Overview of Local Authority Covid-19 Innovations

Local Government Management Agency
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LGMA
AN GHNÍOMHAIREACHT BAINISTÍOCHTA RIALTÁIS ÁITIÚIL
LOCAL GOVERNMENT MANAGEMENT AGENCY

Údaráis Áitiúla Éireann
Local Authorities Ireland

CCMA
Cumann Lucht Bainistíochta Contae agus Cathrach
County and City Management Association

Contents

Table of Figures

Case Studies

Appendices

Executive Summary

Innovation across the public service is a primary policy focus within OPS2020, and the objective of the State is to support the public sector in developing innovative services for the Irish public.

Innovation in this context captures more than technological innovations and can occur across both the provision of local authority internal services and business processes, and the delivery of public services, advice, and guidance. The current COVID-19 pandemic has required all public bodies to develop innovative ways of providing these services. As the closest level of government to citizens, local government has been challenged to develop and implement innovative solutions to the way it operates in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study assesses the level of innovation in the local government sector in the context of COVID-19. It identifies the challenges experienced by the local government sector as a consequence of COVID-19 and the structures implemented to address these challenges. It then identifies the key solutions implemented by the sector in response to these challenges and highlights the key learnings for the sector.

Based on 216 identified innovations obtained from all local authorities nationally through questionnaire responses, the study finds that primary challenges experienced by the sector arising from COVID-19 related to both I.T. and non-I.T. internal services. Internal service challenges were followed by service delivery to community/voluntary groups, library service provision, staff welfare, and public health and well-being concerns.

The study demonstrates that local authorities largely utilised either existing formal internal governance structures or developed informal ad hoc internal structures to develop innovative solutions, with limited use of governance structures with external agencies required.

In the context of implemented solutions, results primarily indicate that the sector redesigned existing business processes, provided enhanced internal I.T. services to support working from home, improved online service provision for public/businesses and developed enhanced internal I.T. capabilities to support internal services.

Key learning identified were largely positive in terms of respondents' overall perceptions of the success of initiatives implemented. Learnings included future requirements to ensure sufficient sectoral I.T. capabilities to support internal services and updating business process and supporting remote working for staff. Identified learnings also included the need to support greater use of online and telephone communication channels for public service delivery and the desire to upscale successful customer initiatives to other areas to build on successes achieved. Finally, a mobile workforce and the need to support staff through the crisis were also important to developing appropriate solutions.

The results demonstrate the willingness of the sector to change and highlight existing capacities within the sector to lead this change. Local authorities have demonstrated an ability to develop novel solutions to complex problems related to public service delivery, internal processes, and staffing provision and in service delivery to elected representatives in a short time period. Ensuring that positive innovations and outcomes are embedded in business-as-usual processes across the sector will determine the long-term success of those actions implemented by the sector in response to COVID-19.

1 Introduction and Context

Fostering innovation across the public service is a primary policy focus within OPS2020[1] and the objective of the State is to encourage the public sector to develop new ways of thinking about the delivery and design of services to the Irish public.

Innovation in this context captures more than technological innovations and can occur across both the provision of local authority internal services and business processes, and the delivery of public services, advice, and guidance. What has become apparent is that local authorities have embraced the culture of innovation as evidenced in their adaptation and innovation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the public sector across all operations. Personnel in all government departments, agencies and local authorities have had to quickly adapt and develop appropriate and innovative responses in order to deliver services to the public. In many instances, 'business as usual' services have had to be modified while additional work has been taken on to respond specifically to tasks related to the COVID-19 crisis. Within the current climate, the local government sector is having to change the way it works to ensure a full range of appropriate services are being provided to employees, councillors, and the public. Local government has taken a leadership role and is driving local responses in the areas of community and SME support, while also collaborating with a range of stakeholder including the health sector.

As the closest level of government to citizens, local authorities have been challenged to develop and implement innovative solutions in both their business processes and their delivery of public services. It is in this context that this research aims to support the local government sector by capturing the diversity of innovations that are taking place across the sector in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The key objectives of this research are to summarise the following:

1	The **diversity** of challenges experienced by the sector as a result of COVID-19
2	The key **formal and informal structures** implemented to address COVID-19 challenges
3	The **key solutions** implemented by the sector to address COVID-19 challenges
4	The **key learnings/obstacles** for the sector in implementing solutions to address COVID-19 challenges

The remainder of this report is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the methods used in this research, with Section 3 presenting research results. A discussion is provided in section 4, with concluding remarks offered in Section 5.

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1   https://www.ops2020.gov.ie/actions/innovating-for-our-future/innovation/

2 | Methods

2.1 | Background and measures

In order to gather feedback across the local government sector, a questionnaire was developed by the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA) Programme Management & Innovation Team with the support of the LGMA Research Unit. The objective was to capture a snapshot of innovations occurring across the sector in response to COVID-19. Specifically, it aimed to identify how local authorities adapted and changed practices to provide services to employees, councillors, and the public in the context of the restrictions imposed upon everyone during the first two months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The questionnaire consisted of six questions examining the following aspects (see Appendix 1 for full questionnaire):

1 Brief **title** of each specific COVID-19 challenge

2 Short description of each **challenge**

3 **Category** of the challenge (drop-down list provided)

4 **Structures** (if any) put in place to manage the challenge

5 Description of the **solution** that was implemented in response to each challenge

6 Key **learnings**/obstacles from the challenge and in implementing the solution

Apart from one question, all questions were open-ended by design to allow respondents to describe the issue experienced in detail. The questionnaire was designed to allow each respondent to identify up to five innovations using the same online link.

2.2 | Questionnaire administration and participants

The questionnaire was administered online through Survey Monkey, an online questionnaire tool, in April 2020 and remained open for a two-week period for input. The timing of questionnaire implementation was chosen to ensure responses were captured whilst the sector was currently responding to these challenges. This approach reduced the risk of respondents overlooking or omitting particular innovations after the innovation had passed.

Directors of Service and Chief Executives across all local authorities, and Grade 8 Managers, Assistant Chief Executives, and the Chief Executive within the LGMA were emailed by the LGMA Programme Management & Innovation Team with a direct link to complete the questionnaire online. Responses were received from all 31 local authorities and the LGMA. A total **of 91 responses were received across the sector, with 216 innovations identified within all functional areas**.

Results were analysed in Microsoft Excel. Detailed thematic analysis of all five open-ended responses was undertaken prior to analysis to identify and categorise emerging themes across each question and to allow for ease of interpretation of data. The results of the study are presented in Sections 3. Details of the specific themes identified for each question is provided in Appendix 2.

Of the 216 sectoral innovations identified, Monaghan County Council provided data for 37 innovations. This represents 17% of all innovations identified. This was followed by Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council, which provided data for 20 innovations; 9% of all innovations identified. Fourteen innovations were identified by Kerry County Council; 6% of all innovations identified. Tipperary County Council and LGMA each provided data for 13 innovations; each organisation provided 6% of all innovations identified. Data for the remaining 119 innovations (55% of all innovation identified) were distributed across the remaining 27 local authorities.
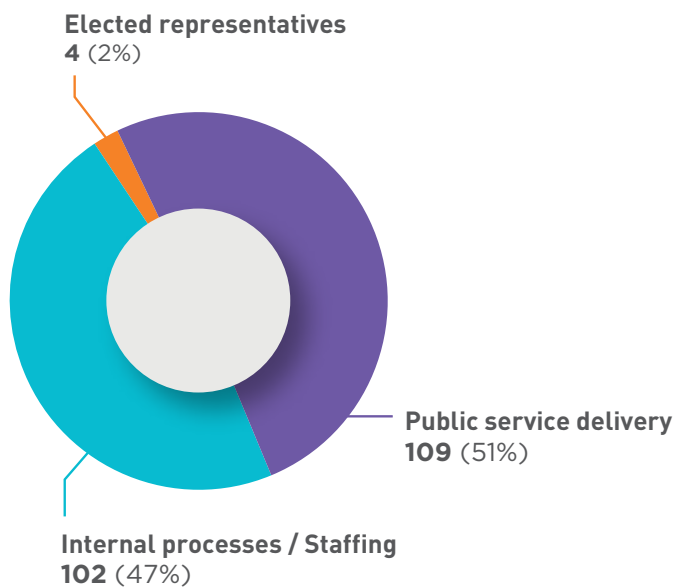
3 | Results

3.1 | Specific COVID-19 Challenges – Thematic Analysis Categorisations

Analysis of data related to specific challenges which the local government sector experienced as a result of COVID-19 showed that 51% (109) of challenges occurred in the delivery of public services. A further 47% (102) of challenges identified were related to internal processes and staffing, with the remaining 2% (4) of challenges associated with service delivery to elected representatives (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1

Local Government COVID-19 Challenges Experienced – General Theme

Elected representatives
4 (2%)

Public service delivery
109 (51%)

Internal processes / Staffing
102 (47%)

The results from Figure 3.1 were subsequently analysed at a more detailed level by identifying subthemes for each of the three main types of challenge experienced i.e. public service delivery, internal processes and staffing and provision of services to elected representatives. Results showed that 24% (52) of challenges were experienced within local government non-I.T. internal services. A further 18% (34) of identified challenges related to managing local government internal I.T. services. This was followed by challenges associated with public service delivery to community and voluntary groups at 15% (33).

Libraries accounted for 8% (17) of all challenges identified, whilst 21% of all challenges were associated with either ensuring staff welfare at 7% (16), ensuring public health and well-being at 7% (14) or providing other public services at 7% (14). Challenges were also identified across heritage/arts at 6% (13), provision of enterprise services at 3% (7), environmental management at 3% (6) housing management at 2% (5) and supporting elected representatives at 2% (4) (Figure 3.2).

Local authority Civil Defence units took on a range of tasks during Covid-19 including transporting patients, delivering medication and other items, delivery of PPE and delivery of food and other essential supplies as part of the Community Call.

Figure 3.2

Local Government COVID-19 Challenges Experienced - Sub Themes

Number of challenges experienced
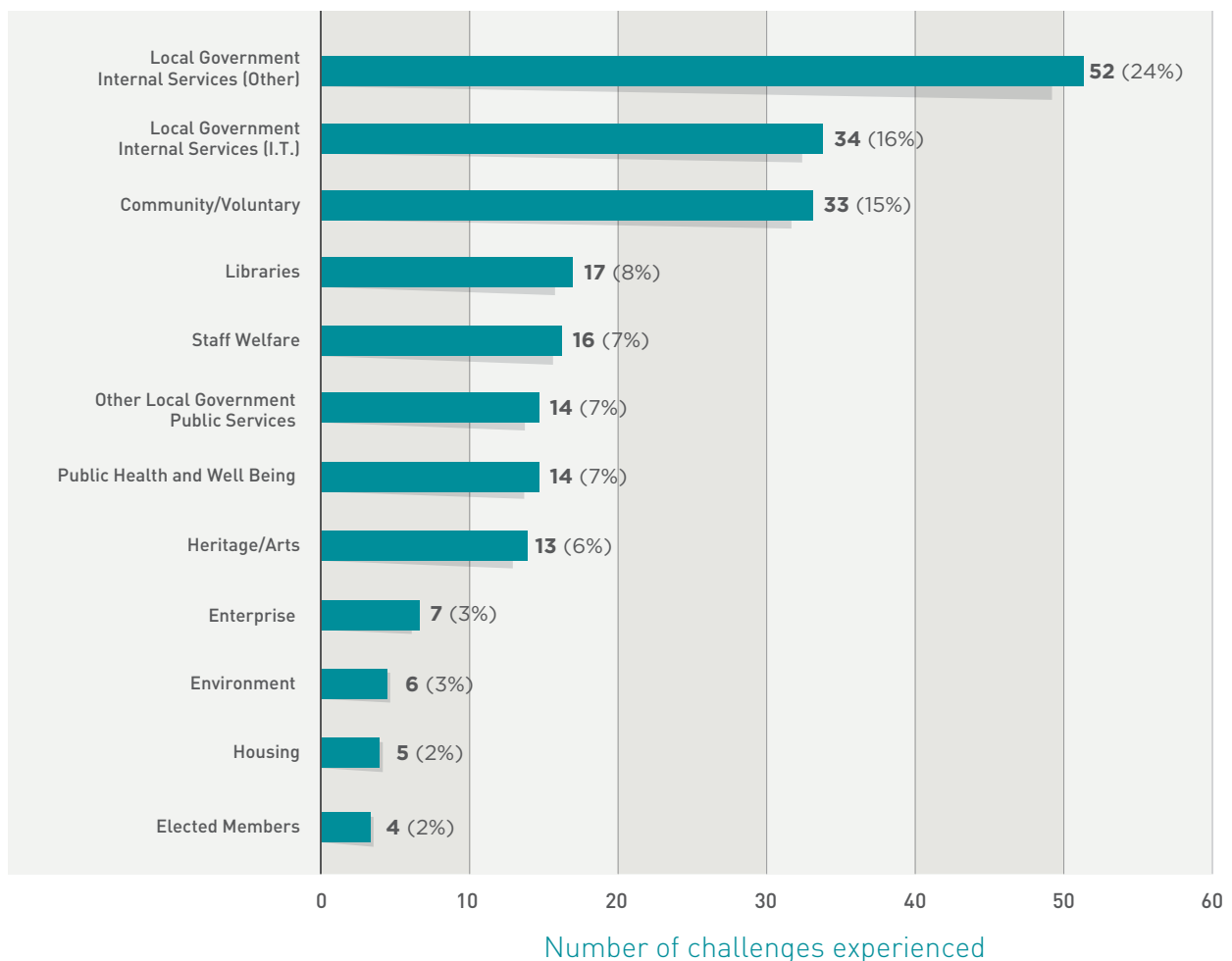
Case Study —— 1

Local Government Management Agency Libraries Development

Local Authority: Local Government Management Agency (on behalf of local government sector)

COVID-19 challenge: Legal restrictions to online library services and activities

Brief description of challenge: Reading stories to children in libraries ('Story time') is allowed under current copyright law. If this activity takes place online a digital recording of the activity is made. Presently this is not allowed under copyright law which means libraries are at liability of copyright infringement if they read stories online e.g. Facebook live during COVID-19 lockdown period.

Structures put in place: LGMA Libraries Development worked informally with the Department of Education, the Irish Copyright Licensing Agency, the Irish Publishers Association and the Irish Writers Union to propose a solution.

Brief solution: An agreement was reached between LGMA Libraries Development, the Irish Publishers Association and the Irish Writers Union to waive any liability for libraries during the COVID-19 lockdown period, enabling story times to take place online, and for them to be recorded for all authorities to use. It was agreed to promote Irish children's authors as part of the process, and this was incorporated into the Spring into Storytime reading programme, which took place entirely online for the first time.

Key learning: New partnerships were developed as part of this challenge, and there is the potential for more joint activities in the future. However, this is a temporary solution, and the outcomes (the videos) are supposed to be taken down at the end of the COVID-19 lockdown. This may limit the success of the initiative in the long-term so there are learnings in relation to the current copyright legislation in terms of whether it is fit for purpose in a post-COVID-19 environment.

## 3.2 | Specific COVID-19 Challenges – Respondents' Categorisations

Results of how respondents classified COVID-19 challenges map similarly to those challenges identified in the thematic analysis in Section 3.1. For instance, external communications (e.g. public/ councillors) represented 22% (96) of all problems identified by respondents. This was followed by communications with internal staff at 18% (77), implementing new requirements (e.g. Community Call Centre/community response), supporting business processes at 16% (70) and supporting new working arrangements at 14% (63).

Maintaining online electronic services (e.g. rent, planning and online payments) accounted for 4% (18) of all challenges identified, with management of financial payments at 3% (14), manual approval processes (e.g. Chief Executive orders) at 3% (11) and Other at 3% (e.g. procurement, staff health and welfare, housing maintenance, environmental management) identified as other challenges (Figure 3.3).

Note: Where a challenge impacted multiple local government functions, respondents could choose more than one categorisation from a list of 10 pre-defined options for this question.

Figure 3.3

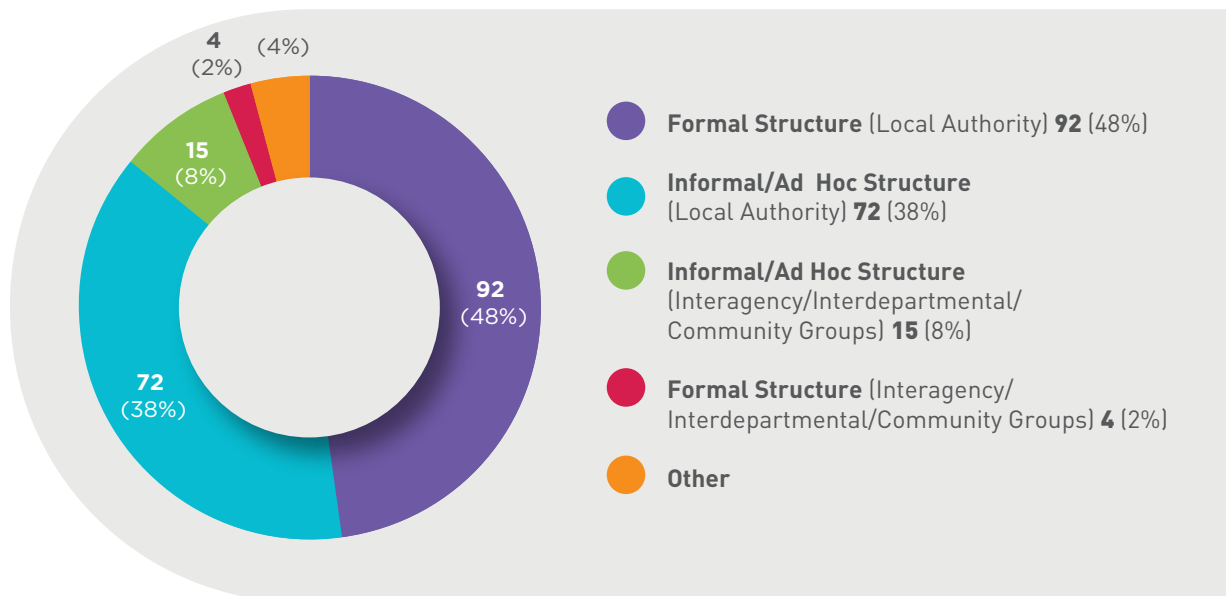**Local Government Categories of COVID-19 Challenges Experienced - Respondents' Categorisations**
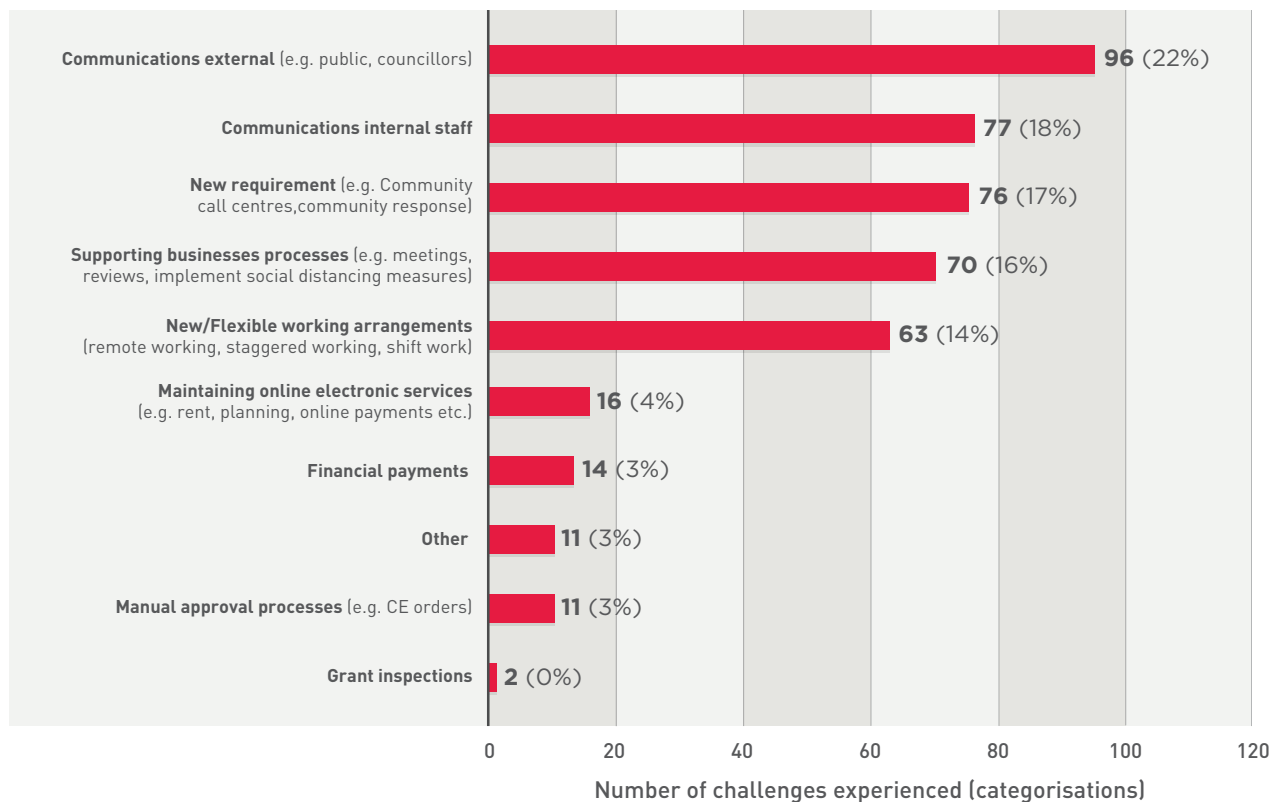
3.3 | Structures Implemented to Address COVID-19 Challenges

In the context of formal or informal structures implemented to address COVID-19 challenges e.g. governance structures or working groups, 86% of all challenges identified were managed through either formal or informal local government structures. Specifically, 48% of challenges (92) utilised an existing formal structure within their organisation (i.e. structure that was set up within existing local government protocols/processes to ensure delivery/management of services). Informal or ad hoc organisational structures (i.e. structure did not previously exist and was specifically set up to deliver COVID-19 services on a short term basis) were developed specifically to deal with COVID-19 challenges in 38% (72) of cases.

In relation to engagement with external agencies (e.g. government departments, other local authorities, community groups), 8% (15) of challenges required development of informal or ad hoc structures (i.e. structure did not previously exist and was specifically set up to deliver COVID-19 services on short term basis), whilst 2% (4) of challenges identified required the use of a formal structure with external agencies (i.e. structure that was set up within existing local government protocols/processes to ensure delivery/management of services). Other structures represented the remaining 4% (8) of approaches taken by the sector to address COVID-19 challenges (Figure 3.4).

Figure 3.4

Structures Implemented to Address COVID-19 Challenges

- **Formal Structure** (Local Authority) **92** (48%)
- **Informal/Ad Hoc Structure** (Local Authority) **72** (38%)
- **Informal/Ad Hoc Structure** (Interagency/Interdepartmental/Community Groups) **15** (8%)
- **Formal Structure** (Interagency/Interdepartmental/Community Groups) **4** (2%)
- **Other**

Case Study —2

South Dublin County Council Waste Permit Inspections

Local Authority: South Dublin County Council

COVID-19 challenge: Difficulty in carrying out remote Waste Facility Permit inspections

Brief description of challenge: South Dublin County Council has in excess of 40 permitted waste facilities operating within the county. As part of their permit conditions, the local authority's Waste Enforcement Unit is required to carry out multiple inspections of each facility throughout the year. Due to social distancing restrictions, physical inspections of facilities by Waste Enforcement Officers have not been possible. Alternative inspection methods were identified to ensure facilities were compliant with their permit conditions.

Structures put in place: Co-operation between the local authority's Waste Enforcement and the Waste Facility Permit Operators.

Brief solution: South Dublin County Council developed a procedure to carry out remote inspections of waste facilities whilst maintaining the integrity of the inspection outcome. The inspection utilised drones, smart phones, video chats, video inspection and email. To facilitate this the permit holder is advised a drone flight of their facility will take place and the requirements necessary for safe operation of the drone. Following the drone flight, a video chat is held with the permit operator to discuss the drone images. Proof of records is provided by email by the permit holder. Where required, the permit holder carries out a walkthrough of the site using the camera on their smart phone to allow Waste Enforcement Officers to inspect areas which cannot be inspected by drone.

Key learning: To ensure the Waste Permit holders comply with permit conditions, it is essential that enforcement inspections are maintained. The use of technologies such as drones and video chat allowed a virtual tour of the site without the Waste Enforcement Officers entering the site. Due to previous inspections of the facility, there is an element of trust and cooperation established and required by both parties to ensure success of the inspection.

3.5 | Key Learnings/Obstacles from COVID-19 Challenges and Implementing Solutions

In the context of key learning identified by the sector, in 18% of all solutions implemented respondents identified the need to ensure that sufficient I.T. capabilities exist to support internal services. This was followed by the need to update business processes in 17% (31) of solutions and supporting remote working for staff in 15% (27) of solutions applied. In 13% of solutions, a range of learnings were identified by respondents as important, classified as 'Other' in Figure 3.6 (e.g. Perspex glass maintenance, long-term economic planning, need for good 3rd party contract/government department supports, collaboration with other local authorities for increased efficiencies, diverse community views needed to solve crisis, community buy-in/societal buy-in to support local government service delivery). Identified learnings also included the need to support greater use of online and telephone communication channels for public service delivery in 12% (21) of solutions and the desire to upscale successful customer initiatives to other areas to build on successes achieved in 10% (18) of cases. Finally, in 14% (24) of cases respondents identified that both a mobile workforce and the need to support staff through the crisis were important learnings.

Figure 3.5:

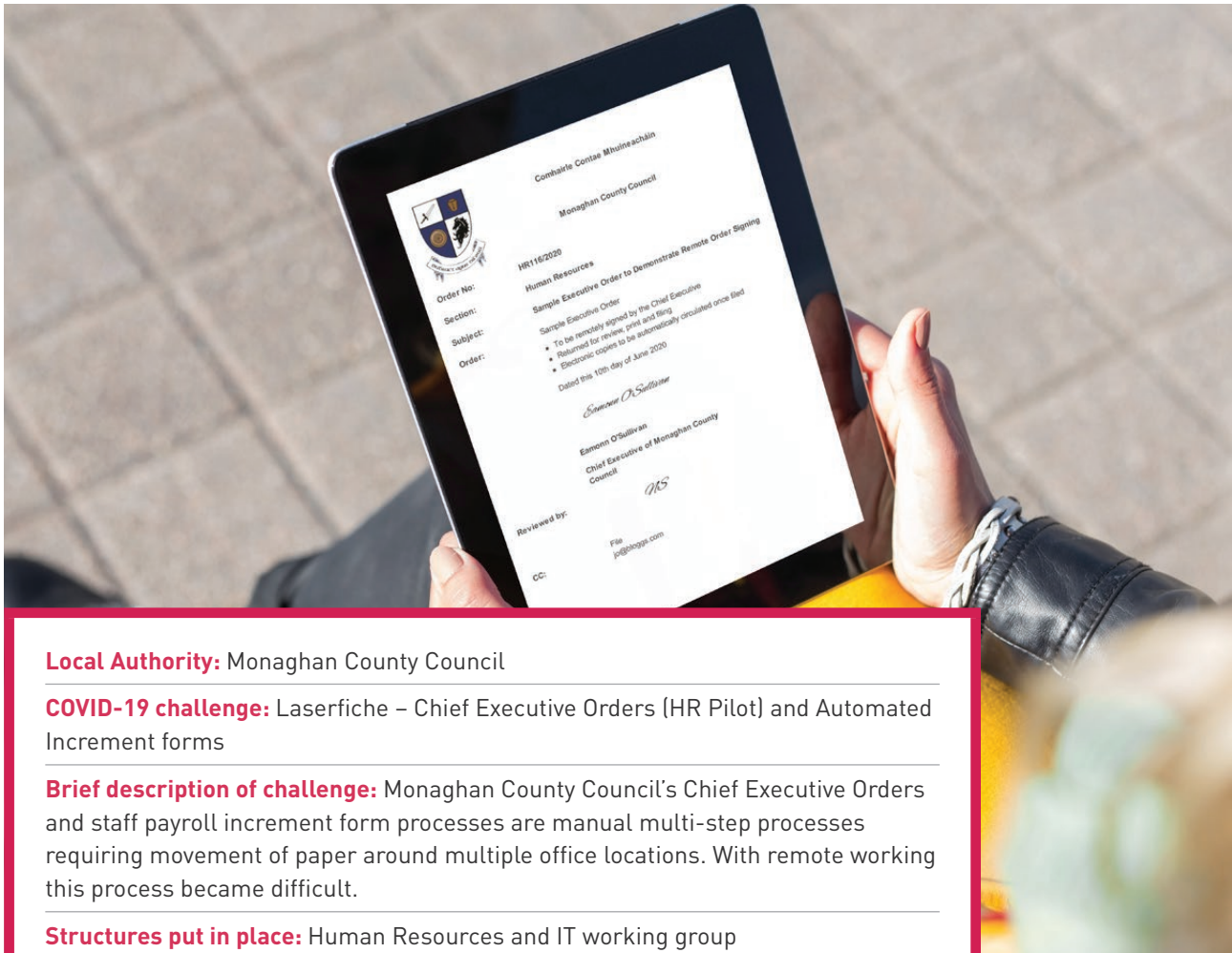**Local Government Key Learnings/Obstacles From Challenges and Implementing Solutions**
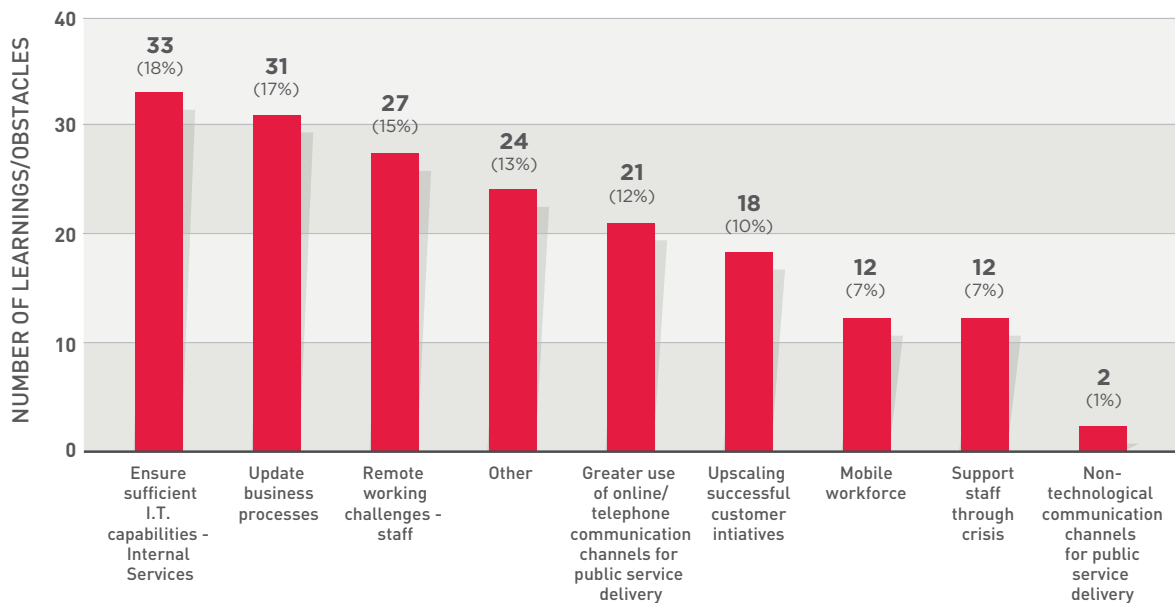
Case Study 3

Monaghan County Council Automation of Chief Executive Orders and HR Increment Forms

Local Authority: Monaghan County Council

COVID-19 challenge: Laserfiche – Chief Executive Orders (HR Pilot) and Automated Increment forms

Brief description of challenge: Monaghan County Council's Chief Executive Orders and staff payroll increment form processes are manual multi-step processes requiring movement of paper around multiple office locations. With remote working this process became difficult.

Structures put in place: Human Resources and IT working group

Brief solution: Electronic Chief Executive Order and Incremental automated processes are being developed inhouse using Laserfiche. The Chief Executive Order is raised and reviewed and initial approval is given electronically. The signed Order is scanned and stored electronically. A paper version is also stored. The increment form is also raised in HR and is reviewed and approved electronically. It is then forwarded to payroll to commence payment of new increments and filed on the individual's file.

Key learning: Obstacles: At present, Chief Executive Orders require manual signatures. This means the Order must be printed out, signed, filed manually, and scanned back into the system. This signature issue arises regularly when building online forms and process automation. An agreed accepted approach to digital/electronic signatures for the sector would be a welcome development and enable for further process automation.

4 | Discussion

The results highlight the types of challenges experienced and the primary solutions implemented by local authorities in response to COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the local government sector across all operational and service delivery aspects. However, the results show that sector has responded swiftly to the challenge and local authorities have adapted innovative solutions to deliver services for the public and elected representatives and ensure continuity of internal services. As the case studies in Section 3 demonstrate many of these changes are innovative in their approach where innovation is defined as "the creation of a new, viable, offering that adds value" (new to the world or just new to an area/employee/customer group).

4.1 Challenges Experienced by Local Government Sector

Section 3.1 highlighted that 51% of challenges experienced by respondents related to the delivery of public services, with 47% identified as internal processes and staffing challenges. The remaining 2% of challenges specifically identified direct service delivery to elected representatives such as providing online meetings and communicating to councillors. It should be noted however that local authorities indirectly supported elected representatives in their roles through managing both delivery of public services (51%) and internal processes (47%).

At a more granular level specific challenges highlighted by respondents included local government non-I.T. internal services in 24% of cases. A further 18% of identified challenges related to managing local government internal I.T. services. This was followed by challenges associated with public service delivery to community and voluntary groups at 15%.

Libraries accounted for 8% of all challenges identified, whilst 21% of all challenges were associated with either ensuring staff welfare, ensuring public health and well-being, or providing other public services. Challenges were also identified across heritage/arts at 6%.

It is perhaps unsurprising that challenges related to managing both internal services (I.T. and non-I.T. services) account for 42% of all issues identified by respondents. Both of these services are the foundations upon which local authorities rely on in delivering services to staff, the public, external stakeholders, and elected representatives.

In addition, community/voluntary issues accounted for 15% of challenges identified by respondents. This included issues such as establishing the Community Call helpline, providing supports for vulnerable groups, and establishing a COVID-19 emergency fund for community and voluntary groups. The establishment of a Community Call Centre in particular over one-weekend was highlighted by many respondents as a key challenge for the local authority given the scale of the project.

Issues with libraries service provision also featured prominently as a particular challenge for the sector, accounting for 8% of all challenges identified by respondents. The increase in online library membership, the need to repurpose 3D printers for PPE equipment for frontline workers, demand for increased online library content, drop and collect book service for vulnerable individuals, home schooling supports and legal library restrictions for online re-productions of books all serve to illustrate the range of challenges experienced by public libraries nationwide and the need for innovative solutions to respond to these problems.

Finally, both staff welfare (e.g. workplace social distancing, staff counselling, employee welfare apps, physical and mental wellbeing supports for staff) and public health and well-being (e.g. online talks and initiatives on mental/physical health for all age groups, maintaining public park openings) were highlighted in 14% of all challenges.

Again, given the extenuating circumstances caused by COVID-19 and the change in work practices for staff across the sector, including implementing remote working for a large cohort of staff and subsequent issues associated with managing staff welfare this is unsurprising. Moreover, as the level of government closest to citizens, and as a key organisation which provides a significant number of supports to citizens to maintain physical and mental wellbeing (e.g. maintenance of public parks, online services), concern for public health and wellbeing is also expected at a time of increased public apprehension.

Whilst it is difficult to precisely map categorisations identified by respondents in section 3.2 to key challenges categorised in section 3.1 using thematic analysis, the results are broadly similar across both questions. When respondents were asked to categorise the challenges, external communications (e.g. public and councillors) accounted for 22% of all categorisations identified by respondents, with internal staff communications accounting for a further 18%. These closely resemble the community/voluntary, libraries, public health, and wellbeing, and non-I.T. internal services themes identified in section 3.1. Similarly, categorisation by respondents of the need to establish new requirements (e.g. Community Call Centre and community responses) and supporting business process (e.g. meetings, reviews, implementing social distancing measures) represented a further 17% and 16% of specified challenges. Again, these responses closely align with community/voluntary and non-I.T. internal services identified in section 3.1. Finally, categorisation of new and flexible working arrangements (e.g. remote working, staggered working, shift work) was identified by 14% of respondents. Responses here align closely to subthemes in both non-I.T. internal services and staff welfare challenges identified in section 3.1.

4.2 Structures Implemented by Local Government Sector

Results highlight that 86% of the COVID-19 challenges that local authorities experienced, and which required appropriate responses, were dealt with directly by local authorities either through existing protocols/processes or through informal or ad hoc internal structures that were specifically set up to deliver COVID-19 services on a short term basis to ensure continued delivery of services.

Section 3.3 highlighted the use of existing structures to address COVID-19 challenges in 48% of cases. This serves to illustrate the adaptability and robustness of existing local authority internal procedures and structures to respond to the need to deliver innovations rapidly across the sector. Moreover, 38% of all responses required the immediate establishment of informal ad hoc internal arrangements within local authorities to some extent. This serves to highlight the pace at which the local government sector reacted in implementing new procedures and governance structures to deal with the immediate challenges it faced and to subsequently develop and implement innovative ways of providing services to the public, elected representative and its employees.

4.3 Solutions Implemented to Challenges

In terms of innovative solutions implemented, section 3.4 highlighted that local authorities needed to re-design existing business processes in 20% of cases, provide enhanced internal I.T. services to support working from home in 18% of cases, improve online service provision for public/businesses in 18% of cases and develop enhanced internal I.T. capabilities to support internal services in 17% of cases. Specifically, re-designing of business processes included a diverse range of actions including housing maintenance procedures, use of drones for environment monitoring, library access/publishing rights, library handling of goods, social distancing for council meetings, managing homeless service provision, disinfecting vehicles and limiting staff numbers in council vehicles, funeral arrangements, acceptance of digital rather than

hard copies of customer documentation, shift work, 3rd party service providers used for service delivery, redesigning workloads, electronic Chief Executive signatures, repurposing of library laptops and online staff training.

The local government sector also implemented direct community/delivery services to the public and businesses (e.g. Community Call Centre delivery, libraries deliveries, dog walking, heritage initiatives, provision of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) to the Health Service Executive, use of 3D printers to produce PPE, waste collection for those cocooning, supporting businesses online presence, extended park opening hours/one-way park routes), to address challenges in 13% of cases. Solutions implemented in 10% of cases related specifically to increasing staff communications and staff welfare initiatives. Staff redeployment represented a solution in 3% of COVID-19 challenges identified.

Unsurprisingly, these solutions align closely to the sub themes identified in sections 3.1 and 3.2 related to the key challenges emphasised by respondents. The development of many of the solutions identified therefore arose out of necesssity to ensure the continued functioning of day-to-day internal operations and public services.

4.4 Key Learnings/Obstacles from Challenges and Implementing Solutions

Key learnings identified by the sector from implementing solutions are largely related to what solutions were implemented by individual local authorities in the first instance i.e. the decision to take a particular action (section 3.4) largely dictates the learnings identified in section 3.5.

For instance, solutions implemented required sufficient sectoral I.T. capabilities to support internal services in 18% of cases, updating business process in 17% of solutions and supporting remote working for staff in 15% of solutions. For instance, many respondents highlighted the value of technology and virtual meetings as an effective means of progressing work and in attending meetings and suggested the need for wider use of I.T. to support service provision in the future given their successful adaptation and

widespread usage during the crisis. Others also highlighted the need for manual procedures to become more automated e.g. staff approvals and Chief Executive orders. A broad range of learnings were identified by respondents as important in 13% of solutions. Identified learnings also included the need to support greater use of online and telephone communication channels for public service delivery in 12% of solutions and the desire to upscale successful customer initiatives to other areas to build on successes achieved in 10% of cases. Finally, in 14% (24) of cases respondents identified that both a mobile workforce and the need to support staff through the crisis were important to developing appropriate solutions.

Learnings identified were largely positive in terms of respondents' overall perceptions of the success of initiatives implemented, with few obstacles identified. This highlights that appetite for innovation exists within the sector. Indeed, many respondents highlighted the desire for innovations implemented to become a permanent aspect of local authority day-to-day operations post COVID-19. This desire of respondents is particularly true whether it related to updating business processes (e.g. virtual meetings, reducing manual paperwork), supporting remote working (e.g. maintaining sufficient supply of I.T. equipment), making greater use of online services for public service provision e.g. (public engagement, social media) or upscaling successful initiatives (e.g. library membership). Taking decisive action to ensure any learnings identified are embedded as business-as-usual within the sector post COVID-19 will be crucial if long-term benefits are to be derived from those solutions implemented.

4.5 Limitations

It is important to note that completion of the questionnaire was not mandatory. Variation in response rates therefore differ significantly between local authorities. Moreover, the full remit of all local government innovations may not be represented in this study. Nonetheless, it offers a useful insight into a broad range of innovations embraced by the local government sector in response to the challenges posed by COVID-19.

Case Study 4

Community Call

Local Authority: All local authorities

COVID-19 challenge: Responding to the needs of those cocooning or unable to leave their homes during Covid-19 restrictions

Brief description of challenge: Covid-19 restrictions announced on March 27th 2020 advised those aged over 70 and those who were medically vulnerable to stay at home at all times. Each local authority was tasked by Government with providing a local response to meet the needs of those restricted to their homes, for example to provide deliveries of groceries, fuel, medication, meals and other essential items. The response also required supports to combat social isolation and to provide relevant information and sign-posting.

Structures put in place: Each local authority established a Community Response Forum that involved community, voluntary and other relevant groups in the area to coordinate community supports and resilience. All local authorities also established internal teams to manage the Community Call helpline and Forum – all of which was created and activated over a single weekend after the announcement on Friday March 27th.

Brief solution: Local authorities operated a 'Community Call' helpline service seven days a week, taking calls from those who needed help or and reaching out to vulnerable members of the community. The helpline team harnessed services and volunteers of Community Response Forum members and other local community and voluntary groups, to arrange or provide supports for those in need. This included arranging collection and delivery of food, essential household items, fuel, medication and meals and a whole range of other items. The Community Call helpline was also cross-referenced with a national helpline operated by Alone, a charity for older people, to ensure those requiring more complex supports in relation to social isolation could be appropriately directly and supported. From March 31st to June 15th, Community Call helplines responded to over 48,000 calls.

Key learning: The Community Call has been hugely successful in meeting the needs of those who required support during Covid-19 restrictions and ensured that government advice could be followed. Feedback from the Community Response coordinators indicates that the Forum structure has been particularly successful and provides an excellent example of what can be achieved when local authorities and the community and voluntary sector work closely together.

5 | Conclusion

This study has highlighted that as the level of government closest to citizens, the local government sector have developed and implemented innovative solutions across all functional areas and in their delivery of public services in response to COVID-19 challenges.

The results highlighted in this report show that local authorities have sufficient skills and capacities to respond to a diversity of challenges that arise and can deliver innovations quickly.

Furthermore, it illustrates that most of the challenges identified and subsequent innovative solutions implemented were delivered within local authority structures, whether through existing formal structures or the establishment of ad hoc informal governance structures to meet COVID-19 challenges. This demonstrates the willingness of the sector to change and existing capacities within the sector to act as leaders of change. In terms of solutions, local authorities have demonstrated an ability to develop novel solutions to complex problems related to public service delivery, internal processes, and staffing provision and in service delivery to elected representatives. Ensuring that positive innovations and outcomes are embedded in business-as-usual processes across the sector will determine the long-term success of those actions implemented by the sector in response to COVID-19.

Monaghan County Council established the Food Hub initiative to provide food to those in need within the county

6 Appendices

Thumbs up for Cork County Council's Covid-19 library delivery service. The library delivered books and other items to those cocooning.

Appendix 1:

Local Authority COVID-19 Innovation Questionnaire

Local Authority Innovation Strategies: COVID-19 Questionnaire
Local Authority COVID-19 Innovation
COVID-19 Innovation

Within the current climate, local authorities are having to change the way they work to provide services to their employees, councillors and citizens during the COVID-19 emergency. Many of these changes may be innovative in their approach where innovation is defined as "*the creation of a new, viable, offering that adds value*" (new to the world or just new to an area/employee/customer group). It is important to note that innovation does not just relate to technology and there are numerous examples of innovation in the provision of services, advice and guidance, particularly around social distancing and supporting communities.

The LGMA Programme Management & Innovation Team wants to identify, capture and promote these innovative initiatives around the COVID-19 crisis to showcase local authorities and how their teams have adapted and changed practices to provide continued services to employees, councillors and citizens. The results of this survey may help to inform the response in developing a sectoral Innovation Strategy under OPS2020.

We appreciate that this is a very busy time for the local government sector but it is important to capture the innovation while it is fresh in your minds.

Questionnaire Structure

This questionnaire aims to capture the full breadth of innovations occurring across the sector in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

The questionnaire consists of 6 questions, specifically examining the current challenges faced by local authorities and the innovations they have implemented in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Note: Y*ou may have experienced multiple challenges which you needed to respond to. Please therefore answer the questionnaire based on each **specific individual challenge** experienced by your department as a consequence of COVID-19. Questions 1-6 have been replicated several times on the questionnaire to allow you to enter multiple challenges experienced.*

3. With reference to this _specific challenge_ experienced as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, please select the category/categories from the below list that represents this challenge

☐ Communications – internal staff

☐ Communications – external (e.g. public, councillors)

☐ Financial payments

☐ Maintaining online electronic services (e.g. rent, planning, online payments etc.)

☐ Grant inspections

☐ Supporting business processes (meetings, reviews, implementing social distancing measures, etc.)

☐ New/Flexible working arrangements (remote working, staggered working, shift work)

☐ Manual approval processes (e.g. CE orders)

☐ New requirement (e.g. Community call centres, community response)

☐ Other (please specify)

4. Please list any structures put in place to address this _specific challenge_ either formally/informally e.g. working group, governance structures, other

5. Please provide a brief description of the solution that was implemented _(approx. 150 words)_

6. What were the key learnings/obstacles for the local authority from this _specific challenge_ and in implementing the solution? Please provide any other relevant information (approx. 150 words)

Appendix 2:

Coding Template for Thematic Categories Associated with Questionnaire Questions

Thematic categories	Subtheme	Examples
Brief title of this specific COVID-19 challenge (Section 3.1)	Elected Members	Online meetings, communications
	Local Authority Internal Services (I.T.)	Remote working, I.T. procurement, IT set up for new communication channels, remote access to required I.T. services for staff
	Local Authority Internal Services (Other)	Flexible working and changed/staggered work patterns, internal communications with staff, volume of communications, changing work practices, maximising satellite offices, crisis management, payroll, Business Continuity Plans, signing of CE Orders, staff training, staff redeployment, process for conducting of interviews, reduced ability to engage with stakeholders, management of staff time
	Staff Welfare	Workplace social distancing, staff counselling, employee welfare apps, physical and mental wellbeing supports for staff
	Community/ Voluntary	Community Call helpline, supports for vulnerable groups, COVID19 emergency fund applications
	Enterprise	Supporting businesses, rent and rates collections, supports for commercial rates customers
	Environment	Illegal fires, water, illegal dumping, waste facility inspections
	Heritage/Arts	Local COVID-19 stories, new creative content online, museum collections, community engagement through Arts/Heritage, adjudicating of Arts/Heritage awards
	Housing	Housing repairs, callouts, emergency works
	Libraries	Online library membership, 3D Printing, Storytime, drop-off and collect book service, home schooling assistance, legal library restrictions re online re-productions of books
	Other Local Authority Public Services	Mortuary, funeral, parks, other services, customer support, mortgage payment breaks, additional COVID physical safety controls
	Public Health & Well Being	Talks and initiatives on mental/physical health for all age groups, maintaining public park openings

Thematic categories	Subtheme	Examples
Any structures put in place to address this specific challenge either formally/informally (Section 3.3)	Formal Structure (Local Authority)	If structure exists already or structure was set up within existing protocols/processes to ensure delivery/management of services
	Informal/Ad Hoc Structure (Local Authority)	If structure did not previously exist and was specifically set up to deliver COVID-19 services on short term basis
	Formal Structure (Interagency/ Interdepartmental/ Community Groups)	If structure exists already or structure was set up within existing protocols/processes to ensure delivery/management of services
	Informal/Ad Hoc Structure (Interagency/ Interdepartmental/ Community Groups)	If structure did not previously exist and was specifically set up to deliver COVID-19 services on short term basis
	Other	All other responses
Description of the solution that was implemented (Section 3.4)	Enhanced provision of online services to public/businesses	Online library services, online payment options, customer apps, online health and wellbeing initiatives, online expert talks, online motor tax, mortgage payment break applications, community alert systems, educational resources
	Enhanced provision of community/ delivery services to public/businesses	Community Call Centre delivery of services to public, libraries, dog walking, heritage initiatives, provision of PPE to HSE, use of 3D printers to produce PPE, waste collection for those cocooning, supporting businesses online presence, extended park opening hours/one-way park routes,
	Staff redeployment - internal/external	Internal/external staff redeployment
	Increased staff communications/ welfare initiatives	Staff training, app development for contact tracing, health and wellbeing initiatives, staff welfare, information purposes, mental and physical health
	Enhanced I.T. to work from home	Procurement, recruitment, staff salaries
	Enhanced I.T. functionality - Internal Services	Remote councillor meetings, Community Call Centre technical set-up, app development Roads, IT to support senior management meetings, external data used to support internal decisions e.g. environmental (NASA), drones used for waste management
	Capture public experiences	

Thematic categories	Subtheme	Examples
	Re-designing business processes	Housing maintenance, use of drones for environment monitoring, limiting quantity of emails, library access/publishing rights, library handling of goods, social distancing for council meetings, managing homeless service provision, disinfecting vehicles and limiting staff numbers in council vehicles, funeral arrangements, acceptance of digital rather than hard copies of customer documentation, shift work, social distancing measures introduced (shift work), 3rd party service providers used for service delivery, redesigning workloads, electronic CE signatures, repurposing of library laptops, online staff training, developed own hand sanitiser, assessing and administering bursaries/awards applications digitally, mortuary setup
	Other	Perspex screens
Key learnings/ obstacles for the local government sector (Section 3.5)	Remote working challenges - staff	Maintain sufficient supply I.T. equipment, slow connectivity/software, staff IT training, planning/organising/delivering remote work, up-to-date information needed for remote working
	Update business processes	Electronic CE approvals, social distancing procedures, GDPR issues, increased work efficiencies through virtual meeting attendances and reduced travel, library copyright legislation requires updating, purchase laptops only in future, lack of contingency planning, Business Continuity Plan (BCP) updated to account for numerous scenarios, test BCP against planned scenarios to ensure functionality in real world setting, reduce paper processes, flexible/adaptable approaches needed to respond to changing situations
	Mobile workforce	Staggered working/shift work, staff flexibility required, remote working long-term, critical staff taking on leadership roles, staff redeployment, critical staff identified for all LA services, re-deployment of staff to satellite offices
	Support staff through crisis	Improve staff communications/welfare supports, reduce quantity of emails, app development to support staff health and wellbeing
	Ensure sufficient I.T. capabilities - Internal Services	Internal I.T. support for staff, conducting job interviews, app development for staff exposure to COVID-19, Community Call technical setup, use of virtual councillor meetings, sourcing additional IT resources for remote working, app development for managing functional areas e.g. road monitoring, need for set up of basic (text services) and online communication channels to reach wider public/staff
	Greater use of online/telephone communication channels for public service delivery	Public engagement, social media, motor tax, Community Call phoneline, library exhibitions, public education on available online services and on using online services

Thematic categories	Subtheme	Examples
	Upscaling successful customer initiatives	Mobile library service, ALONE partnerships to support vulnerable people, housing maintenance, dog walking, multiple datasets from disparate sources supports decision-making/customer service delivery, blog successes, ability to provide supports to wider range of businesses than previously, community support initiatives
	Non-technological communication channels for public service delivery	Cocooners who do not use technology, use of community organisations to spread messages
	Other	Perspex glass maintenance, long-term economic planning, need for good 3rd party contract/government department supports, collaboration with other local authorities for increased efficiencies, diverse community views needed to solve crisis, challenges sourcing PPE/other equipment, community buy-in/societal buy-in to support LA service delivery, mortuary established