

Herald Magazine 'Big Read'
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There are weeks where decades happen. That's how it's felt at times throughout the pandemic.

The hope now is that a return to some greater degree of normality is on the horizon, despite a surging infection rate.

But what kind of society and economy are facing us? And what does it mean for public services?

The Office for National Statistics recently highlighted that 21% of adults in Britain experienced clinical depression between January and March this year; more than double pre-pandemic levels.

Young people have borne the brunt economically, given the under 25s are disproportionately employed in those sectors which have been hardest hit by lockdown and social distancing measures.

Grief, financial worries and social isolation have all been taking their toll and the mental and physical health consequences will be with us for years.

So, what comes next?

Last December, the Scottish Government published a report outlining the impact of Covid on Scotland's National Performance Framework outcomes. The Framework is the Government's report card; how it measures itself against the big objectives for the country.

The report identified four "key harms" wrought by Covid. These were the direct health impact, including deaths and hospital admissions; the indirect health impact, including cancelled or postponed treatment for other conditions such as cancer; the societal impact of lockdown measures, including increased loneliness, mental ill-health and the impact of school closures; and the economic impact, including unemployment.

Addressing each of these is quite rightly the immediate priority and public services will, as ever, be on the frontline.

Pre-pandemic we knew the strain our public services were under and the consequences. Successive Governments have prioritised health, social care and education spending, which has impacted significantly on other local services such as culture and leisure.

Between 2014 and 2017 the culture and leisure sector absorbed a 7.5% reduction in funding from local government, which equated to a 4% reduction in funding for museums, galleries and libraries, and a 9% reduction in sport funding.

In 2018, Audit Scotland forecast that by the middle of this decade local government would be spending 80% of budgets on education and social work.

Recovering from Covid is going to place even more strain on the current funding model for culture and leisure.

Most local government cultural and leisure services in Scotland are delivered by independent trust structures and prior to the pandemic this model worked very well; enabling

arms-length organisations to earn income from a variety of sources as well as strengthen their budgets through non-domestic rates relief.

That was one of the primary drivers for Glasgow City Council's creation of Glasgow Life, the charity that I head, in 2007.

During the decade preceding Covid, Glasgow Life grew annual earned income by around 64%, from £23.2m in 2008/9 to £38m in 2018/19. As part of this, income from our sport and physical activity programmes rose from £7m to more than £22m in that period.

This income, from people paying for gym memberships and ticket sales to our wide variety of concerts, exhibitions and other events, subsidised a wide range of social and community programmes targeting deprivation.

It also helped to reduce the financial burden on Glasgow City Council, and contributed towards cultural, sporting and heritage assets of regional, national and international significance.

Almost overnight, the pandemic wiped out our annual £38m earned income, leaving many of our services and venues with an uncertain future, and at a time when they are needed most.

We are forecasting a conservative income target of £6.4m, at best, in this financial year.

However, the harsh reality of the prolonged financial pressures we face is that we will simply not be able to restart additional services or open more venues beyond those we have already announced without significant additional funding.

The experience of the past 17 months has demonstrated how just important cultural and leisure services are on so many levels.

Across Glasgow and the west of Scotland, tourism, hospitality, the arts, sport, heritage and culture employ almost 80,000 people and bring over £1bn to the local economy.

We also know that regularly participating in cultural activities is linked to improvements in wellbeing, particularly in relation to positive mental health and increased social connection. And we know that regular physical activity prevents at least 20 health conditions and supports positive mental health.

To put Glasgow Life's contribution to the mental, physical and economic wellbeing of Glasgow and Scotland into context, Audit Scotland has said that a 4-5% increase will be needed in local authority expenditure in the years ahead to cover increasing demands in social care and education.

That 5% is greater than the total annual budget allocated to everything Glasgow Life manages – all 33 libraries, 33 sports centres, 26 community centres, nine museums, all of our community learning services, youth programmes, concert halls, theatres, all major events, destination marketing activities and the city's Convention Bureau; reflecting a workforce of more than 2,500 employees.

More worryingly, Glasgow, pre-Covid, was the best funded culture and leisure service in Scotland.

Going forward, culture and sport must be instrumental features in the recovery from the harms the Scottish Government has identified. As a sector with an unrivalled skills network we have always created good quality jobs and improved health and wellbeing.

The questions for me now are twofold. Firstly, how do we pay for cultural, sporting and heritage assets which have a national and international role?

Surely the answer is from a mixture of earned income, funding from local government for local services and building a long-term funding settlement with the Scottish and UK Governments to support the social and economic recovery of Glasgow as one of the UK's major city region areas; recognising that the city's cultural and sporting programmes, events and venues are globally significant.

Despite devolution, the Westminster Government retains powers to stimulate economic development across the UK. We've already seen this kind of partnership between local authorities, Scottish and Westminster Governments around City Region Deals. These focus on investing in physical infrastructure. Now is the time to build a recovery by investing in the creative capacity, health and wellbeing of people.

The second question is how do culture and sport approaches to renewal become core parts of local public services which focus on employment and health and wellbeing?

At least part of the answer to this comes from the social prescribing approaches which have received a lot of media coverage over the last two years.

Increasingly, front-line services such as the NHS and the police are spending huge amounts of time and resource dealing with the consequences of mental distress and loneliness. Many of these issues are complex and require medical interventions, but for people living with anxiety and low mood the support available cannot be limited to prescriptions alone.

We need to increase options that reduce our reliance on the NHS and employ a range of cultural and sporting activities which involve building confidence, improving social connections and creating access to nature and green space.

People need help to make participation in these activities a regular part of their coping strategies and the content of much of this will involve art, reading, drama, sport and music.

So, we need an honest conversation across all governments around how we can work together more effectively to make this happen via a new funding model.

And, perhaps more importantly, we need a new more imaginative mind set around how public services work together, with culture and sport playing an intrinsic role in how we tackle the biggest challenges.

Whatever the post-Covid landscape may bring, Glasgow Life's mission will remain the same: to inspire every citizen and visitor to become engaged and active in a city globally renowned for culture and sport.

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