Urban Big Data Centre

Data and expertise for improving cities

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Scottish Local Government during COVID-19: Report launch (27 May 2021)

Transcript from webinar video recording

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Welcome everyone. Good afternoon, I'm Simon Joss and I'm joined by my colleague

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Justine Gangneux. We're from the Urban Big Data Centre at the University of Glasgow and we

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spent the last six to eight months absorbed in an intensive research project on how Scottish Local

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Government have responded to covid in terms of their data practices and engagement. And yesterday

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we published our report and so we thought that you should be among the first to receive our report

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and to hear our summary of the key findings. Several among you participated in our research

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and I'd like to take the opportunity to thank you for your participation. So, Justine and I are going

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to spend about 25 minutes or so providing you with an overview, a summary of our main findings.

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And then we'll follow up with question and answer. Now, I mentioned that this research

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was undertaken at the Urban Big Data Centre but it's really important to emphasise

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that we relied on two essential external support sources. First of all, we benefited from funding

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from the Economic and Social Research Council, which is part of UK Research and Innovation.

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We've got a couple of participants here and I hope that this report demonstrates how

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social sciences can make a useful contribution to understanding data in the context of covid. And

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the second external source is the Digital Office. Right from the beginning Justine and I decided that

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we didn't want our research only to be relevant to academia but that we wanted it to have a positive

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impact on data practices and policy and that's why we teamed up with the Digital Office. And I

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have to say that they were absolutely instrumental, enabling us to conduct our research. So I'd like to

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take the opportunity in particular to thank Kimberley Hose and Colin Birchenall for their

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support. And I believe Colin would like to say a few words, so I now hand over to Colin please.

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Thank you Simon and thanks for those kind comments as well. I just want to

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first of all thank Simon and Justine for this piece of research and the opportunity

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to work with them to undertake the research. We have obviously seen a huge impact in

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terms of how we use data within local government and how it's been used to support

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the local government and indeed the wider public sector's response to COVID-19. And the collaboration that

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we've seen across the sector and indeed the wider public sector as well. What this research offers

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us is an opportunity to draw breath and capture the learning from that experience. And rather

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than it being lessons learned that's been prepared by local government itself, it's an external body

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that's actually used formal research methods to draw the conclusions of their analysis.

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So for me this is a really valuable piece of research. It isn't just some academic research

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findings. The recommendations, the findings in this report, I think personally will

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provide some really valuable references that we could use to inform policy and practice

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as Simon has identified. And what I'd like to do now is to start to use this as evidence

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for the impact that data has had during the pandemic to help justify

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the case for investment in policy and practice around how we make this sustainable.

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So thanks Simon.

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Thank you very much Colin. And what I now would like to do just in a couple of slides is to give you a little bit more contextual information before Justine will

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then start to present the findings. And as we've said the main focus of our research has been

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on analysing local government's data practices and engagement during covid and in response to covid.

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And when you look at our report you will see that we've included 15 key findings and we've arranged

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these under four overarching themes and you can see them listed here. And this is also how we're

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going to structure our presentation now. So we'll start by talking about the experience of

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rapid response and innovation on the part of local government with a main focus on public sector data.

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The second theme then focuses on how existing challenges were amplified as a result

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of the crisis. And then we'll turn to the third theme, which has a focus the sharing of data

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both within local government, across local government, between local government

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and other public sector organisations and also between local government and the third sector.

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And then in the final theme we want to highlight participant's reflections on what we can learn from

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the last 12 months in terms of how we wish to take data practices forward in the future.

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Just a few words about methodology and again you will find a full write-up in our report.

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As you can see here, we've used three main tools and we've done so in order

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to achieve what is sometimes referred to as methodological triangulation. So, using different

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methodological procedures to generate different sources of data, which then allow us to generate

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findings which have validity. So, the three tools that we've used. First of all, a quantitative survey,

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which we sent out via the Digital Office to the 32 local authorities. And in each local authority

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we invited one participant with a data background and one participant working in the recovery side

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of the crisis. And as you can see we had a really tremendously strong response rate, by any standard

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an excellent response rate. And of course that's thanks to all the participants. 45 out of the 64

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invitees participated and the figure is even more impressive when we look at the overall

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number of participating local authorities, 31 out of 32. And of course I'm not going to

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reveal which local authority chose not to participate in the survey. We then complemented

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this quantitative method with qualitative insights through a series of focus groups. We had one

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focus group where we brought together local authority participants in discussion among

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themselves. And one of the interesting points we wanted to tease out was to see whether there was

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any significant difference between the experience of rural local authorities and more

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urban authorities. And in fact we couldn't really discern any significant difference. A second focus

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group brought together local authorities with other public sector organisations.

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And here the aim was to really focus on the sharing aspect, data sharing aspect. And then we

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ran a third focus group where we brought together local authorities with third sector organisations.

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Now in addition to the focus groups we also ran a number of individual expert interviews. And here

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the aim was to talk to organisations that have a cross-Scottish engagement in the data sphere.

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So that gives you the overview of the project and I'm now going to hand over to Justine please.

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Thank you Simon and hi again everyone. So, I'm going to turn to the first theme of our report, our

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research. The first key finding here is around the rapid increase in data demand that local governments

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experience of covid and the intensification of the data use. So, you can see that

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government have experienced an increase of data sharing both internally in local authorities but

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also externally. In the report and in the survey in particular a number of respondents reported the

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acquisition of new data and the use of new sources of data. In particular, and obviously, health related

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data that was shared by NHS public bodies, which is explained by the nature of the crisis.

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And what is also interesting and that comes out from our research is the rapid development

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of innovative solutions to integrate and analyse data by local government and this data was coming

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from multiple data sets again internally and externally. And some initiatives were around the

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creation of dashboards, others focus more around collaboration and we will touch upon that

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later on in the presentation. So, here on the right, just quickly, you have an excerpt from

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the survey results. So, it's question number six and you can see that 83% of respondents

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reported an increase in data sharing internally. 78% reported using new sources of data as well as

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increasing the use of data visualisation tools. By comparison you can see at the bottom of the table

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that only 4% reported the recruitment of additional staff with data expertise. Next

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slide please, thank you. So, the second key finding of our research is that local government really

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mobilised existing public sector data and that was to really deliver essential services and to support

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vulnerable groups. And you can see this in the survey as well, the excerpt is on question number

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seven here on the table on the right. Where 91% of respondents reported using data to tailor local

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support an 87% to prioritise essential services. And you can see, by contrast, only 22%

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of respondents reported using data to measure public compliance with COVID-19 related rules.

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Really the focus was delivering essential services, identifying the vulnerable groups and supporting

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them. So as one participant in the focus group puts it "Initially, we needed to get off-

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the-ground data in terms of how did we record what people were requiring. Particularly in relation to

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food and pharmacy and medicine and any other needs". So really the focus was on public sector data to

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deliver services. Next slide please. So while we've seen the mobilisation of public sector

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data in response to COVID-19, we have seen an only limited use of novel data and we understand by novel

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data, digital data that is generated via a user application or forms, such as social media data

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or generated via connected infrastructure and internet of things such as sensor data.

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The research really shows only a limited use of this data for or to respond to COVID-19.

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As one participant puts it "novel data is not an area we did a lot of analytics in". And this was

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corroborated in our survey as you can see in the bar chart graph, 36% of participants actually

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reported using none of the above so no novel type of data in response to COVID-19. And 25% use social

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media data and only 4% crowdsourced data, cellular data. While there was a limited use

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of novel data participants across the board, so in interviews, in focus groups as well as in the survey

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recognised the potential of this type of data. For example 62% of participants

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in the survey stated that novel data would become quite or very important in the coming period. So

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there was an expectation of future relevance for this type of data. And I will hand it back to Simon

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for our theme number two.

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Thank you very much. So the second theme is interested in exploring

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challenges naturally as local government engaged more in data practices

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rising demands and uses. They inevitably encountered some challenges and difficulties on

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the way and we were interested in exploring with them what these challenges were and what kind of

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00:14:08,800 --> 00:14:15,840

innovative responses they came up with. And first of all looking on the left of the slide

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participants highlighted three types of challenges, starting with the

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quality of data. So here the message is that we cannot assume as a matter of course that the

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quality of data is necessarily assured. But instead what participants highlighted was that often

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data sets might be, or data contained within data sets, might be partially inaccurate. It might be

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partially incomplete or there might be duplicate data. And so a great effort has to go into the

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cleansing of data. So data quality cannot be taken as a matter of course. It has to be generated first.

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A second challenge relates to the sharing of data and here, time and again, participants

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flagged up the importance of common identifiers and that sometimes these common identifiers

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weren't readily available. And so the future focus has to be on making sure that there are these

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common identifiers, which allow data within an organisation but also across organisations to

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be shared more readily. And related to that more broadly the need for templates for standardised

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data standards so that the sharing process can be made more easy. And the third challenge they

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highlighted was some of the legacy systems. Legacy systems that were actually still in use

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but which weren't necessarily compatible with more recent systems. So again that is something that

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needs addressing. And in terms of a wider context, participants highlighted that of course this takes

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place within a local government context and local governments are complex organisations, necessarily

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so because they deliver quite a diverse range of public services. So the sharing within a local

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authority, but also across local authorities, is something that really has to be developed. And we

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can see these findings also reflected here on the right. This is from the survey question number 17

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where we asked respondents to rank different challenges. And here you can see the different

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challenges and the relative ranking. So, for example, integrating data, data matching and

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interoperability as well as ensuring data quality were ranked as being particularly challenging.

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More so than, for example, at the bottom of the table GDPR compliance or data security.

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Now participants also spoke to the criticality of improving skills and related debates about

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targeted investment. So participants distinguished between different kinds

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of skills needed in order to succeed with data engagement and practices. First of all, there are

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of course technical skills and data know-how so participants highlighted analytical skills,

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technical skills to integrate data, as well as the ability to use particular technical

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software. So that's one type of skills where there is a need for development. But participants also

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highlighted the importance of broader data literacy, which goes beyond the technical.

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Which relates to a broader appreciation and understanding of data within an organisation and

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across organisations. And so this relates not just to data specialists but also to decision makers

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at different people within the organisation who increasingly have to deal with data. And then

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the third point they were making was that given that investment opportunities are often scarce,

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we need to have a really good analysis of specific needs so that we can then channel targeted

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investment towards these skills developments. And again you can see that reflected on the right.

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This is question number 13 from the survey where we presented participants with different

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development areas for data capabilities and we asked them to rank the relative importance

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now actually one participant in the discussion said "but of course all of these are important"

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and that's right but nonetheless it's interesting to see the ranking by the

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survey participants. So data analytics, internal data harmonisation top the ranking whereas

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data software and human resources were a little bit further down. So, over now to Justine.

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Thank you Simon. I'm sorry I'm just going to have to keep my camera off for connection issues but

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anyway, hopefully you can still hear me. So let's go to theme number three which connects to

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data sharing. And so our research really found that in response to the crisis local

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government have experienced an intensification of data sharing and in particular

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with public sector organisations. 70% of survey respondents reported an increase in external data

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sharing broadly, so that includes public sector organisations but also other sectors. 65%

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reported the implementation of data sharing agreements in response to the crisis. And 84%

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reported data related collaboration with public sector organisations and 78% with other

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Scottish local authorities. There were a lot of sharing and collaboration happening in

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response to the crisis. Initially it was more a case-by-case approach to data sharing agreements

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to meet the rapid demand for data as we've seen in theme number one.

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Participants spoke to uneven access to data and a frequently disjointed approach. However

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throughout the crisis we have seen a consolidation of collaboration to coordinate practices in terms

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of data sharing agreements for instance with the development and implementation of the data sharing

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framework known as the data accord between the local government and NHS, as

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well as the sharing of the learning of how to successfully develop a data sharing agreement.

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Another key insight that comes out from our research is the data sharing that was

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happening between local government and the third sector. And here we qualify this

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as more ad hoc data sharing. So the research shows that there's been a strong engagement

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by local authorities with the third sector and in the context of COVID-19. So 80%

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00:21:30,160 --> 00:21:38,000

of respondents noted that they use data to coordinate volunteering and community responses.

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However, during the focus group participants both from local authorities and from the third

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sector really put an emphasis on the ad hoc character of the data sharing that was taking

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place between local government and third sector. So, you can see here on the right bottom there is

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00:21:56,480 --> 00:22:01,360

a quote from the focus group which really puts this emphasis on the fact that data

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sharing was taking place but maybe not as systematically or larger scale as it could be.

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00:22:07,920 --> 00:22:13,280

Furthermore third sector organisations also really talked to the significant burden

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that data sharing put on their organisation and some raised concerns also about handling

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00:22:20,160 --> 00:22:26,320

personal data. And you can see that in the top quote from a third sector organisation saying

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that it's really onerous requests that takes a lot of time and sometimes duplicated as well.

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So these ad hoc data sharing were also exacerbated by lack of data standards

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across the third sector, across the local government and between both sectors as well.

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So let's now turn to theme four, the fourth and final theme where we invited participants to

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reflect on the last 12 months and what we can take from the management of the crisis through

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various data engagements and practices as we move through the recovery into the future. And

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00:23:13,680 --> 00:23:21,120

participants evidently reflected the very difficult times that local government faced

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but at the same time they also positively highlighted that the crisis really

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helped to open up conversations about data and they thought that across local

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government now, data was much more broadly recognised; its value, its contribution to

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gathering information, making decisions, and that this recognition of the value of data

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now extended far beyond small teams of data specialists. So that was seen as really a

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positive development. Participants also thought that there was potential to further strengthen

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existing collaborative networks, such as the COVID-19 Data Intelligence Network by the Scottish

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Government or the Local Government Data Task Force by the Digital Office. Participants also discussed

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the opportunity to develop further partnerships and they in particular singled out partnerships

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with the private sector but also with academia. And that's reflected in the survey question number 16

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00:24:33,200 --> 00:24:40,960

shown on the right here, where 43% of respondents indicated that collaborating with other

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00:24:40,960 --> 00:24:48,240

stakeholders was a significant opportunity. And again it's reflected by one of the participants

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00:24:48,240 --> 00:24:54,560

from a local authority who was saying this, it's what we can do together, it's yes what we can

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00:24:54,560 --> 00:25:00,800

do individually but actually there's real merit in working together, what we can achieve jointly.

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00:25:03,200 --> 00:25:12,080

And another broad agreement by the participants was about ultimately the importance of our data

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00:25:12,080 --> 00:25:20,720

practices being in the public interest. So survey participants indicated that there was already some

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00:25:21,360 --> 00:25:28,320

wider public engagement taking place. 27% reported collaborations with grassroots

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00:25:28,320 --> 00:25:34,560

organisations and 20% with citizens. But there was also consensus that more could be done

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00:25:35,200 --> 00:25:41,840

and there was agreement that it was important to demonstrate tangible benefits to the public

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00:25:41,840 --> 00:25:50,080

in order for the public to embrace data use and to engender public trust. And in this discussion

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00:25:50,080 --> 00:25:57,920

it was interesting also to hear that rather than each local government proceeding individually

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00:25:57,920 --> 00:26:04,960

again there is a real benefit in joining forces and they mentioned on a number of

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00:26:04,960 --> 00:26:11,600

occasions the opportunity of developing and further strengthening the national approach.

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00:26:11,600 --> 00:26:19,360

And this is here reflected by this quote from a third sector organisation who really emphasises

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00:26:19,360 --> 00:26:27,040

the importance of a common approach, of common standards ultimately in order to place citizens

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00:26:27,040 --> 00:26:36,240

at the centre of our data practices. Justine please.

Thank you Simon, so drawing on the findings

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00:26:36,240 --> 00:26:41,840

that we have highlighted, and please refer back to the report for more details on these findings,

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00:26:41,840 --> 00:26:48,960

and the report offers a series of recommendations for policy and for practice. So we have clustered

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00:26:48,960 --> 00:26:56,720

them under four headlines. So the first one is around how do we build on a recent achievement? And

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00:26:56,720 --> 00:27:03,120

secondly, how do we address the challenges that local government have encountered in the data

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00:27:03,120 --> 00:27:11,680

engagement in the context of COVID-19? And thirdly, how do we enhance cross-sectoral data sharing?

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00:27:11,680 --> 00:27:18,800

So within the public sector but also across sectors. And finally is building up

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00:27:18,800 --> 00:27:25,680

and joining up data practices to address this national agenda? So I will

229

00:27:25,680 --> 00:27:33,000

invite you to go into the detail of this, each of these 15 recommendations in our report.