynamic local partnerships across England to help explore the issues raised in this report.

Collaborating for better lives



Just under half the population of England lives within a District Council area. Even under normal circumstances district councils shape the wider determinants of health in the areas they serve and are active partners in protecting the health and wellbeing of their residents. In our 2018 report we highlighted that districts make a significant contribution to the effectiveness and sustainability of local health and care ecosystems as providers of key preventative services including housing, homelessness, benefits and environmental health. We also illustrated how many districts are forging close strategic and operational partnerships with health and care partners to maximise this preventative role and relieve pressure in other parts of the system.

In 2020 the nature of the role played by districts has been thrown into sharp relief by the response to Covid-19 and lockdown. Our key recommendation is that place-based partners and national government must recognise:

- the importance of close local connections between district councils and communities in supporting the most vulnerable residents
- the role districts play in their Leadership of community, voluntary and 3rd sector agencies bringing them together to provide delivery of locally focussed services
- the substantial part played by districts in the health of communities and the early interventions provided by districts in the wellbeing of residents
- the foundational nature of housing responsibilities which are the bedrock from which other agencies (e.g. health and DWP) can provide their services to maximise the full potential of each person.

Helping those who needed it the most during lockdown

Almost overnight at the start of lockdown, councils of all types across the country had to stand up new services for responding to the needs of the most vulnerable members of society, whilst also providing information and reassurance to their wider communities.

Districts played a critical role alongside social care services and providers, local resilience forums and emergency response partnerships; but given their proximity to communities they have also been on the front line of accountability for the effectiveness of the local response. Sometimes this has meant acting to fill in the gaps where central command and control has not responded at the pace needed by local communities.

The case studies submitted for this report include a long and inspiring list of District Councils creating brand new mutual aid and community hub services, working closely with voluntary and community sector organisations, charities and their County Council partners. These services were often run from repurposed premises using redeployed staff who suddenly found themselves in a very different environment to their previous roles. Districts and their partners created or adapted overnight new infrastructure, policies, and procedures for identifying, triaging, and responding to vulnerability, sharing data, registering and processing a huge volunteer workforce and where necessary referring residents to other agencies better placed to provide specialist support.

Case study

Sevenoaks District Council

Care for our community during lockdown

The Council provided its expertise and resources to launch the Care for our Community Scheme in response to coronavirus. An idea generated from within our community, we provided a service to verify and provide ID badges to a team of 1,500 volunteers across our District. Our website was developed, and customer solutions team engaged to receive requests from residents. Operating 7am to 7pm for 16 weeks and linking to community leaders in towns and parishes across our District more than 1,500 requests for support from vulnerable and locked-down residents were managed, from food shopping and collecting prescriptions to walking dogs and critically befriending services. We are focussed now on creating a legacy that retains this incredible volunteering effort for the benefit of our District and are doing so in partnership with local community organisations.

Case study

Watford Borough Council

Manging local volunteers

Over 1,600 local people responded to Watford Borough Councils call for volunteers at the start of the coronavirus pandemic. To date they have carried out over 8,000 good deeds including delivering food parcels, collecting prescriptions, grocery shopping for those self-isolating and shielding, picking up prescriptions, making friendly calls to people living alone, dog walking for people who could not get out or helping out at local food banks and at other local charities at the frontline of the towns coronavirus response. Plans are currently underway to retain the volunteer force into the future for a range of volunteering activities that enhance and strengthen our diverse community.

Through these new services, districts and their partners enabled the provision of a wide range of critical support services including food parcels, assisted shopping, medicine collection and deliveries, remote befriending services for socially isolated residents and financial advice and support. Many case studies illustrate how simple requests for support around access to food or medicine led to the provision of wider support around isolation and mental health. There are also examples of districts working closely with digitally excluded older residents and other adults, even providing adapted tablets to enable improved social connection and shopping online.



Case study

North Kesteven District Council

Protecting vulnerable residents

We identified a cohort of potentially vulnerable residents and sent almost 11,000 letters to reach them with support. Knowing personal contact makes all the difference, 6,825 follow-up calls were made. 58 colleagues volunteered to make these calls while ensuring Council services continued. Additional support was facilitated through the LRF Customer Service framework. We've received many compliments, with recipients saying they felt valued. The daughter of one said: "It absolutely made her day [to hear] your very caring nature". The Head of Corporate and Community Services continues on the LRF Community cell, ensuring best practice is shared and communities remain supported.



Case study

Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council

Food Buddy scheme

Proving access to food to vulnerable people who were not on the Shielded List was our challenge. This is where the idea for a new Food and Wellbeing Buddy scheme was devised. This is very much a preventive model, providing early reassurance and support. In close partnership with our local VCS colleagues, local volunteers were recruited who were allocated to a vulnerable person/family. Eighteen fabulous Food Buddy volunteers have supported over 70 vulnerable people over the past four months. "My client was overwhelmed yesterday with the support he has received from HBBC and the volunteers. He was very appreciative". In addition to the Food Buddies scheme, the Council has made over 2,000 welfare calls and secured over 900 volunteers as part of its Resident Support Scheme to help vulnerable members of the local community during the crisis.

Lockdown and the response to Covid-19 also triggered a major national effort to end homelessness and rough sleeping. Districts were central to this in the areas they serve, directly identifying and providing suitable accommodation and often providing integrated services with local partners, charities and community organisations.

Providing information and support to wider communities

As well as working with the most vulnerable, districts played a broader role in supporting cohesion and providing information and resources to their wider communities. This included the provision of simple guidance on managing the virus and social distancing but also a crucial role in building community spirit under challenging circumstances. The case studies illustrate how districts promoted positive stories and recognised the work of individuals within their localities, highlighting real stories of community support and wellbeing and contributing to a sense of a shared experience and responsibility. There are many examples of district councils making innovative use of social media to rapidly disseminate information, but also to foster new digital networks and discussions focused on particular communities.



Case study

Braintree District Council

Celebrating heroes on social media

To celebrate and bring together the hundreds of heart-warming community stories being shared through local community groups, Braintree District Council ran a 'heroes' social media campaign, shining a light and saying thank you to 64 local heroes in their district who were doing fantastic things for others during the pandemic. The campaign was all about remaining authentic and using real photos, real videos, real quotes, all from real people. This generated fantastic local coverage and positivity to local's social media feeds, resulting in over 32,600 engagements and seen by over 349,370 people across Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Maintaining lifelines to mental health

Parks and green spaces have always been invaluable local assets, but during lockdown they became lifelines for mental health, with households relying on safe access to outdoor spaces to socialise and cope with the effects of being confined to their homes. District Councils worked hard alongside local partners during lockdown to adapt and manage public spaces to ensure that they could remain open safely and continue to be enjoyed. This role became especially challenging in areas where popular destinations continued to draw large numbers of visitors desperate for a change of scene; in these cases districts worked sensitively with local partners including the police to manage access to the best of their ability.



Case study

South Lakeland District Council

Restarting the visitor economy

The visitor economy is a particular area of priority for South Lakeland, with a third of our total employment in sectors (hospitality, retail and leisure) most highly impacted by Covid-19. We are working with Cumbria LEP on the economic response activity, and in particular with Cumbria Tourism, as the Destination Management Organisation, on a recovery marketing plan for the area to welcome people back in a responsible way. This is being co-ordinated along with our work with the parishes and County Council, as well as the National Park Authorities, in reopening our high streets safely.

For other cultural assets such as museums, libraries and leisure facilities, districts have demonstrated innovative new approaches to enabling virtual and remote access, for example through online exhibitions, activity packs, video conference exercise classes and digital arts and cultural resources.



Case study

Craven District Council

Culture at home

Skipton Town Hall, run by Craven District Council, put together "Culture At Home", a huge collection of online resources for arts and culture. The Craven Museum team has also been running an online roadshow, showcasing their own most-loved treasures from home, via social media, and encouraging other Craven residents to do the same. Finds included a soldier's record book, dating from 1890-1898, which was found under the floorboards of a family home in Skipton.

Finally, districts also worked hard to ensure that bereaved families were able to have funerals safely and with dignity and respect, often going beyond the minimum level of provision set out within national guidance.

Supporting wellbeing in the winter of 2020 and beyond

The intensity of the community response required during the initial period of lockdown may have eased somewhat, but as we move past the first wave of the virus and begin living alongside it Covid-19 for the foreseeable future, districts will continue to play a critical role in both managing the virus direct impacts and supporting the broader wellbeing of communities as part of local health and care systems. For example, District Councils will continue to work with government to ensure effective management of Test and Trace Support Payments during the anticipated six months of local restrictions.

Working with NHS and Ccounty Council partners, it is clear that local authorities will be required to manage Districts continue to manage local surges in cases and transmission within communities. The early experience of places in some areas show the importance of enforcing and reinforcing the importance of social distancing, increasing the speed and scale of local testing and managing rapid changes within the local public realm.



Case study

East Staffordshire Borough Council

Managing local surges in Covid-19

Following increasing Covid-19 cases in two Wards, a collaborative and strategic response was quickly implemented. The Leader of the Council, Chief Executive, ward councillors and the MP joined with Staffordshire County Council and community leaders to investigate ways of engaging the community and reinforcing messages around social distancing, testing and isolation. This led to several strategies including door to door testing; working with local businesses on social distancing; undertaking targeted communications; revised opening of local parks; and walk-in testing in local mosques and community centres. The community responded well with over 500 accessing tests to help reduce infections in these areas.

Districts are also increasingly playing formalised roles at the heart of accountable care systems and in partnership with clinical commissioning groups, GPs and social care services. For example, some districts provide non-medical support to residents with long-term needs on a referral basis, focusing on areas such as housing needs and adaptations, social isolation, and accessing food and medicine. There are also examples of districts using leisure services, both physical and virtual, to support re-ablement and prepare people for surgery.



Case study

Colchester Borough Council

Working with integrated care systems

The long-standing engagement that Colchester Borough Council has had with the wider health and social care sector through its role at the heart of the North East Essex Health and Wellbeing Alliance has paid off enormously. As we faced the Covid-19 crisis we were able to do so as an established system with strong existing relationships. Not all district councils are engaged as full members of local Alliances within the new Integrated Care System structure for NHS England, but, we would strongly encourage them to do so. Playing a full role within the Alliance ensured a speedy and joined-up response.

Collaborating for stronger economies



Recognising the importance of economic geography, the 2018 toolkit highlighted the role of district councils in working “boundary blind” and aligning plans, resources and structures around functional economic areas as the building blocks of local growth. We also recognised the ability of district councils to maintain direct and personal connections with local businesses, employers and high streets. Finally, from the local to the long-term, we also highlighted the strategic planning role and its generation-spanning impact on communities and economies.

Inevitably, much of the discussion in 2020 is about districts’ role in addressing both the short and long-term impacts of Covid-19 through:

- work with place-based partners to provide short-term support to local businesses and economies in managing immediate impacts of Covid-19 and lockdown, and
- the strategic role that districts play in helping the country plan for and deliver the growth required for a sustainable economic recovery.

In this section we also recognise that climate action is now very firmly on the agenda at a local level and districts are at the forefront of the response.

Our key recommendations are:

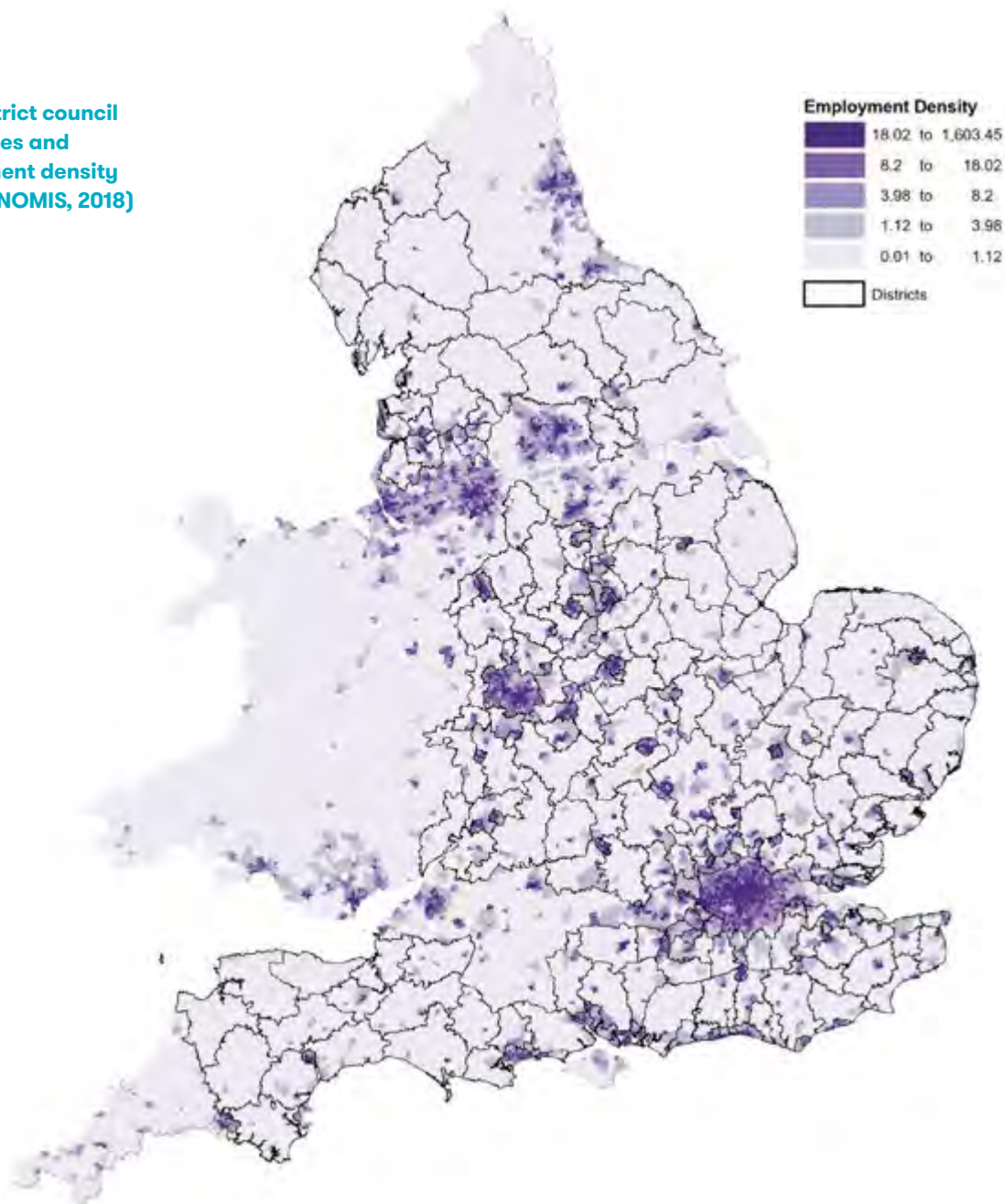
- There is a need for targeted investment from government to recognise the vulnerability of economies within shire areas and help close the gap between rural and urban economies.
- This should be accompanied by a commitment to finally realise the devolution of powers and budgets to the most local level, enabling local public services to support recovery and growth with the best possible set of tools at their disposal.
- Government and LEPs should recognise the importance of local knowledge, capability and responsiveness offered by district councils as a crucial part of their toolkit for supporting, informing and engaging with local businesses and employers.

Working with the grain of local economies

The 2018 toolkit tackled the issue of economic geography, which continues to be central to government’s thinking around public sector reform. We recognised that there is no fixed method for determining functional economic areas (FEAs), but in practice some key components are often considered:

Administrative boundaries	Labour market areas	Housing market areas	Transport corridors	Supply chains
Local authority administrative boundaries are often used as the most straightforward areas for assessing economic output – however they often do not reflect how economies work in practice. Some district councils are more than one Local Enterprise Partnership area.	FEAs are often defined using commuting patterns through “travel to work areas”, with clearer economic geographies having higher levels of “self-containment”. This measure may now be less straightforward as many commuting patterns are likely to be permanently disrupted by Covid-19.	This approach analyses housing demand and supply, prices and search patterns to define a “market-based” assessment of broad areas in which it makes sense to plan for housing needs and growth requirements. These areas may overlap.	Many areas use transport corridors such as motorways, major roads and trainlines as a physical framework for describing economic geography and developing strategic plans. Strategic junctions and stations are often a focal point for growth areas.	Understanding the different sectoral clusters and their supply chains within an area can give a more nuanced sense of economic geography and help articulate the economic “purpose” of a place. Where supply chains are physically close, this approach helps to identify other areas to work with.

Map: district council boundaries and employment density (source: NOMIS, 2018)



Supporting businesses through lockdown

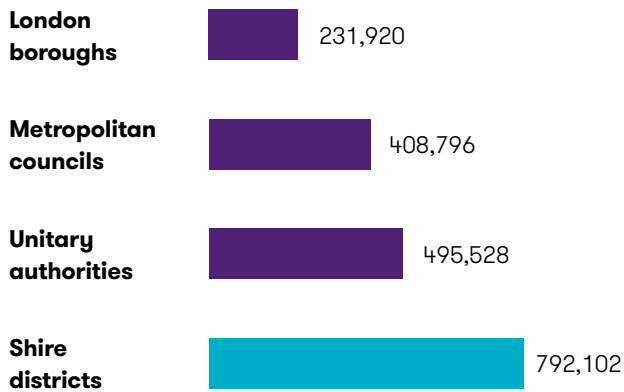
District Council areas contain just over 40% of the businesses and around a third of the economic output in England. In shire areas, districts are the local leaders for economic development and regeneration, and strategic partners working with counties and LEPs, providing business advice and local intelligence, and attracting inward investment.

As the local billing, planning and licensing authorities, district councils already know their local businesses well. During lockdown, central government turned to districts as local partners in supporting businesses to cope with the immediate impacts of lockdown. As of mid-August, district councils had

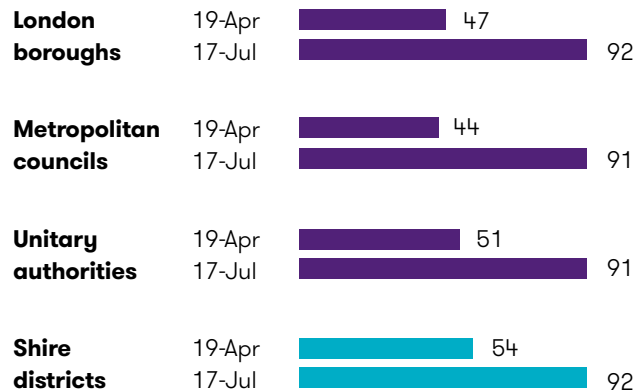
distributed grants approaching £9 billion in value to three quarters of a million businesses in Shire areas, demonstrating the ability of districts to operate economic support programmes at significant scale.

The data shows that district councils had processed the payment of emergency grants to 54% of eligible businesses by April 19th, a significantly higher proportion than bodies in single-tier areas, increasing to 92% by mid-July. The case studies submitted for this report illustrate how district councils innovated to expedite payment of these grants, building on existing networks and relationships and developing new digital processes.

Business in-scope for COVID-19 grants



% payments made to eligible businesses



Case study

South Kesteven District Council

Payment of Covid19 business grants

South Kesteven paid more than £10 million of critical business grants to local businesses within 24 hours of the money being received from Government. These businesses were further-supported by the Council's decision to postpone parking charges; the creation of an online directory of businesses that continued to trade in South Kesteven's market towns and villages; and regular business networking events that supported companies in both the business and visitor economies.

Payment of grants is just one of the many ways in which districts were able to support local economies during lockdown. In many cases, districts were able to tap into existing partnerships such as Town Deal governance structures, Business Improvement Districts, and local chambers of commerce to provide information, understand the needs of local businesses and manage the support and local adaptation required. In other cases new and inclusive networks for local businesses and employers have been created, for example with dedicated Covid-related social media groups being used to distribute information, create peer networks and gather intelligence. Many areas also ran local surveys to understand the immediate impacts on local businesses, mitigating the gaps and time lag inherent in traditional economic datasets.



Case study

Chelmsford City Council

Business recovery survey

In May, the City Council carried out a Business Recovery Survey. This went to over 3,000 SMEs, many of whom had applied for the Government funded business support grants. With close to 50% of respondents indicating that they don't expect to be trading in 12 months' time, the Council has used the Survey responses to connect with its business support partners agencies (Colbea, BEST Growth Hub, and Back to Business) to match support to business need, as the local economy seeks to recover.

As a result, districts have been able to:

- actively promote businesses within their area that continued to trade safely through "shop local" campaigns and publication of maps, lists and recommendations
- provide selective business rates holidays and relief
- provide crisis grants and funding outside the support provided by central government
- offer other relief such as rent waivers and suspension of parking charges
- creating virtual spaces for local markets, enabling local people to shop online with familiar traders
- refer businesses to other sources of funding available through local enterprise partnerships or bodies such as the Prince's Trust.



Case study

Stroud District Council

Promoting local businesses and high streets

Stroud District Council is working in close partnership with parish and town councils and local chambers of commerce to promote safe visits to our main market towns across the district, boosting business and helping economic recovery. We are just completing a highly successful six week 'shop local' campaign, in partnership with local businesses, that has generated huge interest on social media. We are now building on the relationships made to develop a comprehensive market towns strategy with partners, helping to re-define and boost vitality of our market towns and support the transition to a low carbon future.

Adaptation of public realm and high streets

As we enter recovery, the effective and safe functioning of the public realm is fundamental to the ongoing success of local economies. Districts, as stewards of the public realm, continue to play a collaborative role with local partners to achieve this, creating Covid-compliant public spaces to support the day-time and night-time economies. Case studies include examples of:

- re-opening high streets safely, collaborating with business improvement districts and town and parish councils where necessary
- communicating clearly and action-planning with local businesses to enable them to manage access and flow of people in harmony with their wider environment
- restricting and managing traffic to increase outdoor space for hospitality and food businesses and markets
- town-centre taskforces and ambassadors, tasked with helping the public to adapt their behaviour and stay within social distancing guidelines,
- working with partners such as Visit Britain and DCMS to market and safely re-open major visitor and tourist destinations, providing crucial support to local economies and tapping into changed tourist travel patterns
- collaboration with police and community safety partners and trade representation.



Case study

Harborough District Council

Re-opening the night-time economy

Under the Community Safety Partnership umbrella a task group was set up to support the reopening of the night time economy made up of several key partners. This saw a detailed action plan develop, night time helpers and very close liaison with the Police - plus a communications campaign around the safe return to our pubs and clubs. It saw us deal with any issues very quickly and respond to concerns around certain premises. This was led by the Portfolio holder so saw key member engagement in the recovery phase, and this continues to be reviewed as more premises open. Pubwatch were a key part of this so included trade representation.



Case study

South Lakeland District Council

Re-opening the visitor economy

The visitor economy is a particular area of priority for South Lakeland, with a third of our total employment in sectors (hospitality, retail and leisure) most highly impacted by Covid-19. We are working with Cumbria LEP on the economic response activity, and in particular with Cumbria Tourism, as the Destination Management Organisation, on a recovery marketing plan for the area to welcome people back in a responsible way. This is being co-ordinated along with our work with the parishes and County Council, as well as the National Park Authorities, in reopening our high streets safely.

Many district councils have also taken the opportunity to temporarily or permanently open up new sustainable travel routes and infrastructure to promote cycling and walking, support visitor economies and provide wider wellbeing and environmental benefits.



Case study

Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council

Re-Cycling Communities

Covid-19 has seen a surge in outdoor exercising and in particular cycling. Not long into lockdown the demand for bikes outweighed supply with waiting lists for new bikes being into October. The Physical Activity team made contact with a local father and daughter team from Burbage whom have spent lockdown maintaining, reconditioning and selling over 150 second hand bikes for Cure Leukaemia. Matching the service with an event at Hinckley Rugby Club on 08/08/20, a further £1,500 was raised and 20 local families, some who have been supported by partner agencies, have benefitted and are now getting out exploring the local area.

Carbon reduction and climate change

A global concern for decades, climate change has landed firmly on the local agenda within the last two years and is not to be forgotten against the dominant backdrop of economic recovery post-Covid. Around two-thirds of English districts have declared a climate emergency and have set out their plans for local action, often in collaboration with local partners. Measures taken include long-term reductions in emissions through:

- improvements to office space and premises and lower overall use of office space to reflect more home working
- re-phasing refuse rounds, using electronic vehicles and reducing business mileage through agile working
- focusing on “green and blue infrastructure”, including for example tree-planting, the creation of new meadows, orchards and ponds to increase biodiversity.
- installation of solar power and electronic vehicle charging infrastructure, often using joint venture models with private sector partners.
- creation of district heating schemes to re-use waste heat,
- low-carbon development and incentivising the retrofitting of existing buildings
- working with local councils to help them create own declarations and plans.





Case study

Wealden District Council

Local response to climate change

Wealden District Council declared a climate emergency in July 2019. By December 2019, we had approved an action plan, assessed the district's emissions, baselined the Council's emissions and developed pathways to net-zero. Cited as one of the "pioneering early plans" by the South East Climate Alliance, we are now working with our partners to decarbonise the district through a range of projects including the low carbon redevelopment of a shopping area (Hailsham Aspires), the development of an EV charging network, and the retrofit of existing buildings. We are also working with our local councils to help them deliver their own declarations and plans.

North Kesteven Climate Change

Local response to climate change

The Council was first in Lincolnshire to declare a Climate Emergency and has reduced emissions by 65% so far. To enact this response, workshops with colleagues, private sector partners and public identified priorities to achieve together. They were facilitated using the Doughnut Economic model by Kate Raworth and created actions defined as achievable now, within five years or 10 years. The result is a robust Action Plan that drives the Council to be zero carbon by 2040. Examples include waste heat from the Sleaford Renewable Energy Plant used for the main offices, and changing waste collection routes to save fuel.

Managing economic recovery for the long term

Separate research from Grant Thornton shows that almost six million people living in district council areas work in industrial sectors that are particularly exposed to disruption as a result of Covid-19, equating to 53% of residents compared with 44% for England's biggest cities and 38% for London. Even pre-COVID, shire areas were faced with significant and complex economic challenges around productivity, income disparity, skills, infrastructure funding gaps and digital connectivity.

Sadly, the turbulence that local economies have experienced in recent months is likely to be the start of a long and painful process of adjustment and recovery over a number of years. The next few months will also see the outcome of Brexit trade negotiations with the EU and settle the question of whether Britain leaves with or without a deal. There is also considerable uncertainty around the pace at which new trade agreements can be agreed outside the EU. Again, this is a national debate but the social and economic effects will be felt locally.

Longer term, places across England will be expected to grow their way into recovery through creation of new housing and employment spaces, supported by new investment in infrastructure. As the gatekeepers to strategic planning and growth, districts have a pivotal role to play in achieving this, and must find the solutions for the places they serve, creating sustainable and inclusive economies, driving housing growth and directly supporting businesses for the foreseeable future.

Irrespective of whether and when the Devolution and Recovery White Paper finally emerges, it will continue to be crucial for districts to think about "strategic geographies" in their areas and where appropriate work in clusters to support these, sharing strategies, plans, resources and assets.

Collaborating for resilience and impact



The 2018 toolkit highlighted the widescale success that many district councils have achieved with shared service models, which are much more prevalent amongst districts than other groups of local authorities. The toolkit pointed to a range of innovative models being explored by partnerships of districts and distilled some key lessons for others who may be at earlier stages of this journey. We also explored some of the ways in which County and District Councils collaborated by sharing assets and key posts.

In 2020, shared service models continue to be popular driven by the need to drive increasing efficiency and cost reduction, and the intrinsic benefits of building resilience and capacity. Data provided by the LGA indicates that 40% of all local authority shared services are led and operated by district councils. Many areas are in the process of progressively integrating services, structures and operating models, others remain in mixed economies of overlapping partnerships according to local opportunities and circumstances, whilst some authorities have not chosen to explore this model of collaboration for a variety of reasons.

There continues to be significant interest in enhanced partnership working between County and District Councils, and – an area that was not emphasised in the original toolkit – new models for collaborating and building resilience within local voluntary and community sector organisations.

Our key recommendations are:

- Relationships with voluntary and community sector partners have been galvanised by the response to Covid-19 and lockdown. Maintaining these relationships and continuing to build strength and resilience within the third sector will be critical to an effective social and economic recovery.
- Districts should continue to consider how to increase resilience and impact through dynamic local partnerships and shared services, thinking carefully around combining around functional economic areas and strategic geographies. These innovations can deliver investment, improved outcomes and savings without the disruption and distraction of reorganisation.

Enhanced partnership working between County and District Councils

The case studies provided for this report include a number of examples of close collaboration across County and District Councils with a focus on particular services such as social care, for example in the use of social prescribing, reablement and dementia support. Some areas have experimented with formal referral and commissioning structures to support this.

The last two years have seen a number of areas exploring more systematic and widescale functional reform across county and district councils as an explicit alternative to disruptive unitary discussions, supported by exploration of pooled financial benefits. Examples include:

- District shared services – district councils building on and extending existing patterns of shared services.
- Sharing and integration of services across district and county councils – such as back-office services, customer services or waste collection and disposal functions.
- Redistribution and delegation of services across district and county councils – some areas have explored the possibility of selectively scaling up and/or disaggregating key services between organisations although this has not been implemented successfully to our knowledge.
- Major service and structural integration – some district partnerships across England have fully integrated services and officer structures whilst remaining as sovereign democratic bodies. It would be technically and legally possible for County and District councils to do the same, although this would be unprecedented.

Local collaboration and a shared approach to solving place-based problems is intrinsically a good thing. In its most radical form, the potential financial benefits from functional reform could approach those offered by some unitary models. However, it must be noted that whilst many Shire areas have explored and experimented with this type of approach, none have yet implemented a functional reform proposition at this scale and in practice it may be very difficult to do so due to the inherent complexity and volatility of benefits pooling and multi-partner commissioning/shared service models.



Case study

South Staffordshire

Three-tier working

For South Staffordshire 3 tier working is an integral component of our Localities + model. Locality forums are held in each of the Council's five localities on a regular basis and include representation from all three tiers of members. The governance arrangements of the forums include County members as Chairman, and District members as Vice Chairman, with the forums giving local members an opportunity to join together on local community issues. There are six Locality Enablers, who are officers from the District Council who cover priority areas such as community safety, and street scene, and they provide a crucial point of contact for members, partners and community groups.



Case study

Districts and County Council in West Sussex

Experience West Sussex destination partnership

The Experience West Sussex Destination Partnership is the central voice for the region on tourism bringing together all the districts and boroughs in West Sussex, with the County Council who host the Partnership. Working in collaboration, EWSP delivers on destination management and the visitor economy, including industry intelligence, local business support, and creative marketing campaigns to attract visitors. The districts and boroughs as well as local businesses benefit from the economies of scale this brings as well as creating unified representation across the area when working with DCMS, LEP and other regional and national bodies such as Visit Britain.

Building resilience within voluntary and community groups

Many districts have also highlighted their work to build systemic resilience within their local voluntary and community sector, with the aim of building capacity to work with a wide range of potential challenges and scenarios – alongside the obvious Covid-19 response other examples given including managing the impacts of local flooding. Case studies point to the importance of building networks, mapping gaps in the system, co-creating networks and action plans, and using influence to generate investment in key projects.



Case study

Norwich City Council

Building resilience in the voluntary and community sector

Prior to covid, NCC had facilitated VCSE partners which were all linked by their use of food to come together to create a network called the Norwich Food Network, and from this group an extra group called the Norwich Food Poverty Alliance, led by VCSE partners. Not long prior to Covid-19 in October 2019 they had released and the council adopted, their food poverty action plan which identified gaps in the system and places we could work better together. This work was already being picked up with the council using its influence to generate investment in key projects so when Covid-19 hit, the city had a solid foundation. This group was given a dedicated officer who worked solely with food groups and supported them with funding, linking up, noting gaps and helping them get the word out to residents and frontline council staff about what their support entailed. The officer also linked back in to the councils' own Community Hub which was providing the food support for those on the shield list with no other options to ensure it was all joined up across the city. Bulk purchasing and contact information was shared, donations of food such as chocolate and pasta to the council was rerouted through these groups to ensure it was shared and groups were able to access support to continue and develop their offers. This resulted in minimal numbers of people from a large shielding population needing that crisis support as it was available in their own community.

Collaborating for devolution and reform



The 2018 toolkit reflected the contemporary conversation about public sector reform, with a unitary Buckinghamshire having just been provisionally approved by the Secretary of State and discussions underway about reform in Northamptonshire.

In October 2020 the government's appetite and timescale for reform is currently unclear, with a recent change in minister, indefinite delays to the devolution and recovery white paper and some local partnerships uncertain about the status of existing or developing unitary proposals.

In this context, districts are pushing ahead with building dynamic local partnerships focused on housing delivery, investment, economic growth and recovery; collaborating around functional economic geographies without the need for wholesale structural change.

Our key recommendations are:

- Government and local partners must carefully consider the risks in dismantling a tried and tested local planning and delivery infrastructure that has the potential to accelerate delivery on recovery and growth without the disruption of reorganisation.
- Government must also recognise and support existing and new dynamic local partnerships based around strategic economic geographies.
- In areas where there is local support for reform, all partners should work collaboratively and openly on proposals to avoid damage to relationships, disruption and wasted time.
- Districts should be on the front foot in thinking how positive change can improve outcomes for communities and local economies

Delivering through uncertainty

Our first-hand experience is that many district councils, along with their partners, are frustrated at the distraction caused by seemingly abortive unitary discussions whilst continuing to manage the ongoing Covid-19 response. In areas where there may be broader support for change, there is also frustration that effort and resource spent in developing proposals may now be wasted.

It is still the case that local leaders must determine the best model for local reform in their own context, and that a collaborative approach to developing proposals is intrinsically better than a public fight. Based on our conversations with a wide range of district colleagues in recent months, we recognise that districts are positive about change, reform and exploring new ways to support local communities and economies. Whatever the local solution is in terms of devolution and recovery, districts are the building blocks.

As the heat is taken out of unitary debates it is possible that the government's short-term focus will be a more pragmatic "what works, works" approach to socio-economic recovery, building on delivery infrastructure put in place by existing local partnerships. District councils are necessarily the building blocks for "strategic geographies" and it remains crucial to think carefully about functional economic areas and to recognise how these may have evolved as a result of changing economic behaviour and travel patterns in a post-Covid environment.

Districts recognise the need to think and act at scale for some issues such as transport, but it is important not to lose the "local" in local government. As the case studies in this document show, effective delivery is done locally by people who understand communities and businesses. There is a careful balance to be struck between responding locally and thinking strategically – district councils already do both.

Conclusions

Looking ahead to the next two years and beyond, there is little sign that things are going to get easier for communities, businesses and the public services that support them. Instead of imposed disruption, district councils will continue to work closely with their local partners and central government to deliver the socio-economic recovery and growth that the country desperately needs.

District Councils with their local and national partners must reflect deeply on what has worked well during this incredibly challenging period and work together to keep hold of the positive changes in ways of working for the long term. District Councils have responded very effectively during the pandemic, and whatever the next crisis, resilience is enhanced by having services and decisions as close to the community as possible. Government must think carefully before prematurely dismantling a system that has delivered so well.

In turn, districts must continue to think about how they can build and support dynamic local partnerships over geographies that reflect how economies work in practice, and then demonstrate the pace and ambition in delivery of which they are capable.

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