

Across Scotland we can see mutual support, solidarity and assistance being put into place – and Labour values are needed now more than ever. writes **SARAH BOYACK**

THE coronavirus crisis is the greatest challenge that we have faced in generations. With the Prime Minister in intensive care, the streets eerily quiet and limits on our liberty, it can feel that the normal political process, and indeed normal life, is on hold.

As difficult as it may be to believe it, just over a month ago we were debating the Scottish government's budget proposals. A decade of austerity, initiated by the Tories at Westminster and amplified by the SNP government and its push to centralise services, has placed huge pressure on our councils to provide social care, roll-out childcare services and meet the changing needs of our communities with dwindling resources.

But in the last fortnight the coronavirus pandemic has delivered an unprecedented challenge, requiring our councils to respond on the ground and reshape all their services without the certainty of knowing which bills the Scottish government will pick up.

Faced with the huge challenges posed by the pandemic, our councils have stepped up to the plate. Despite the deep damage done by a decade of Tory-SNP austerity and the

huge pressures on front-line services, local authority staff have reshaped their services to cope with the demands placed on them as they work to support our local communities.

By providing services such as social care and housing, local government is on the front line of this pandemic, delivering services to the most vulnerable in our society. In many cases, the work of local authority staff can make the difference between life and death.

In North Ayrshire, the Labour-led council, like so many councils across Scotland, has responded to the challenge posed by the pandemic with dynamism and efficiency, putting Labour values into practice to protect those in need.

Faced with the threat posed by coronavirus, mutual aid groups have sprouted up across the country as testament to the community spirit. In North Ayrshire the Labour led council has taken the lead in helping to direct the efforts of mutual help groups and allowing for the council infrastructure already in place to be used to deliver help to those who most need it.

Expanding on the free school meals scheme that was put in place after schools were formally closed, North Ayrshire council has expanded its meal delivery programme

and at the time of writing, up to 4,000 households in North Ayrshire are having meals for all the family delivered to their doorstep.

and in hand with the increased financial pressure on local government has been the increase in the commitments and obligations passed onto councils from the Scottish government. In the parliament, Scottish Labour has been focusing on the necessity of rolling out widespread testing and PPE, not just to our vital NHS staff but to all other key workers too.

In an online meeting with Labour leaders across Scotland, their experiences and the pressure they are all under was clear. The scale of the challenge includes the impact of staff having to self-isolate, while services are reorganised in ways that would have been unimaginable a month ago.

Other obstacles include having to provide new services to help find safe care support to enable people who would otherwise still be stuck in hospital and to house and support homeless people. These challenges were previously in the "too difficult" category, but have now had to be addressed urgently.

The pressure on front-line

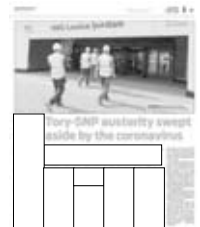
local authority staff is tremendous, whether it is managing and shifting resources to make large-scale changes happen fast to support people in our communities and to work with the third sector to make sure people get access to food and the support they need locally.

Local authority trade unions have rightly flagged the need for consistent support for staff such as access to testing and PPE. This is something Scottish Labour has been demanding for all social work and care staff since the start of the pandemic, along with action to ensure that the safety of all local authority staff is delivered, such as social distancing measures at work.

It is vital that the Scottish government commits to underwrite the additional costs that local authorities incur to keep our communities safe and resilient so that they come through this crisis able to adjust and help us transition to the recovery we will need in the coming months.

As hard as it is to remember that only just over a month ago we were discussing the Scottish budget, it is near impossible to imagine that this pandemic will one day be over. But it will.

There is no denying that the pandemic will have a profound and lasting effect on almost





every aspect of our lives. From how we work, to how we socialise, to the most wide-ranging aspects of macroeconomic policy, all will be changed utterly by the virus.

It is vital that the lessons we learn from this pandemic stem from our experiences. Junior Doctors, once the bane of cer-

tain tabloids, are now being lauded as heroes on the front pages of the same publications.

This crisis will allow us to recalibrate our political priorities and must bring about a sea-change in how local government is treated and how funding is approached.

In the last few weeks we have

seen a gradual shedding of the dominant economic approach of the last decade. Austerity is no longer orthodox.

A new economic approach, which values the work that local government does, must emerge from this crisis, so that properly funded, empowered councils can once more

deliver for our communities, with Labour councils leading the way towards a dynamic, people-centred municipal socialism.

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