



North Ayrshire: A case study on kindness



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This journey might never have begun without Elma Murray, who had the courage to embrace kindness at a time when this felt challenging and risky. It would not have progressed so far without the care and heartfelt commitment of Audrey Sutton and the Connected Communities team; nor without the guidance and gentle challenge of Zoë Ferguson throughout. Most of all, however, we would like to thank the people and communities across North Ayrshire who have engaged in this conversation and put kindness at the heart of their work and lives.



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Contents

Kindness Timeline	2
1. Introduction	4
2. Where we were	5
3. What we did	7
4. Where we are now	10
5. What we learnt	12
6. Kindness during Covid	13
7. What would it take?	14
8. References	15

Kindness Timeline

Enabling State

The Place of Kindness

The Power of Kindness

Quantifying Kindness

2014



2015

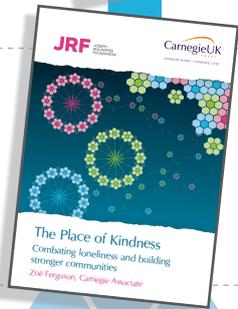
Partnership with JRF and appointment of Carnegie Associate to research kindness in communities

2016

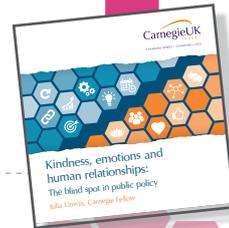


2017

Julia Unwin, DBE appointed as Carnegie Fellow to explore kindness in public policy



2018

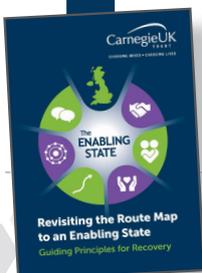


Ipsos MORI commissioned to conduct survey on experiences of kindness

2019



2020



Kindness in North Ayrshire

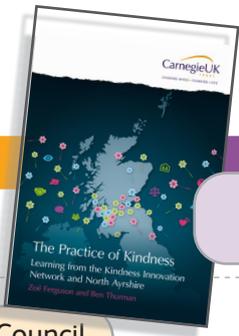
Kindness Innovation Network (KIN)

Kindness in health & social care

Kindness Leadership Network (KiLN)

Partnership with North Ayrshire Council

KIN is established



KIN comes to a close

Carnegie Associate appointed to explore kindness in health & social care

First meeting of KiLN

North Ayrshire Council joins KiLN



1. Introduction

Kindness matters. The relationships that we have with those around us, and the quality of our interactions with organisations and services, are fundamental to our wellbeing. But while there has been growing recognition of the importance of kindness and relationships in recent years, the question of how to embed this into organisational values and behaviours – the practical application of kindness – has received less attention.

In 2017, the Carnegie UK Trust published research that highlighted the importance of everyday relationships for individual and community wellbeing, and identified the factors that might enable or inhibit kindness (Ferguson, 2017). The Place of Kindness, which built on the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's 'Liveable Lives' project (Anderson, Brownlie, & Milne, 2015), recognised the importance of structural inequalities on our experiences of relationships and overall wellbeing; but crucially, found that 'neighbourhoods can have very different atmospheres in very similar conditions'. In other words, the existence of a social infrastructure that creates space for kindness and connection can lead to some communities, which otherwise appear similar in terms of standard measures of deprivation, doing better than others.¹

Following this research, the Trust was invited to work with North Ayrshire Council, who were interested in exploring how the practical application of kindness could contribute to the vision and objectives outlined in its 'Fair for All' strategy for reducing poverty and inequality (Fair for All, 2016). 'Kindness in North Ayrshire' developed into a partnership that ran for two years, coming to a formal close in March 2020, and encompassed a range of activities and initiatives, some of which were reported on alongside the Kindness Innovation Network (KIN) in *The Practice of Kindness* (Ferguson & Thurman, 2019).

The partnership was built on the research on kinder communities, and subsequently ran alongside projects exploring kindness in public policy, in leadership, and in health and social care, acting as a practical test-bed that has informed and connected the Trust's work on kindness since 2017 (as displayed on the Kindness Timeline). But it also drew on earlier work on the Enabling State (Elvidge, 2014), in considering how the local authority could use kindness as a value to reset the relationship between citizen and state, and drive forward community wellbeing.

This case study report tells the story of that two-year journey. It provides an overview of the background and expectations, a summary of activities and analysis of what was learnt about a place-based approach to kindness within communities and local government.

In early spring 2020, this was what we had envisaged covering in our final report on Kindness in North Ayrshire. But since then, the landscape and the way people talk about kindness has shifted dramatically as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. It felt important to continue the conversation with colleagues in North Ayrshire, to better understand what had changed in communities and in organisational practice, and to reflect on what this might reveal about kindness. And so, the case study finishes with the story of 'kindness in a crisis' and offers five priorities to sustain and build on the changes that have become possible as we emerge into a different future.

¹ Subsequent research has strengthened the evidence on the impact of social infrastructure on social and economic outcomes for deprived communities: see (Local Trust & OCSI, 2019).

2. Where we were

Situated on the south-west coast of Scotland, North Ayrshire combines areas of affluence and a local history and natural scenery that attracts thousands of tourists each summer, with persistent levels of poverty and inequality, a long-term legacy of deindustrialisation, lack of economic growth and high levels of unemployment. Despite the Council's award-winning excellence and innovation,² in 2018 North Ayrshire remained the fifth most deprived local authority in Scotland, and had the second highest level of child poverty (Fraser of Allander Institute, 2018). The scale of this challenge is reflected in strategic priorities across the local authority to regenerate North Ayrshire's most deprived communities, to tackle the root causes of poverty, and to build 'A North Ayrshire that is Fair for All'.³

In this context, North Ayrshire Council's interest in kindness built on existing work already being undertaken to tackle poverty and inequality. Their invitation to the Trust was motivated by a desire to continue to reframe its relationship with communities, and explore whether focusing on the importance of relationships could do something different to improve outcomes for communities. It also sought to build a more positive reputation for North Ayrshire, recognising the role that a sense of belonging and civic pride could play in strengthening communities.

Building on what had been learnt about what it takes to encourage and enable neighbourhood kindness, the partnership in North Ayrshire was situated in the

Communities Directorate and framed in terms of community empowerment.⁴ However, just like in Wigan Council, which underwent a similar process of building a different relationship with local people (Naylor & Wellings, 2019), it recognised that realising the full potential of kindness as a value and approach demanded a new way of working across the local authority; and that, in particular, this would require challenging the institutional barriers to kindness that had been identified in *The Place of Kindness* (Ferguson, 2017).

The ambition of Kindness in North Ayrshire, then, was transformational change: moving beyond the 'random' and 'relational' acts of kindness; and, in seeking to improve relationships between people, communities and services, embracing radical kindness (Unwin, 2018).

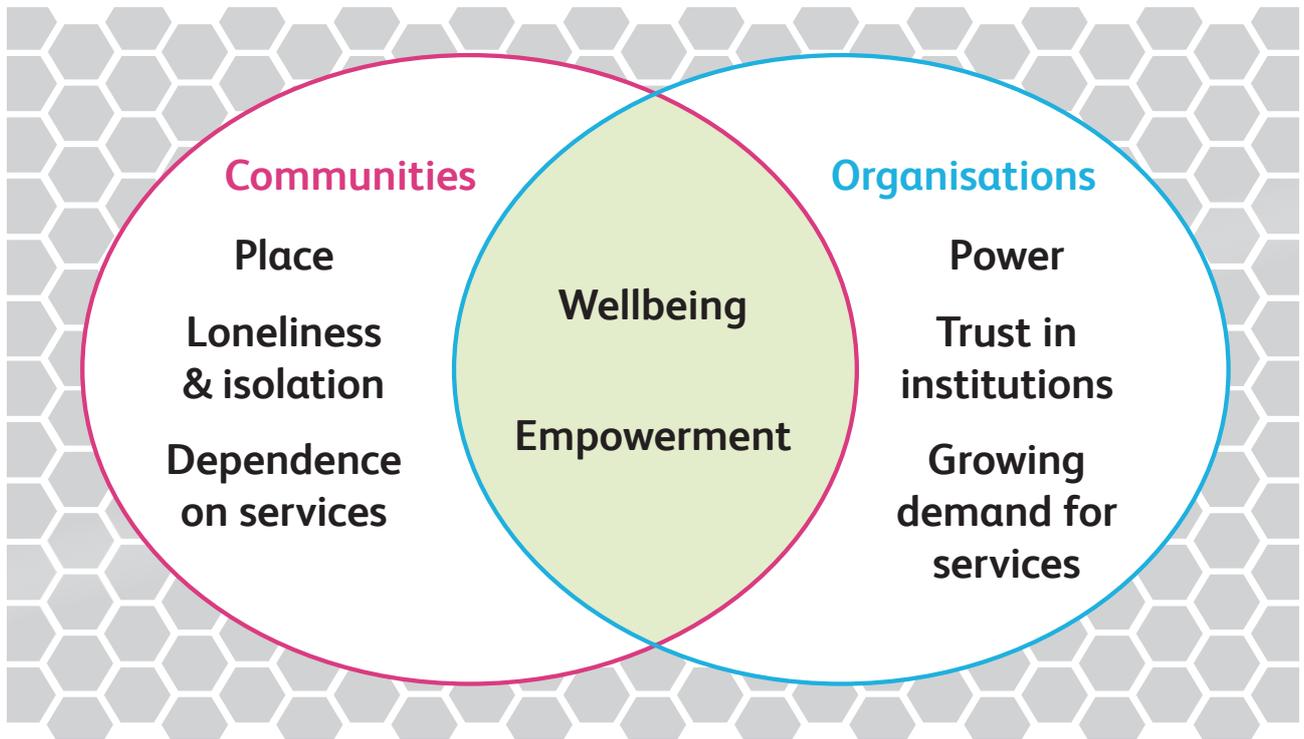
² In 2017, North Ayrshire Council was named '[Council of the Year](#)' by the Association of Public Sector Excellence.

³ See North Ayrshire [Economic Development & Regeneration Board](#), North Ayrshire Community Planning Partnership [Fair for All Strategy](#), [North Ayrshire Council Plan](#).

⁴ The connection between kindness and community empowerment is discussed in the Trust's work on 'the Enabling State': see (Davidson, Wallace, & Ormston, 2020).



FIGURE 1: WHY IS KINDNESS IMPORTANT?



3. What we did

The Trust's partnership with North Ayrshire Council was led by Carnegie Associate, Zoë Ferguson, whose role was both to work with a group of partners to test how everyday relationships might be encouraged in different settings; and also to further explore and challenge institutional behaviours, procedures and processes that act as barriers to kindness. The work ran in parallel to KIN, allowing it to connect with ideas and experiences from a wider network of people in Scotland (Ferguson & Thurman, 2019).

Kindness in North Ayrshire began in March 2018, with a meeting at Saltcoats Town Hall in which eighty attendees from the public and voluntary sectors identified four themes to explore throughout the year:

🔑 Unlocking spaces focused on how changing the way we use community space, through creating welcoming settings for interactions and relationships focused on informal use, rather than service provision.

❓ Why not? explored the barriers to opportunities to come together, with the aim of building understanding and confidence in interpretations of regulation – and potentially challenging policies and procedures that inhibited kindness.

👁️ Noticing kindness sought to create a shared conversation that recognised the value of kindness, and to create visible opportunities that gave permission to act in kindness.

💖 Kind organisations sought to embed kindness within organisational cultures, building an expectation of kindness into how people treat themselves, those they work with and the communities they serve.

We then convened meetings of partners across these four thematic working groups, establishing a participative approach to developing and testing out ideas. Between March and September a range of activities were carried out, some initiated by the team at Carnegie UK Trust, others by the Council and partners. Pop-up #CupOfKindness stalls aimed to unlock public space and create opportunities for interaction in different communities (Why not?); the libraries service ran library sleepovers to change the feel of the space and give permission for people to connect in different ways (Unlocking spaces); and young people involved in North Ayrshire Youth Services initiated a 'kindness rocks' movement that looked to initiate a shift in attitudes and behaviours by making kindness visible (Noticing kindness).⁵



⁵ These examples are covered in more detail in The Practice of Kindness (Ferguson & Thurman, 2019).

Through these activities and subsequent meetings of the working groups, the partnership began to build engagement in the value of kindness across North Ayrshire. Within the Council itself, this narrative was strengthened by the establishment of a voluntary team of ‘kindness peer researchers’. From May 2018 onwards, this team of forty peer researchers has conducted informal interviews with people across the local authority, asking about their experiences of and thoughts about kindness. This organic process has both encouraged individuals to consider their roles and relationships in a different way, and helped to develop a shared understanding of kindness that has guided the Council’s ongoing approach.

High levels of attendance at follow-up events in September and December further demonstrated a growing interest and willingness to take action on kindness. But conversations at these events, and in working groups, also highlighted the limitations of individual and community action, in the context of institutional barriers (policies, procedures and performance metrics) that inhibit relationships.

Over the last 12 months, we have increased our understanding of the importance and necessity of making significant organisational change, in order to reduce the barriers to kindness. This has led us to reflect on how our staff are permitted and encouraged to behave, and the consequent impact that this then has on the people we serve.

(Audrey Sutton, Interim Executive Director of Communities, North Ayrshire Council, March 2019)

Kind organisations looked at what it would take to create the conditions for kindness within organisations and for the people they serve. This working group had spent much of the year reflecting on the tensions between kindness and organisational systems and structures. By March 2019 they had co-produced a ‘Kindness Promise’: this set of principles spoke about trusting staff to make meaningful connections, ensuring that systems allow them to prioritise the needs of people over process, and, in doing so, articulated a vision for North Ayrshire’s organisations to strive towards.

Throughout 2018-19, Kindness in North Ayrshire engaged with both individual and community action, and institutional behaviours and culture; but our understanding of what it would take to create meaningful change increasingly shifted towards the latter. And so, in March 2019, the Trust extended its partnership with North Ayrshire Council, seeking to build on the principles set out in the Kindness Promise and to integrate practical changes across the local authority’s services – to embed radical kindness.

The second phase of Kindness in North Ayrshire ran for a further 12 months, conducted under challenging circumstances that included internal restructure and job losses, a snap general election, a Best Value Audit, and the emergence of a global pandemic. During this time, the Associate worked across the Community Planning Partnership to encourage a shift in organisational culture and ways of working, and challenge public sector leaders to embrace the principles laid out in the Promise.

NORTH AYRSHIRE 'KINDNESS PROMISE'

We will strive to create the conditions for kindness in our organisations and for the people we serve by:

- trusting our staff to make meaningful connections with people
- protecting time and creating spaces for people to come together
- listening to people's needs and finding solutions in the round, not just addressing our bit of the picture
- creating opportunities to recognise and celebrate kindness
- creating a culture where people are more important than processes and enabling unkindness to be called out
- ensuring our performance management aligns with our values and committing to ask our staff and those we serve if they experience kindness



4. Where we are now

Engagement with the kindness agenda

Over the past two years, North Ayrshire has been on a journey in building an awareness of the importance of kindness, and an understanding of what this means in practice. Participants in earlier events, though well-attended, were drawn largely from the Communities Directorate and voluntary sector, with kindness perceived in some ways as a standalone project. Contrasting this with the Community and Locality Planning Conference in January 2020 – attended by elected members, leaders from NHS, Health and Social Care Partnership, Police, Fire and Rescue, all able to articulate how kindness related to their specific practice – it is evident that this resonates across local authority services.

Part of this is a Scottish context in which kindness is front and centre in the National Performance Framework, and local governments across the country are talking about a more relationship-centred approach. But it is also the strength of staff engagement, led by a cohort of volunteer peer researchers, who have held kindness conversations with people right across North Ayrshire Council.

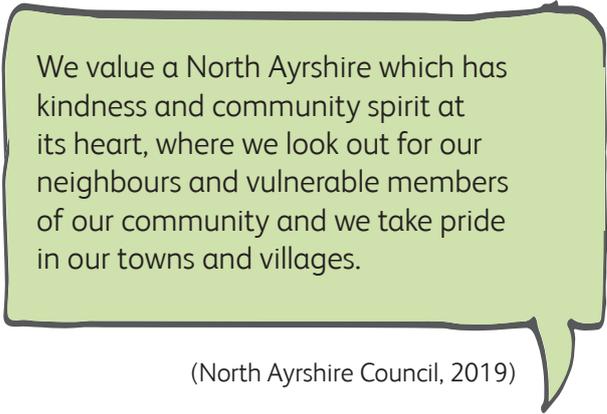
There is a real feeling that the growing visibility of kindness as a value has precipitated a shift in individual attitudes and behaviours, some of which was captured in qualitative data submitted in the Council's recent Best Value Audit. Yet, there is also recognition of the limitations of building a shared narrative, without accompanying this with the hard-edged, structural changes to performance management and risk management that would create the space for kindness more systematically. It is instructive that, although the Communities Directorate submitted information from kindness peer researchers to Audit Scotland, it was not mentioned in

the final report (Accounts Commission, 2020). This perhaps indicates a level of discomfort in auditing for values, and highlights one area where existing systems of accountability fail to incentivise and encourage relationships.

Embedding the language of kindness in policy and collective vision

Despite the fact that large numbers of people have engaged in the conversation around kindness, it is yet to filter down throughout the Council's 6,500 staff – less so the 135,000 residents in North Ayrshire. There is still work to be done to ensure that this conversation translates into ways of working, and that kindness is a value that people in North Ayrshire feel belongs to them.

This process will take time, but it is being facilitated by the inclusion of kindness in the collective vision across the local authority. The Council Plan, updated in 2019, states:



We value a North Ayrshire which has kindness and community spirit at its heart, where we look out for our neighbours and vulnerable members of our community and we take pride in our towns and villages.

(North Ayrshire Council, 2019)

At a more local level, North Ayrshire is split into six localities to facilitate engagement between key partner organisations and the communities they work with. In five out of the six locality partnerships, kindness is a core theme in the Community Charter

developed in partnership between the Council, community organisations and people. With this groundwork in place, before the Covid-19 pandemic took hold plans were in place for locality partnerships to deepen their engagement with communities, by launching a #KindNorthAyrshire campaign that would explore what kindness means to people in terms of their relationship with the Council and their neighbourhood.

High level commitment to structural change

For all the progress in embedding kindness into values and vision, it has to be accompanied by structural change. People involved in Kind organisations identified how at times unhelpful targets and regulations prevented a holistic, human response to people's needs. At a time of squeezed resources and unprecedented levels of scrutiny, it was critical to consider how organisations can invest staff with the autonomy and support to work in a way that is underpinned by kindness.

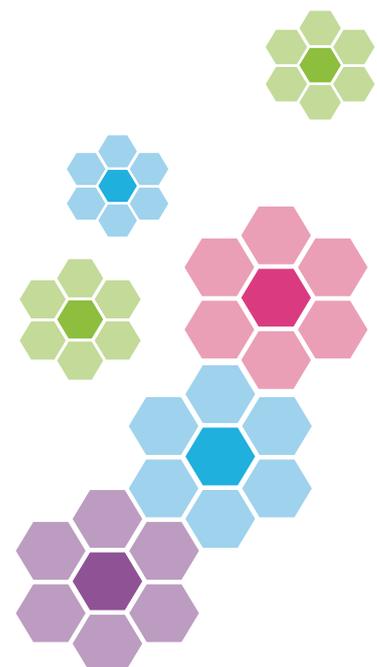
The public conversation that build understanding of the implications of a different approach, and the creation of a culture within organisations is important. But radical kindness can't rely on individual action: it has to actively tackle the constraints that get in the way. The Community and Locality Planning conference in January 2020 marked a first step towards this.

The conference opened with a video in which the chief officers of the Council, NHS Ayrshire and Arran, Ayrshire Police Division, North Ayrshire Health and Social Care Partnership, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, and the Church of Scotland – endorsing the Kindness Promise, giving their staff 'permission' to put kindness at the heart of what they do.

The Kindness Promise gives staff across North Ayrshire permission to think and act in kindness. If that feels hard or things get in the way, tell us and we'll work to remove the barriers.

(Craig Hatton, Chief Executive, North Ayrshire Council, January 2020)

This high-level commitment is important. It empowers staff to trust their instincts and behave in a human way, without fear of the implications of regulation or 'professionalism', even when it feels difficult. It also signalled a commitment to moving beyond silos, and working across the partnership to embed a more holistic approach to meeting the needs of individuals and communities. In spring 2020, the Council began developing plans to ensure that they delivered on this promise.



5. What we learnt

Throughout the Trust's work on kindness, we have acknowledged the scale of the challenge: that kindness is not soft and easy-to-do, but complex and challenging; that it demands rethinking the systems and structures that govern our organisations (Unwin, 2018). In North Ayrshire, it is important to recognise that the full extent of our ambitions at the start of the partnership – of radical service redesign and a fundamental resetting of relationships between state and public – are yet to be achieved.

By spring 2020, we had arrived at a position where key stakeholders understood the implications of kindness as an organisational value, and where North Ayrshire could truly begin the process of transformational change. That it took nearly two years to move from a conversation about cultural change to one about systems change illustrates some of the challenges inherent with work on kindness – learning that we reflect on here with the benefit of hindsight.

First, because of the almost universal appreciation of kindness as a personal value (undoubtedly part of its strength and appeal) the word itself brings associations that can be problematic. Unlike other approaches to describe systems change, there is a certain comfort in conversations about kindness that makes it difficult to move beyond values and attitudes towards something more structural – indeed, we wrote about the 'fear of radical kindness' in a previous report (Ferguson & Thurman, 2019). Tied to this, there are expectations about behaviour and of 'living your values' that can make it feel hard to have challenging conversations, or to embrace decisions that feel unkind, both of which are critical in any process of transformation.

More fundamentally, existing assumptions can pre-set people's expectations of what kindness is, which are then difficult to unpick. In North Ayrshire these assumptions were, perhaps, affirmed by situating kindness within the Communities Directorate. While these services were undoubtedly best-placed to lead on engagement with communities, it allowed kindness to be perceived as an initiative relating to strengthening communities, rather than something that was organisation-wide, which took time to redress.

A programme that aims to reset the relationship between Council and communities demands a joined-up, a whole system approach, where kindness is visible in every touchpoint with the local authority. For Kindness in North Ayrshire to realise this ambition would require leadership to connect and ensure buy-in not just from Communities, but across all services. The presence of competing agendas and priorities across these directorates and services, while not mutually exclusive, has slowed the process of change.

Alongside this, a range of external factors and internal pressures took the focus away from kindness at various junctures throughout the two years. Work had to be paused during an organisational restructure a snap general election then postponed the Community & Locality Planning conference; and subsequently a Best Value Audit demanded energy that would otherwise have been directed at planning and implementation. All of these highlighted the profound difficulty of delivering change while being held accountable for increasingly unsustainable targets and budgets. Yet, the biggest external shock to occur during this period – the Covid-19 pandemic – has not stymied but rather fast-tracked the process of embedding of kindness across the local authority.

6. Kindness during Covid

As the Covid-19 pandemic hit the UK, the Trust was preparing to exit North Ayrshire with a plan in place to embed the structural change required to drive the kindness agenda forward. Although these plans were put on hold, we noticed that the emergency response had triggered a change in approach that felt important to document, and provided something of a blueprint for renewal.

It's community development on steroids: the partnership working, communities empowered, the generosity, the kindness.

(Locality Officer, The Three Towns)

Over the first five months of the pandemic we held conversations with the coordinator of the community hub in The Three Towns locality. We noticed that many of the things we had spoken about over the previous two years were suddenly happening at speed: trust in frontline staff to make connections, and flexibility to respond accordingly; a holistic approach based on collaboration across public services; and an enhanced and equal partnership with communities and community organisations.

These changes were driven by a common purpose, exemplified by the presence of all local stakeholders – from volunteers and community organisations, to social work and health and social care – ‘under one roof’ in the community hub. Through a shared understanding that supporting people through the pandemic was the greatest priority, organisational hierarchies and barriers fell away.

- The suspension of targets allowed services to focus on outcomes; and the flexibility in budgets empowered staff to deliver them.
- The relaxation of governance and information sharing facilitated more effective partnership working, particularly with the voluntary sector who helped drive the community response and emerged as equal partners.
- And all of this underpinned by a transformed approach to risk and accountability, which shifted decision-making responsibility to those that had the closest relationships with people and communities.

People reflected on the energy and fulfilment derived from the knowledge that they have the freedom to build relationships and the individual autonomy to help people. And while the relationship between Council and community has been enhanced because of the pandemic, there is a sense that it was the investment in communities before Covid – of which kindness was a part – that had really enabled this relationship to flourish (a hypothesis that has been echoed elsewhere⁶).

In its relationship with communities, collaboration across the public and voluntary sector, and focus on human relationships, North Ayrshire's response to Covid-19 embodied the principles set out in the Kindness Promise a year before. The challenge now is different: not to overhaul systems and structures, but to ensure that recovery and renewal sustains and builds on what has been possible during Covid.

6 See, for example (Morgan, 2020) (Cooper, 2020).

7. What would it take?

Based on our 'Covid conversations' with North Ayrshire and our understanding of what was strong in the collective response to the pandemic, we finish with five priorities to embed radical kindness – priorities that we hope will feel relevant and urgent not just in North Ayrshire, but for local government everywhere.



Create a shared narrative.

Across North Ayrshire the response to Covid has been underpinned by kindness:

our experience of working on values-based approaches to wellbeing suggests that this can be carried forward by telling the story of what people have valued most, building on the trust and relationships between communities and organisations that have flourished during the crisis.



Put power in people's hands.

The pandemic has given rise to unprecedented levels of volunteering and community action because people were given the

tools and resources to take control of their lives and their neighbourhoods.



Build on models of partnership.

The Covid crisis demanded a new way of working together – both with communities, and across departments and organisations. In North Ayrshire, the community hub emerged as a place-based model that facilitated multi-stakeholder collaboration and allowed a more flexible and responsive approach to supporting people.



Give permission to act.

Throughout 2020, we have seen what can happen when staff are given the trust and autonomy to make meaningful connections with people and

to respond accordingly. Embedding radical kindness demands that North Ayrshire Council maintains this permission 'from the top' and embraces diffused leadership throughout the organisation.



Reassess 'value' and 'performance'.

So much of this has been possible because of the temporary suspension of restrictive budgets and targets. Accountability will remain important, especially as organisations enter a period where difficult decisions will have to be made; but there is a need to consider what we can take away from the existing performance management report card in order to create the space for kindness.

In distilling the ongoing journey of kindness in North Ayrshire into five priorities, it is striking how these overlay with the 'guiding principles' set out in the recently refreshed route map to an Enabling State (Davidson, Wallace & Ormston, 2020). Recommendations to 'tell an authentic story of change', to 'give people permission to take control' and, most explicitly, to 'build in radical kindness' have realigned the two conversations, showing that embracing radical kindness in a local government context is fundamentally about resetting relationships between citizen and state.

Our experience of working alongside North Ayrshire shows that taking a kindness approach can be a way to build a new, more human, relationship between public services, communities and citizens. A kinder society is an end in itself, and one that we are proud to be associated with at the Trust, but it is also a way to build a strong society – one that can help people withstand future shocks, be they personal challenges, public health emergencies or environmental disasters. In the face of an increasingly insecure future, our relationships are our resilience.

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