Back to Normal or Back to Better?

Building on Positive Responses to Covid-19 in Northern Ireland
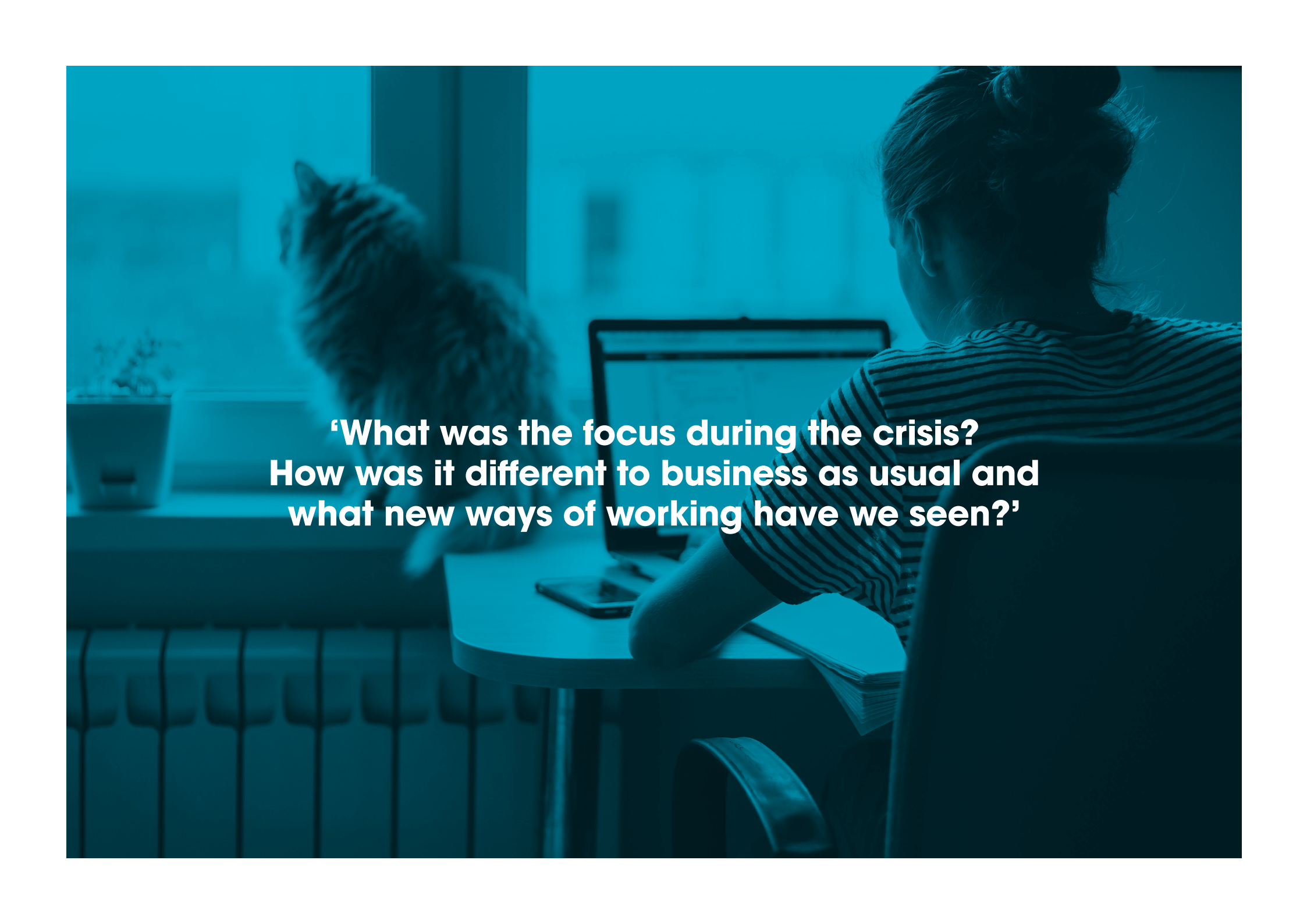
November 2020

SOCIAL CHANGE INITIATIVE

1. Background

- SCI is a Belfast-based NGO working with activists, funders and policy makers to achieve lasting social change. One element of its work includes extracting the lessons learned from a significant partnership between philanthropy (The Atlantic Philanthropies) and government (Delivering Social Change) in Northern Ireland, which aimed to deliver service transformation and embed new ways of working in public services.

- There is building pressure to transform public services in Northern Ireland. Our core services are straining to meet current needs with available funding. If we are to improve outcomes for the people who live here, tackle disadvantage and make public services sustainable into the future, we need to find better ways to plan and deliver them.

- The Shifting Gear report (produced by SCI and Deloitte) reflects on the lessons of the AP/DSC partnership and Deloitte's international experience, highlighting factors that enable public service transformation and suggesting steps that might be taken in Northern Ireland.

- The government response to the covid-19 pandemic has involved rapid, large scale transformation in public services, with the introduction in a matter of weeks of new and reconfigured services and systems that would normally take months or years to create. Many public sector workers have shifted to remote working almost overnight, while others have been quickly redeployed into high demand areas and emergency operations.

- It is clear from the response to this unprecedented crisis that significant capacity exists in public services to work in the ways described in the Shifting Gear report - acting decisively, innovating and collaborating with others in pursuit of a shared outcome. What can be learned from this experience that might support the wider transformation needed to achieve better outcomes from our public services?

2. About this project

- To explore this further, SCI has conducted a series of non-attributable interviews with senior figures from government departments, health, education and the voluntary sector in Northern Ireland, all of whom have been leading change in response to the covid-19 crisis.

- They spoke candidly to us about:

  - the different (and in some ways more effective) ways of working they have seen during the crisis, and the factors that seem to have enabled them;

  - what has changed as a result of this experience and the new capabilities and resources that now exist; and

  - the steps that might be taken to build upon the positives so that they are sustained into normal ways of working in the future.

- Other reviews will judge how well the decisions taken during the response served to protect and support the public; that is not the purpose of this study. Rather, in the midst of the continuing terrible impact of Covid-19, this report looks for signs of positive change in how we have worked together that can be built on in the future. This is important to provide effective support to those hit hardest by the crisis in the short term and to address the longer-term need for public service transformation.

'What was the focus during the crisis?
How was it different to business as usual and
what new ways of working have we seen?'
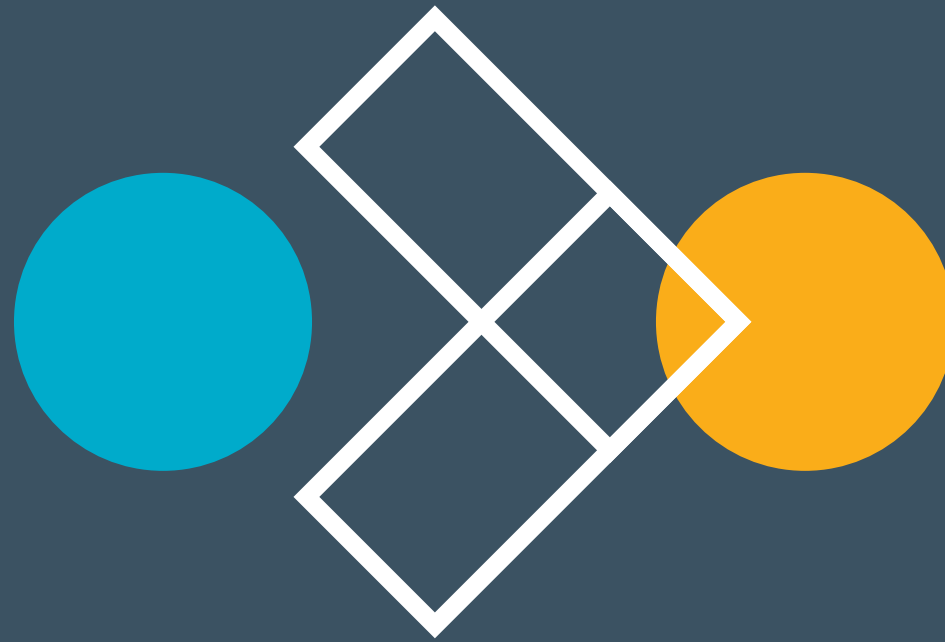
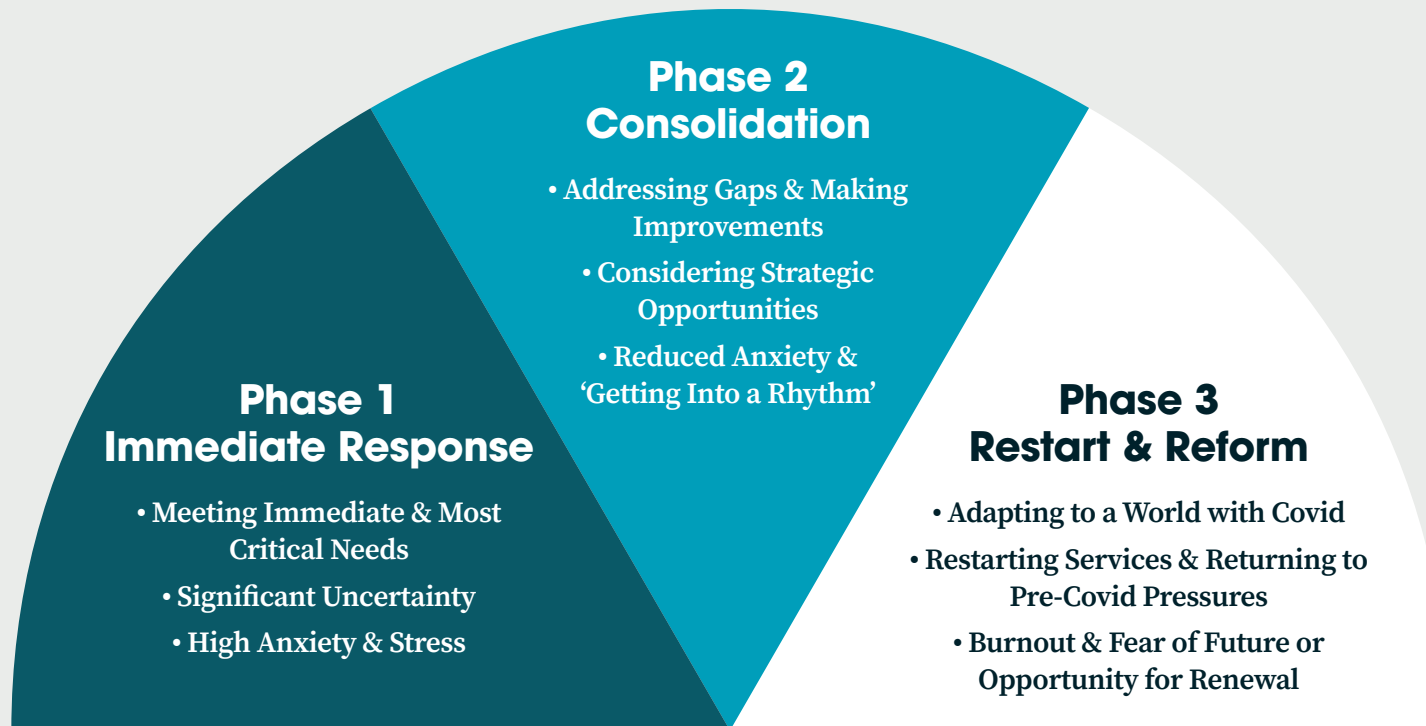# 3. What we Have Seen During the Crisis

Rapid Transformation

- People told us about how their respective organisations had responded to the covid-19 shutdown in terms of their services, staff and internal processes:

- where possible, services were moved online and new protocols were introduced for those needing to continue on a face to face basis. Changes were made to ensure continuity of existing services and brand new services were created to meet emerging needs. Services deemed unnecessary were suspended to protect staff and create capacity in other higher priority areas.

- emergency management structures (often pre-determined in organisations' contingency plans) were stood up, including new structures for internal communications, situation reporting and planning meetings.

- many staff moved to working from home, some were redeployed into priority service areas, whereas others saw their position furloughed, particularly in the voluntary sector where the lockdown effectively halted public fundraising and organisations quickly faced financial insecurity.

The Crisis Arc

- Leaders identified 'phases' in the crisis that had distinct characteristics and demanded different responses, as shown in the diagram below. The analysis that follows makes reference to these phases.

- For some leaders the current phase is the most challenging as it demands a return to pre-crisis pressures while continuing to deal effectively with the demands of covid-19. Some identified the potential to build on the momentum created by the crisis, taking action on long-needed public service transformation.

Phase 2
Consolidation

- Addressing Gaps & Making Improvements
- Considering Strategic Opportunities
- Reduced Anxiety & 'Getting Into a Rhythm'

Phase 1
Immediate Response

- Meeting Immediate & Most Critical Needs
- Significant Uncertainty
- High Anxiety & Stress

Phase 3
Restart & Reform

- Adapting to a World with Covid
- Restarting Services & Returning to Pre-Covid Pressures
- Burnout & Fear of Future or Opportunity for Renewal

More Outcome-Focused Working

- Leaders told us there was a reconnection to public service values during the crisis and their role in supporting 'the essentials of life' - good health, basic income, housing, education etc. Social inequalities and the interrelationships between social issues were also highlighted. There was a strong sense of common purpose in public service organisations, with people being willing to do whatever was necessary to achieve their priorities around keeping the public and staff safe and well. These priorities were easily understood within organisations and shared by the public, resulting in a shared sense of working in the public interest.

- This encouraged a more outcome-focused style of leadership, with the development of solutions being devolved more than usual to teams and grant funded organisations. The latter told us that funders focused less on the activities and outputs that would be delivered and gave them more scope to work towards meeting agreed outcomes in the ways they felt would be most effective.

- Leaders reported significant reliance on data and evidence (including the views of the public) to inform their decisions about how best to work towards the agreed aims, and resources were invested in creating new data streams and dashboards.

- The shared view of public interest also gave leaders more confidence to take decisions and authorise action - to 'just do it' -shortcutting the normally lengthy approvals process. It was noted that, as time went on, concerns about future scrutiny grew and people began to document their rationale for decision making more carefully.

- After the first few weeks of the crisis, some leaders began to think more strategically about how their response to the immediate needs presented by the crisis could also help achieve their longer-term aims.

A Challenging But Rewarding Time for Staff

- Leaders praised the energy, commitment and adaptability of staff in their organisations in response to the rapidly changing circumstances of the crisis. Staff were variously required to: continue providing essential frontline services managing the risk with new infection control systems, transition to home working, take up new roles, develop new online modes of service delivery, work longer hours and, for some, accept temporary furlough. It was highlighted that many staff had carried a heavy burden, on top of the anxieties of their own personal, health and family circumstances.

- Despite this very challenging context, there was a view among several leaders that in some ways the crisis had been empowering and rewarding.

- There were new opportunities for people to 'step up' into problem solving roles and to flex their creative, leadership and other skills. People in middle management roles that are often process-focused, had more scope to create solutions and take decisions, and were described as having been energised by the experience. Some civil servants in niche policy areas suddenly found their roles were critical to maintaining essential services and these 'unlikely heroes' found new fulfilment in their roles.

- Staff wellbeing became a very high organisational priority and steps were taken to improve communications, ensure appropriate breaks, respond to people's individual needs and provide emotional support. As a result people felt more valued and better looked after than normal. Simply acknowledging the challenge people were facing was cited as having been important to maintaining their positivity and energy.

More Agile Working & Innovation

- Leaders noted how the pressure to act quickly during the crisis seemed to encourage more innovative and agile ways of working and to reduce bureaucracy.

- Some leaders reported there had been less 'noise' in their organisations and greater 'freedom to act'. There was a reduced demand from external stakeholders for involvement in operational matters and leaders felt they could focus on taking decisions and implementing change. They highlighted the importance they placed on engaging with external stakeholders, but suggested a need to find more effective ways of doing so in future.

- Leaders also described a more agile approach to transformation during the crisis. Given the urgency to act, they strived less for perfection, introducing 'good enough' solutions quickly and then reviewing and improving them in the field or stopping whatever wasn't working. There was a sense that the scope to take managed risks was greater than normal, underpinned by a view that the greater risk would be to do nothing. Leaders commented that there was temporary relief from the 'stifling' impact of regulation and public expectations on innovation and healthy risk taking.

- Remote working became almost ubiquitous during the crisis (supported by rapid adoption of video-conferencing technology) and many services went online or were delivered by telephone. Working from home provided greater flexibility for all, reduced travel time (commuting and going between meetings) and enabled vulnerable people to continue to work. However, leaders highlighted that as well as the current challenge faced by many to combine work and childcare, home working also involves long, relentless hours at screens, and reduced social and professional interaction. Leaders advocated a balanced model with time spent working at home and with others in the workplace.

- Technology also supported organisations to keep serving people and to introduce new support services, but leaders warned about data security and inequality of access to digital skills and infrastructure, and therefore the need to keep providing non-virtual options.

New Attempts to Collaborate & Co-Produce

- Many leaders reported that there had been more collaboration during the crisis: between government departments and the voluntary and community sector; among voluntary organisations; and between government departments and business organisations. This was not universal however, with the degree of collaboration between government and non-government actors reportedly being quite variable across policy areas.

- Where significant efforts had been made to work collaboratively, new, effective working relationships had been established and greater respect developed for each others' skills and resources. Leaders reflected that the sense of common purpose that existed during the crisis had helped bring people together. However, they also observed that where they had to establish new relationships and modes of engagement during a crisis, that had been very challenging and pre-existing collaborative mechanisms would have provided a better starting place. The issue of representation in collaborative working structures was a difficulty identified both by leaders who had and had not been 'at the table'.

- The development of new services during the crisis involved genuine co-production between organisations / sectors, which those involved reported had been challenging but hugely valuable. Putting the co-production theory into practice required the development of new modes of engagement and a sense of shared accountability. Strong commitment and leadership was required. It was thought that this collaborative experience had been more effective than previous attempts because it was time limited and focused on a tangible product.

- There was also new collaboration within organisations, with management and front-line staff working better together to find and jointly implement solutions. Frontline staff reported being listened to and trusted to find the right solution as a result of this more bottom-up approach.

- Several leaders from different sectors highlighted that a major shortcoming in terms of collaboration related to service users whose voices were largely absent in the midst of the fast-paced response to the crisis. This continued even as the crisis moved into the consolidation phase and more time and space became available. They urged an immediate remedying of this situation.

- The policy advocacy space was also described as having 'closed down' during the crisis - advocacy organisations campaigned jointly on immediate, critical issues but there was limited scope to engage on longer-term, systemic issues.

What was helpful?

Leaders identified some of the factors that seemed to help during the crisis:

Access to Senior Decision Makers

Devolved Decision Making

Remote Communications Technology

Clear & Regular Staff Communications

A Simple Message Everyone Gets

Having Tasks to Deliver

A Common Goal

Ideas from Diverse Sources

Good External Relationships

Data & Analysts

Open & Outward Looking Attitude

Individual Commitment & Resilience

Financial Resources

'What has changed?
What new capabilities & resources do we now have?'

4. Where We Are Now

Changes and New Capabilities to Build Upon

- Leaders were to varying degrees cynical and cautious in their predictions about the longer-term impact of the covid-19 crisis on public services - particularly as regards identifying any lasting cultural change - but they agreed that new ways of working and new capabilities were emerging that could be built upon:

- New relationships between organisations and people, with greater respect and understanding of respective skills and resources.

- Practical experience and skills of co-production between government and the voluntary sector and lessons learned about 'putting the rhetoric into practice'.

- Flexible working practices developed; working from home and joining meetings online accepted as valid.

- New skills developed in rapid transformation and implementation using more agile approaches.

- Experience of more evidence informed and outcome-based working, supported by new data systems.

- A sense of achievement among a workforce with greater confidence in its abilities and insight into the impact of its work.

'How can we build on the positives?'
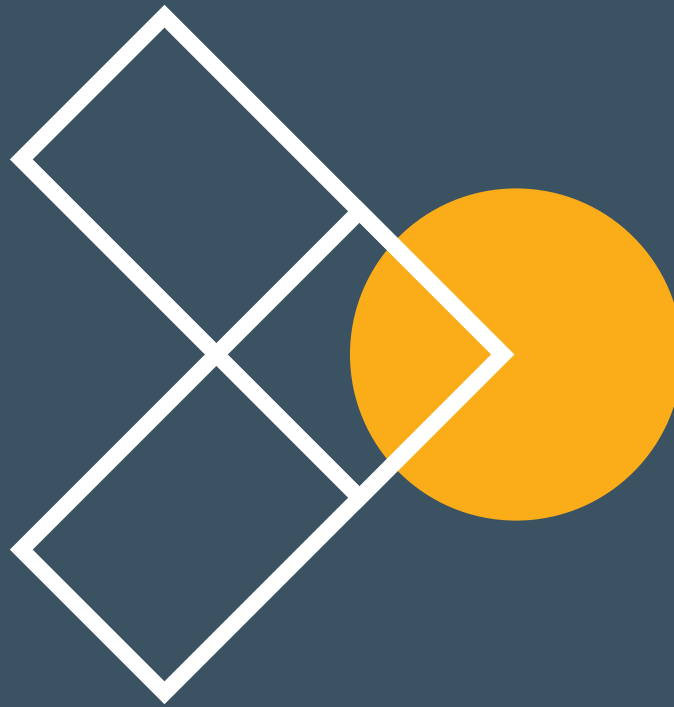
5. Next Steps

Ways to Sustain Positive Change

- Many people at all levels are tired and burned out from the pressures of the covid-19 crisis, which is evolving rather than coming to an end. Covid-19 increasingly needs to be managed alongside re-emerging public service pressures.

- Leaders recommended that the first step in building back better is to acknowledge this and **support and invest in staff**:

  - create opportunities for staff to 'come up for air' and reflect on their experiences, lessons learned and how to move forward positively.

  - retain some of the communications and wellbeing support structures put in place to support people during the early days of the crisis.

  - keep empowering people to act as problem solvers and implement solutions, in particular creating 'the space to perform' for middle managers.

  - develop the crisis home working model into a new flexible way of working that offers more choice, a blend of onsite and offsite working, with reduced travel and appropriate technology support.

- Build on the greater focus that emerged during the crisis on 'life's essentials' - good health, basic income, housing, social connectedness - **to open up mature public conversations** about transforming our public services so they can meet people's needs in a sustainable way.

- Build on the experience of **working in a more outcome-based way**, supporting staff and politicians to adopt this approach as envisaged in the Programme for Government, and resisting the temptation to focus on output delivery in the crisis recovery period.

- Urgently **re-open the policy advocacy space and engagement with service users** to ensure that longer term planning for a world with covid-19 reflects the needs of the most disadvantaged.

- Work on **reducing bureaucracy** by finding better ways to balance external engagement, scrutiny and regulation with delivering services and effecting change.

Ways to Sustain Positive Change

- Keep **building relationships** within and between organisations - 'you'll never regret it, there is no downside'.

  - consider how permanent structures can adapt so they better encourage the kind of pooling of management and frontline staff skills and resources that was seen during the crisis.

  - implement new structures to further develop inter-sectoral collaboration and co-production, sustaining senior level involvement (decision making power) in collaborative vehicles.

- Embed the use of **innovation methods** to accelerate transformation:

  - continue using agile approaches to design and implement change - 'stop waiting for perfection' - and develop a culture of appropriate and managed risk taking.

  - keep engaging frontline staff in problem solving and ensure that service users are involved in a meaningful and sustained way.
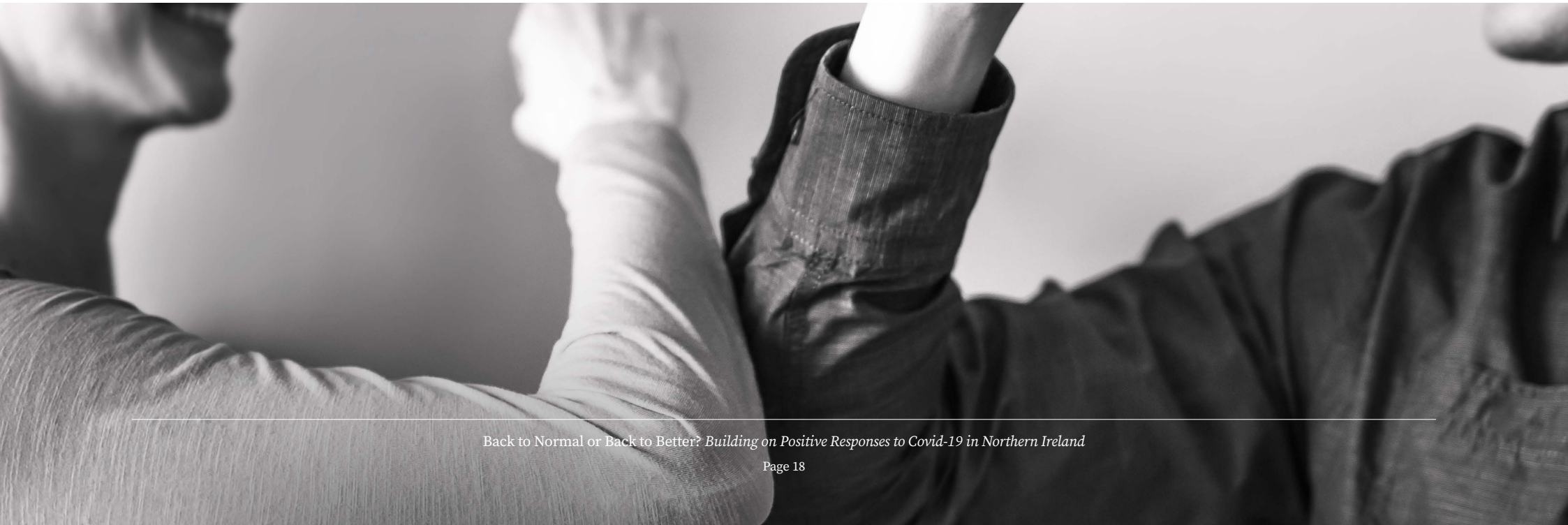
Actions

- This report aims to support ongoing and future efforts to transform public services in Northern Ireland and embed an outcomes-focused approach.

- By illustrating the experiences of a cross-section of public service leaders during the pandemic, SCI hopes that it will stimulate further reflection (within and between organisations) on:

  - how different (and more effective) ways of working were employed during the crisis;

  - the lessons learned and new capabilities that have been developed as a result; and

  - how to build upon these experiences in the future.

- SCI is keen to engage with organisations on this report and the findings of the Shifting Gear report to encourage new action and thinking that improves outcomes and the effectiveness of efforts to achieve them.