We Were Built for This

How community organisations helped us through the coronavirus crisis – and how we can build a better future.



locality
the power of community

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1. Executive Summary 06

2. The power of community in seven places
- Berwick Community Trust 23
- Centre4 26
- Charles Burrell Centre 30
- Knowle West Alliance 34
- Levenshulme Inspire 38
- Manor House Development Trust 42
- Moat House Community Trust 45

3. What have we learnt through the community response to coronavirus? 49

4. Reflections for the future 66

5. Recommendations 71

6. Further reading 79

7. End notes 81



Mark Law

Chair, Locality and CEO of Barca Leeds

The coronavirus pandemic has brought immense pain and hardship to people across the world. Lockdown has separated us from our loved ones, communities and friends, and has caused significant financial and personal strain for so many. Thousands of people have lost their lives to this terrible illness, and the health impacts of this period will be with us for many years to come.

But alongside this pain we have also witnessed the extraordinary response of our communities: from the kindness and compassion of neighbours helping neighbours, to the community organisation staff and volunteers who have been working day-in day-out, alongside other key workers, to help get people through the hardest of times.

At Barca Leeds we have been working with others here in Bramley, and partners across Leeds, to coordinate the distribution of emergency supplies, support those who are isolated, and make sure people still have access to the services they need. We've been helping the homeless find accommodation, interpreting information and advice for non-English speakers, and working with the police on better youth engagement.

And as Chair of Locality, I know our story in Leeds is not unique. This new research showcases stories from across the country that demonstrate how the power of community has supported us through the pandemic.

The research shows that, in many places, the collective endeavour of emergency support has strengthened partnerships between local government and community organisations. Historical inter-organisational friction engendered by competitive tendering and funding has become irrelevant. Previous siloes and barriers were sidestepped, and trust-based collaboration formed in their place. In areas like Leeds, where there is a history of good partnership, this has helped us go further and faster.

As we emerge from lockdown and begin our tentative recovery, our minds must turn to the big challenges we now face as a country; from the future of social care, to the climate emergency. This must truly be an opportunity to reimagine and revaluate, not just slip back into the "old normal". This report sets out a platform for how we can do just that: by tapping into the power of community. Over centralisation has been holding us back – we need government to create the conditions for community power to flourish at a local level, and to make this the foundation of a fairer society after the crisis.

This pandemic has demanded a response unprecedented in peace time, and our communities have delivered. Now it is time for government to unlock and strengthen this amazing resource for the future.



Tony Armstrong

Chief Executive, Locality

The first few days and weeks of the coronavirus crisis were frantic, difficult and emotional. Our members had to shift their service delivery model overnight from bringing people together to keeping people apart but connected, while their income fell off a cliff. But they did it, prioritising the needs of local people through distribution of food and medical supplies, hot meals, a friendly voice for isolated people, and ongoing support for people in crisis.

This response has been remarkable, as has the huge surge in neighbourly behaviour from individuals across the country. Remarkable but not at all surprising. At Locality, we know that however daunting the circumstances, there is a huge source of hope at our disposal. This is what we call the power of community.

We have seen this power in action like never before. Community organisations – along with our NHS and care workers – have been our frontline of defence. They have been coordinating emergency support, adapting and scaling up existing services, and finding new ways to keep people together. As our new research shows, they've been "cogs of connection" within their neighbourhoods, connecting people up with a range of different services, and bridging the different layers of response – from grassroots mutual aid, to city or county wide statutory provision. We owe these organisations a huge debt of gratitude and we need to value and support them to continue to do their vital work.

As we start to emerge from the first phase of the pandemic, there are so many urgent questions about what needs to change. The crisis has shown us glimpses of a better future, just as it has exposed deep existing wounds in our society and economy. We cannot return to the old way of doing things. Changing course requires huge, macro level shifts, not least to ensure the systemic inequalities exposed by the pandemic are determinedly and comprehensively addressed.

One of the biggest lessons that needs to be taken from this moment are the failings of centralisation and the potential for building a better future on the foundations of community power. We cannot control everything from the centre, and if we needed any reminders of this, we've just had them in spades. Instead, we must support and trust local delivery and networks which have shown their value many times over during the crisis.

The new partnerships and increased trust in community solutions which formed in many places as a result of this crisis must pave the way forward. This government has a unique opportunity, right now which it cannot blow. We've seen a national mobilisation of people power in

local communities across the country. We need to channel this surge of community spirit into a lasting framework of community power.

Our recommendations for government build on the current opportunities they already have at their disposal- and push them to go further. Rebuilding our economy is going to be a national priority, but we have to learn the lessons of failed economic policies over several decades which have not succeeded in "levelling up" the places that always miss out.

Our recommendations show how the promised Community Ownership Fund and future economic development funding can be used to drive forward a community powered economic recovery which achieves renewal and growth while tackling entrenched inequality. We show how the government can support a shift away from competition and towards collaboration in our public services – investing in long-term local relationships and resources. And we show how we can put neighbourhoods and communities at the heart of a new wave of de-centralisation through the upcoming Devolution White Paper.

Taken together these recommendations are radical, but common sense. They would deliver much of the Prime Minister's ambition to level up the country, build self-reliant and resilient communities and bounce back stronger from the crisis.

1 Executive Summary

Our key findings

This report showcases the inspiring ways community organisations have helped us through the coronavirus crisis. Through in-depth research with community organisations and local authorities we have learnt:

- Existing social infrastructure has been vital to the crisis response
- Well-functioning local systems have emerged in the heat of the crisis
- The role of community organisations as "cogs of connection" has been strengthened
- Community organisations have adapted at pace – but need support to meet the challenges of the future

The committed and agile way communities have responded to the coronavirus crisis points the way to a new future that's built around community power. But to be truly transformative, policymakers need to catch up with the innovation that's happening locally - and help embed it as the "new normal" as we emerge from the crisis.

So this report sets out three practical ways the government can create the conditions for community power to flourish at a local level and make this the foundation of a fairer society after the crisis.

Opportunity 1: Support a community-powered economic recovery

- Expand the Community Ownership Fund to capitalise community organisations, by leveraging Dormant Assets and other funding to establish a £1bn investment plan for community assets
- Put communities in charge of local economic development by ringfencing 25% of economic development funding for community-led partnerships

Opportunity 2: Create collaborative public services that unlock community power

- Support "power partnerships" to develop at a local level through long-term investment in councils and communities
- Permanently embed procurement flexibility introduced during the crisis
- Shift from competitive tendering to community collaboration

Opportunity 3: Turn community spirit into community power

- Put neighbourhoods at the heart of the Devolution White Paper and strengthen community powers to lead change locally.
- Provide £500m revenue funding to protect, strengthen and grow existing community organisations and provide a pathway for new mutual aid groups to become established.

The coronavirus crisis has transformed our lives in ways we wouldn't have believed possible just a few short months ago. Basic everyday acts – travelling to work, meeting friends and family – suddenly stopped, as the whole country committed itself to preventing the spread of this deadly virus.

As our key workers have stepped up to lead the fight, the rest of us have found a new way of living. For many, it has been incredibly challenging. Despite massive government intervention, record numbers have lost their jobs.[1] Many of those still in employment are struggling to balance working from home with childcare responsibilities. Domestic violence has surged.[2] Mental health problems are on the rise, with experts warning of a "tsunami of mental illness" on the way.[3] The sudden shift online has sharply reinforced the digital divide and left those without good internet access socially and economically isolated.[4] And of course, thousands upon thousands are coping with the grief of losing loved ones, often without having been able to be there to say goodbye.

Lockdown life, however, has also reminded us of some things that were in the process of passing us by. With the pace of the modern world slowed, the air is cleaner. We can hear the birdsong we may have forgotten was ever there at all. Even at a social distance, many of us know our neighbours better than we did before. We have clapped for carers and reset some perspectives on skilled work. And our parks and green spaces – so often the first cut of the austerity years – have reinforced their role as absolutely essential to our quality of life.

It should be clear to us now - if it was not before - that these are not the "nice to haves", adjuncts to our essential roles as individual units of economic production. Our neighbourhoods, our places, our social solidarity; these are the fundamentals of life as it should be lived. Our economy should support our community, not the other way round.

This goal seems simultaneously incredibly simple and very difficult to achieve. Our current economic model drives our lives: the work we do, the environment that surrounds us, the public services we use. Its inherent inequality has been devastatingly exposed by the pandemic. Far from being a "great leveller", the economic effects of the crisis have been most keenly felt by those already in precarious work and on the lowest pay. The rates of death in our most deprived places are over double those in the least deprived. What's more, the disproportionate impact on people from BAME communities lays bare how these socioeconomic divides have combined with structural racism to create fatal health inequalities.

Changing course is a huge task that will require macro level shifts: to an economy that's organised around community wellbeing and environmental sustainability; to an society where systemic inequalities are determinedly and comprehensively addressed; to a social security system that ends poverty and raises living standards; to public services that focus on keeping us well rather than treating us when we're ill.

At heart, we need a concerted effort to shift public policy: away from an ethos of competition organised around the individual where power centralised; towards an ethos of collaboration organised around the community where power is widely dispersed.

The good news is, we don't need to invent something new to support this resetting. As the new research in this report highlights, to build the better society we know we want, we simply need to invest in and support something that's been with us all along: the power of community.

Many people have known this for some time – from the work of Locality members across the country to the growing community wealth building movement and the emerging thinking around the community paradigm.[5] A few places – the Wigan Deal for example – have crept out, if not into the mainstream, then at least into think tank reports and broadsheet newspaper columns.

But could this be community's break out moment? Is it time for community power to move from the margins to the mainstream? Will all the fantastic community-led activity that's been happening in different ways in different neighbourhoods finally add up to more than the sum of its parts and take its place at the forefront of our political imagination?

The window of opportunity

The research we've captured over the last few months suggests that it could – but not that it will.

We have learnt about the spontaneous and agile way communities have responded to the coronavirus crisis.

But to be truly transformative, this community power needs public policy to catch up and reshape itself around the future that's happening now.

There is a window of opportunity to do this. The full focus of the government is – rightly – on responding to the crisis. It has mobilised the resources of the state in ways which were unimaginable for any political party just three short months ago. But as we begin to emerge the other side, the decisions this government takes will set the trajectory for a new era. They have the opportunity to build on the innovations we have seen, the new world that is kindling –or to snuff it out.

This report sets out what the new world emerging in our neighbourhoods looks like and how policymakers can support it to put down permanent roots.

- We showcase the inspiring ways community organisations have helped us through the crisis – how, as one of our members put it: "we were built for this"
- We set out ways policymakers can catch up with the innovation that's happening locally - and help embed it as the "new normal" as we emerge from the crisis

How community organisations have responded to the crisis

At Locality we don't think we have all the answers. But we do think we know a really important part of the answer: strong and successful community organisations.

There is a vast reservoir of ideas, skill, innovation, passion, local knowledge and long-term commitment that lives

in our neighbourhoods. Our new Theory of Change - which is being published alongside this report - outlines how, by creating strong and successful community organisations, we can unlock this power and provide solutions to the big economic, social, and environmental challenges we face.[6]

But too often, community organisations are doing incredible work in spite of the system. Indeed, many Locality members were originally set up in the face of egregious system failure. The story of Goodwin Development Trust - formed on a council estate in Hull in the early nineties - captures the origin story for many community organisations. As Stuart Spandler, chair of Goodwin Development Trust, explains:

> **"What the residents on this estate did was band together and say this isn't good enough. No one else is going to help us. No one else is bothered. We've got to do it ourselves. Let's not talk about it: let's do it."**[7]

Our new research shows what can happen when community organisations are enabled to play a collaborative role in a supportive system, rather than having to kick against a failing one. Here we present our four key findings.

Research methodology:
This research draws on the evidence and insights from Locality members. We carried out in-depth case study interviews with community leaders in seven places – Berwick, Bristol, Coventry, Grimsby, London, Manchester and Thetford. We have also used qualitative survey responses from 57 community organisation respondents, alongside a series of member roundtables and wider member engagement.

Through Locality's Keep it Local Network[8], we have also drawn on contributions from council leaders, councillors, chief executives and council officers, through interviews and an online roundtable. This provides a local authority perspective on how partnerships with community organisations have supported their response to the crisis.

Key finding 1

Existing social infrastructure has been vital to the crisis response

Barely missing a beat, local community organisations have completely recalibrated the way they work to respond to the coronavirus crisis. Alongside our NHS and care workers, they have been part of our frontline of defence against this deadly virus. Across the country, community organisations have been coordinating volunteering efforts, delivering emergency supplies, supporting isolated groups, and finding creative ways to keep communities together at a time when there is a clinical imperative for them to be physically apart.

They have been able to respond in this way because they have built up a huge resource of community power over a long period of time. This power comes from a range of sources: networks of relationships; deep reservoirs of local knowledge and trust; established services and enterprising use of community buildings. It's what makes community organisations a fundamental part of our "social infrastructure" – the facilities, services, organisations and networks that support the flourishing and wellbeing of our society.

When crisis struck, there wasn't time for local areas to wait for a centrally implemented response. But within hours, conversations were happening, systems were up and running, and volunteers were being mobilised. Community organisations already had the relationships in place locally, and had existing services that could be adapted and reimagined.

As Julien Lake, CEO of Berwick Development Trust explained:

> **"We cannot overstate the value of us simply being here. We have been able to provide a foundation for the local response to flex, grow and develop."**

Key finding 2

Well-functioning local systems have emerged in the heat of the crisis

For years, "place-based systems change" has been the holy grail for ambitious social reformers. It's accepted to be a long-term goal, likely to be realised through incremental progress. However, our research has found that in some places, the heat of the crisis has encouraged well-functioning systems to fall into place almost overnight. A shared sense of collective purpose has streamlined processes and removed barriers that have previously impeded partnership working.

As Kim Shutler, CEO of the Cellar Trust in Bradford, told us:

> **"With the red tape lifted, we have been able to move mountains and change things which would have taken months or even years."**

As might be expected, local systems have been particularly strong where good relationships already existed. Areas with a history of collaboration have been able to move further and faster. For example, Calderdale Council's recent experience of flooding made them well prepared for the coronavirus crisis. Tim Swift, leader of the council, explained that:

> **"The speed and way in which we are able to respond depended on the existing partnerships, networks and understanding that were in place."**

Similarly, Knowle West Alliance in Bristol was already a partnership of community organisations and residents, working together to join up services across the neighbourhood. So, when the crisis hit, they felt: "we were built for this".

However, the crisis has also inspired the creation of new relationships where they didn't exist before. This has been

particularly visible between local authorities and the NHS, accelerating the shift towards "whole system" working. As Toby Savage, leader of South Gloucestershire Council, put it:

> **"It has been important for our local health partners to see the power of community and how that can be harnessed to deliver their aims. The idea that we're able to develop a joint commissioning approach that deals with the short, medium and long-term is a real priority for us as part of the recovery."**

Key finding 3

The role of community organisations as "cogs of connection" has been strengthened

The key feature of the supportive local systems that have emerged has been a mutual recognition of roles and strengths. Mutual aid has been incredibly quick and agile, acting as first responders, the eyes and ears on the ground. Established local community organisations have supported this informal street-level activity across the neighbourhood, providing local people with more formal support and expertise, and connecting things up with the local public sector. Local authorities have often then plugged statutory services into these community networks, coordinating at a strategic level and adding resource.

What's been vital to this working well has been an equalising of power relationships. It has not been a case of the public sector buying a service or commissioning an output. Councils have recognised the value of the work that's already happening, fallen into its slipstream and helped it to go further.

Local community organisations tell us that understanding of the work they do and trust in their expertise has grown. Linda Dellow, chief officer of Centre4 in Grimsby, says:

> **"The local authority are looking at the community in a whole different way. We did have good relationships anyway, but now they are working towards a different model for the future."**

A recent New Local Government Network (NLGN) survey bears this out: 95% of council chief executives say the contribution of community groups to their coronavirus response has been 'very significant' or 'significant'.[9]

Similarly, supportive and trusting relationships have formed between community organisations and mutual aid groups. As Danny Whitehouse, chief executive of Charles Burrell Centre told us:

> **"We didn't try and outdo them, we've really supported them and they are doing lots of wonderful work."**

Indeed, the crisis has highlighted what recent Locality research has shown: that the distinctive role of community organisations in the local system is to act as "cogs of connection".[10]

As multipurpose organisations they connect people up with a range of different services and activities, as well

as connecting the different "layers of local", from the street level response of mutual aid groups, to city or county wide networks and provision.

> **"Our role is vital as we have established relationships with all the GP practices, adult social care and through the community so we have been able to quickly identify those at risk, link services up and become a trusted and known source of advice and support."**
>
> Amy Kinnear, chief executive, Southmead Development Trust.

Key finding 4

Community organisations have adapted at pace – but need support to meet the challenges of the future

The speed and agility with which community organisations have been able to respond to the crisis has shone through our research. Time and again we have heard how services have been reshaped and partnerships forged with a few phone calls. Some organisations were able to adapt existing provision; others have deployed community assets in different ways to respond to newly emerged need.

However, they are making these transformations at the same time as their business models have come under severe strain. This is particularly the case for those organisations who feel they have "done the right thing" and shifted away from grant dependency towards earning their own income. Trading income from community cafes and room hire has disappeared; and organisations that run buildings and have tenants face the uncertainties of changing behaviours. This has left many community organisations exposed; seeing huge demand on their services while facing an extraordinary external challenge to their business models.

A survey conducted for this report revealed that 59% of Locality members risk losing a quarter of their income due to coronavirus. What's more, the majority of Locality members are based in areas of multiple deprivation, trading in areas of traditional market failure to provide local social value. In a crisis whose impact has followed the contours of existing inequalities, their role in their neighbourhoods is ever more acute.[11]

The community organisations we spoke to have already made huge strides to adapt to the "new normal". In particular, digital transformation has been happening at a rate previously unimaginable. As one Locality member described it, "we managed to roll out a new digital strategy in two days that in ordinary times would have taken us a year to implement." At the same time, community organisations have also been finding new ways to counter digital exclusion – including one-to-one telephone support and provision of dongles and tablets to help people access the internet.

They are also ensuring their own organisational business models continue to be resilient. Coronavirus has provided a huge external shock that has impacted community enterprise as it has the rest of the economy. Lessons are being learnt – about overreliance on one income stream; about the potential long-term impact of social distancing on room hire or cafes – and community organisations will need to be fleet of foot. But trading income will

continue to be a critical part of a mixed income model for community organisations.

To meet the challenges of the future and play their full role in the recovery, community organisations will require long-term support. The scale of the economic crisis and the depth of its social impact will make it very difficult for community organisations to trade their way out alone. And if these organisations go to the wall, we'll have lost years of investment and relationship building. It is precisely these "cogs of connection" that society needs to drive us out of the crisis into a better world.

How policymakers can unlock the power of community

We believe the good practice we have uncovered in our research should set a new bar for how supportive local systems operate. Clearly, the picture has not been the same across the country. We have heard plenty of examples of where things have not been working well: inflexibility over contract payments; inconsistency in decisions about funding awards through small business grants; and top-down crisis management that has in some places take the rug out from underneath neighbourhood-led schemes, rather than enhanced them.

We also know that while there is good evidence that local authorities are placing increased trust in the work of community organisations, this trend is far from universal. In many places, stubbornly paternalistic attitudes persist in the public sector.

However, we have seen enough evidence of good practice to suggest there is something here that our future policy agenda can nurture and spread. This government has a unique opportunity, right now, to ally itself with and build upon the surge of community spirit we have witnessed over the last few months. It can create the conditions for community power to flourish at a local level and make this the foundation of a fairer society after the crisis.

Indeed, it is crystal clear from our research that there is no desire on the part of council or community leaders to "bounce back" or return to "business as usual". And this motivation is shared by the wider public: an RSA poll found that 85% wanted to see at least some of the personal or social changes they have experienced during lockdown to continue afterwards, while just 9% want a complete return to normal.[12]

But state capacity has been drained by the scale of the crisis, and there will be a social, economic, and political imperative to get the economy moving as quickly as possible. In the face of certain recession, there will be a powerful incentive for Whitehall to fall back on its traditional levers.

It is crystal clear from our research that there is no desire on the part of council or community leaders to "bounce back" or return to "business as usual".

We cannot allow that to happen. The crisis has shown us that huge shifts are possible when there is the collective will to achieve them. Importantly, it has also shown we don't need to design new institutions to solve the complex social, economic and environmental problems we face. The new world can be built on an old idea whose time is now: the power of community.

What's more, we believe there are a number of opportunities within the government's existing policy agenda to do precisely this and set the terms for a new future that's built around community power.

To do it, government will, first and foremost, need to break free of its instinct to centralise. This tendency has been reinforced by the crisis, with ministers under huge pressure to be seen to take control. But for a long time now, it has been clear Whitehall's levers can't provide the answers to the problems we face. And so it has been, from volunteering to food supplies to testing, where local solutions have only been sought once the limits of centralisation have become all too apparent.

Let this be the last chapter in the UK's story of ever tighter centralisation. Let the lesson from the crisis be the need to unlock community power.

Here we outline three big opportunities the government has to reset policy to unlock the power of community.



Opportunity 1

Support a community-powered economic recovery

Key recommendations:

- Expand the Community Ownership Fund to capitalise community organisations, by leveraging Dormant Assets and other funding to establish a £1bn investment plan for community assets
- Put communities in charge of local economic development by ringfencing 25% of economic development funding for community-led partnerships

Once the public health crisis of coronavirus has been overcome, addressing the economic crisis it has created will quickly become the government's top priority. We need to ensure that the desire to "bounce back" as quickly as possible doesn't mean we double down on an economic model that has not worked for so long, for so many.

Research published by the Communities in Charge campaign last year showed how UK government economic development funding tends to flow to more prosperous places such as London and the South East.[13] This has been driven by Treasury orthodoxy that the best way to support the economy is through investment in the highest-growth, highest-productivity areas - under the assumption that increases in wealth will "trickle out" to poorer areas or be redistributed by the tax system.

Just prior to the coronavirus crisis, the think tank Onward's "Levelling Up" report said that "the new government must rethink an approach which has meant that for decades growth enhancing spending has been skewed to the areas which are already the most productive and richest."[14] Indeed, there is a big risk that the crisis will make these geographic inequalities even more entrenched. As the Centre for Cities points out: "Places with stronger highly-skilled information-based economies

– mostly in the Greater South East – have been able to more easily adapt to working from home, ensuring that some parts the economy continues to function. However, other areas – mostly in the North and Midlands – with weaker low-skill service-based economies have been less able to do this".[15]

If the government is serious about "levelling up", it needs to make sure the huge economic development investment that will be needed to kick start the economy is spent in a different way. Traditional approaches will simply widen inequalities between people and places, and accelerate the climate crisis. The billions that will need to be pumped into our economy to invest in our rebuild must reach the places that need it most, in a way that will help them to become prosperous and sustainable in the long term.

We can do this if we make it a community-powered recovery. Recent Locality research has demonstrated the role of community organisations in strengthening "local economic resilience": creating a productive local economy that's environmentally sustainable and supports community wellbeing.[16]

In particular, community organisations act as local economic multipliers in the disadvantaged areas they operate – places we know will face the toughest challenges in the years to come. They ensure the wealth they generate is redistributed in their neighbourhoods, by employing local people in good quality jobs, using local supply chains, and providing training opportunities so local people can become economically active.

We believe the government has two key opportunities to support a community-powered recovery.

Expand the Community Ownership Fund to capitalise community organisations

The Conservative Manifesto in 2019 pledged £150m to create a new Community Ownership Fund. We believe this fund can be the start of something transformational. With more ambitious scale and scope, it can turbocharge the community ownership agenda and create the foundations of a community-powered recovery.

A national fund to support communities to take ownership of local land and buildings has been a longstanding Locality campaign call – and it is now more important than ever. So the government must seize the opportunity to establish and expand its planned Community Ownership Fund, leveraging Dormant Assets and other money to create a £1bn fund over the next 5 years.[17]

This fund can provide the capital base to unlock the power of community and reshape our local economies. It can invest in the established community organisations that helped us through the crisis, supporting them to weather the current financial storms, develop and expand their asset bases, and be sustainable in the long term. This will enable them to help their neighbourhoods bounce forwards from the crisis - in particular, supporting their critical role in providing localised employment and skills training in areas of multiple deprivation where labour market challenges will be particularly acute.

It can also help save important local community spaces that will come under threat during the coming recession and ensure they are put to productive economic use through community business. It can enable communities to buy back buildings that have been lost to the private sector during the austerity years. And it can allow new mutual aid groups, and other community start-ups who want to

become more permanently established, the opportunity to develop an asset base.

An example of the huge impact a Community Ownership Fund could have on local economies is Heeley Trust in Sheffield. They have already redeveloped a number of derelict spaces and transformed them into active centres of local enterprise, making a vital contribution to local economic activity. Sum Studios, for example, was an old school building the Trust have renovated and is now a hub for 30 local businesses alongside artists' and community studios. The legacy of these assets and independent income enabled Heeley Trust to deliver a wide-reaching community support response to coronavirus and to play a strong local leadership role. They have well developed plans for further asset development projects and are a prime example of where relatively small amounts of capital funding would have a significant impact on the local economy and improve the local area. This would create real, long term grass roots resilience and regrowth.

Put communities in charge of local economic development

The second big opportunity for the government is to put communities in charge of local economic development. We know from all our experience on the ground that local people themselves are the best judges of how to develop their local economies and reduce inequalities. As Sacha Bedding, Manager of the Wharton Trust Community Centre in Hartlepool, explains:

> **"Change happens through the power of community. You can't get people who aren't from these communities to come in and tell them what's right. You've got to ask them and trust them to identify their own priorities."**[18]

Government should ring-fence 25% of any future economic development funding for community-led partnerships. These partnerships – as proposed by the Communities in Charge campaign – would be made up of local businesses, community organisations, residents and local authorities.[19] So whether it's from the Shared Prosperity Fund, a further boost to the Towns Fund or new government initiatives: communities know best what their places need, so let's put them in charge.

Opportunity 2

Create collaborative public services that unlock community power

Key recommendations:

- Support "power partnerships" to develop at a local level through long-term investment in councils and communities
- Permanently embed procurement flexibility introduced during the crisis
- Shift from competitive tendering to community collaboration

Investing in the asset base of our communities will not just have a critical impact on the health of our local economies. It can also transform our public services by supporting the development of the collaborative local systems our research has described.

With their own long-term power base, community organisations will be less reliant on competing for contracts to deliver particular services. Instead they will be more able to focus on long-term community development and better positioned to form "power partnerships" on equal terms with the local public sector.

This has been one of the key drivers of the well-functioning local systems that have emerged in the heat of the crisis. Because the community response was often up and running before the council, power relationships have been equalised. Successful local authorities have not sought to create or control, but to develop and shape what's already there.

This cultural change has been supported by procedural shifts. The flexibility around procurement rules the Cabinet Office introduced has given permission to behave differently. It has helped councils break out bureaucratic straightjackets and build better partnerships with local organisations. Members of Locality's Keep it Local Network - a group of councils committed to unlocking the power of community - have told us how the procurement world changed overnight.[20] This has helped them get money out the door quickly to local small and medium-sized enterprises and voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations during the crisis, which has in turn demonstrated to commissioners and procurement officers that high quality, credible solutions can be found locally.

This shift has raised ambitions around the "art of the possible": to not return to designing complex procurement processes based on the principle of creating fair competition to invite tenders from across the EU.[21] Instead commissioners have seen the value of local partnership working and want a system that supports it. As Andrew McCartan, Commissioned Services Manager at Wirral Council, put it:

> **"Traditionally, we've been a very KPI, performance-driven organisation. During the crisis, we've seen organisations do things well without this level of process and a greater degree of trust and collaboration. We now need to use this learning to understand how we commission and procure things in the future, and where appropriate and in the best interest of local communities, move away from some of those more inflexible approaches to more collaborative, outcomes driven partnership solutions with these organisations and local community businesses."**

The government has the opportunity to let this local innovation rip - by unwinding the

policy drivers that encourage competitive tendering. This is a journey that started with compulsory competitive tendering in the 1980s, was tweaked by New Labour towards "best value", before being turbocharged by the Coalition's open public services agenda. It means that the broad task of commissioning local services has become dominated by the narrow constraints of procurement procedure. Here, councils are clearly told by the Crown Commercial Service guidance their "over-riding" requirement is to use competition to achieve value for money – thus enforcing the bureaucracy and big contracts that dominate services today.[22]

There is a range of creative ways councils in the Keep it Local Network and elsewhere have been working around this to make the most of flexibility that already exists within EU Procurement Rules and Public Contracts Regulations 2015.[23] But doing this requires committed and innovative commissioners to decide they want to move mountains to find a different way. The government needs to make local partnership the norm rather than the exception.

With Brexit "done", the government has a huge opportunity to do this - and chart a new course for public services that unlock the power of community. This means embedding the flexibility that has already been shown to be working and taking it as the starting point for a new approach to public services. We must strive to end the inflexibility of competitive tendering and instead design policy to support community partnerships.

Crucially it also means ensuring councils are properly resourced. As one Keep it Local council chief executive put it:

> **"We're entering a recession. That's pretty inevitable. We're still in the biggest funding crisis that local government and voluntary and community sector organisations have ever had. Our voluntary and community sector organisations are often reaching people that are destitute, that are most disconnected from services, with multiple and complex needs, at a time when that demand is accelerating. Our ability as commissioners to support that is less than ever."**

That's why we are calling for a review of local government finance: to ensure local government is able to meet the scale of the task it faces, now and in the future.

It is only by doing this that we can effectively tackle long-term challenges like loneliness, mental health and social care, which the crisis has brought to the fore. These "complex problems" can't be fixed by top down plans or market mechanisms. With multiple and interconnected causes, they require deep and lasting relationships to be forged, with power widely dispersed and services that join up around and harness the strengths of every person.

Community organisations are particularly well-suited to this task – but are too often prevented from playing their role as "cogs of connection" by a system that is constantly battling budget cuts and is organised around competition rather than collaboration. By shifting away from a world of contracts and competition towards collaboration, the public sector can concentrate on investing in long-term local relationships and unlocking community power.

Opportunity 3

Turn community spirit into community power

Key recommendations:

- Put neighbourhoods at the heart of the Devolution White Paper and strengthen community powers to lead change locally.
- Provide £500m revenue funding to protect, strengthen and grow existing community organisations and provide a pathway for new mutual aid groups to become established.

Community spirit has sprung up everywhere in response to coronavirus: from the "clap for carers", to the new mutual aid groups, to the 750,000 who put themselves forward to support the NHS. "The outpouring of goodwill, solidarity and compassion has been fantastic," says Aaron Barbour, chief executive, Katherine Low Settlement. "Local people want to volunteer and support our work".

The big challenge for policymakers now is not just how this community spirit can be sustained for the long term, but how it can be transformed into community power.

The partnerships we've seen emerge between mutual aid groups and community organisations show us how this can be done. Mutual aid has brought fresh energy and new relationships to our neighbourhoods - but has been most effective when supported by established community organisations. Indeed, the experience of the last few months at a local level has reinforced our view that strong and successful community organisations are a vital "cogs of connection" in the local ecosystem. Investing in these relationships will enable the community spirit that has come to the fore during the crisis to put down long-term roots.

So we need to inject significant new revenue funding – we propose £500m - to protect and strengthen existing community organisations, and to support a pipeline of new community activity to grow. We support the ambitions behind Power to Change's proposals for a "Community Heroes Fund" which, as well as funding existing community organisations, would provide support to mutual aid groups in areas which lack existing community infrastructure to become permanent organisations.[24]

However, the government's promise to "level up" the country provides an opportunity to go further and strengthen the routes for people power to drive change locally. The Conservative manifesto stated a desire to spread devolution across England "so that every part of our country has the power to shape its own destiny".[25] Before the coronavirus crisis, a Devolution White Paper was underway to set out the plans in detail.

As our Commission the Future of Localism made clear, devolution can provide favourable conditions for unlocking the power of community. But up to now it has tended to merely shift centralisation from Whitehall to regional combined authorities.[26] To change that, the Devolution White Paper must instead focus on neighbourhoods. The crisis has shown the potential of the neighbourhood as an organising unit for political power. It is where local services can best be coordinated and where local people can feel real control over the important decisions that affect their lives.

The Localism Commission outlined the need for neighbourhood-level institutions to make power "stick" to local communities. This should involve bolstering existing institutions with new powers and responsibilities so they can become true "power partners" with local authorities. In some areas this will mean parish councils, but a key conclusion from the Localism Commission was that there should

be no "one size fits all" when it comes to neighbourhood governance. Policy needs to be sensitive to the dynamics of local places and build on the assets that already exist in our local communities, rather than imposing new structures from the centre.

We believe there are particular opportunities to build on Neighbourhood Forums, for example. These have already built local democratic legitimacy through referendums and could take on other powers, strengthening existing Community Rights and taking on increased powers around spending and service delivery, following negotiations with the local authority.

In other areas, larger community "anchor" organisations could be supported to develop the important local democratic function they already perform. As our Theory of Change sets out, they provide an independent collective voice for the neighbourhood, involve the community in decisions, help residents navigate their way through services, influence policy making processes, and advocate on behalf of their area.

Community anchor organisations can do this because they have built up legitimacy over time, establishing deep bonds of trust with local people and with unrivalled local knowledge. These benefits are hard won and can be difficult to replicate with new institutions or starting from scratch. The Localism Commission made clear that community organisations are a huge source of strength in our neighbourhoods and any successful attempt to devolve power should look to work with them and build on them.

Conclusion: A long-term vision to unlock the power of community

We believe this radical resetting of political power – away from Whitehall to our local communities - is urgent and necessary, to help us bounce forward as a country and tackle the big challenges that lie ahead, together.

It is also practical and achievable. We don't need to design new institutions: local community organisations have stepped up to the plate in the most challenging of circumstances. In so doing, they have demonstrated the qualities that we believe make them particularly well-placed to tackle our long term social, economic and environmental problems.

What's more, there are a number of opportunities within the government's existing policy agenda to set the terms for a new future that's built around community power.

We also know community organisations can't do this alone. We believe community organisations are a vital part of a bigger answer. There is a range of organisations and initiatives who we are working with in different ways to unlock community power – such as the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES), Collaborate, Cooperatives UK, Lloyds Bank Foundation, Local Trust, Onward, New Economics Foundation, NLGN, Plunkett Foundation, Power to Change, the RSA, Social Enterprise UK, Shared Assets and Social Investment Business.

Together, we believe our work represents a repository of evidence and good practice from which we can build this better world - from the community up. It just needs policymakers to understand how the power of community has helped us through the crisis – and join us in making it the foundation of what comes next.

2

The power of community in seven places

We carried out in-depth interviews with community organisation leaders in seven places across the country to find out more about their response to coronavirus and their reflections for the future.

Their stories show the incredible response that community organisations have taken to support their communities and keep services going throughout the pandemic.



Berwick Community Trust, Berwick

Interview with **Julien Lake, chief executive**

During the crisis, Berwick Community Trust has been a hub for coordinating local support. They turned their foodbank into a delivery scheme and provide a central point of advice for residents experiencing economic strain during lockdown. For the future, they are now focusing on how to support and sustain the burgeoning community spirit they have seen locally in recent weeks.

Set on the Northumberland coast, Berwick-upon-Tweed is England's most northern town. Julien Lake, chief executive of Berwick Community Trust (BCT), describes how the North East can sometimes feel forgotten, with Berwick, at the tip of the region, its remotest part: "We can feel very far from London... even the County Council in Morpeth is 50 miles to the south." Berwick has changed hands between England and Scotland throughout history, and this has provided them with a mentality where "people sort things out for themselves".

BCT is a manifestation of this spirit. It was set up in 2004 as a volunteer-led development trust, supported by the then borough council, to relieve poverty, promote education and preserve heritage. Over the years it has developed into a multi-purpose community hub, providing a range of services around childcare, young carers, employment and training, food poverty and benefits advice. 400 people use the building every week and BCT also provide expertise and support for the town's other community organisations.

Indeed, partnerships across the town are strong, stemming from its sense of independence and relative isolation. Berwick has many assets, not least its beautiful coastline and clean air; but their nearest A&E is 50 miles away, there is an ageing population, and their local schools have suffered from lack of student numbers and underinvestment.

Response to coronavirus

At the start of the coronavirus crisis, Julien describes how the Trust's focus was on sustaining and expanding their foodbank provision:

> **"That has then led us into a diversity of operations that we hadn't anticipated, and has been unplanned and unexpected... It's snowballed in multiple directions at once."**

Usually a drop-in service, they have partnered with a local taxi-service to do food deliveries to people's homes, which the county council have paid for. They have also worked with partners to map existing provision and gaps. For example, a local café whom BCT know well had set up their own food parcel delivery, but this was resulting in duplication. Instead, they discussed how the café could support hot-food deliveries. BCT brought them takeaway packets and brokered a relationship with the chip shop who supported the delivery service. As Julien describes, this example is a testament to the rush of enthusiasm and support from local businesses and volunteers, but what was needed was coordination to make it work in the most effective way.

BCT have also put in place a new communications plan for moving advice services online and on the phone. Julien describes how the diversity of support requests has increased significantly. From accessing free school meal vouchers, to sending in hardship evidence to the council, to helping people apply for Universal Credit, it has been about supporting people with anything they need, step by step.

Partnerships between the public sector and community services are working well. Local councillors are managing a lot of the coordination of volunteers, referrals between different agencies are relatively smooth, and Julien also sits on the County Council's community resilience hub.

However, it is also the case that much of the positive partnership working with the County Council is down to a couple of staff members, one of whom is on a short-term contract. The hollowing out of local government capacity over the last decade has really impacted County Council's responsiveness to neighbourhoods and hindered its ability to react quickly now. For example, a few months prior to the crisis, the County Council undertook a community asset mapping exercise – but neglected to come to Berwick, meaning that they were not included in resilience planning.

Julien worries that this lack of capacity is also impeding planning for the future. They have been trying to discuss recovery but are finding "deafening silence at the moment, [the] hunch is that they don't have the bandwidth or the staff capacity."

Reflections on the future

BCT itself is in a good position; compared to some other community organisations in the county, they have reasonable reserves. They are starting to think about what their future priorities will be.

Prior to the crisis, they had been working on a project to improve the wet-weather leisure offer in the town. Berwick's economy is reliant on tourism; and creating resilience in the tourism economy will be a big part of the town's post coronavirus recovery. As people avoid foreign travel, Julien hopes there will be a boost for the local economy: "Don't go to Tenerife, come to Northumberland."

Julien's biggest concern is that we fail to learn from this crisis and think about our preparedness for future ones. Climate change, for example, will bring huge challenges – but do we have the capacity in our public agencies to cope? The only way through will be to embed the expertise, skills and abilities in our local systems and continue to empower community leadership.

Julien hopes that we can sustain the importance of community that this crisis has taught us. Many people have experienced what it is like to have a stake in their communities and used their time and skills to support others. This experience can be a powerful counterweight to the disenchantment and disempowerment that we've seen in the last decade.

BCT know they have a big role to play in sustaining these habits and that this will require them to raise their game on community engagement and demonstrate the power of community action locally.

> **"If we want to secure that more positive, kinder, emotionally richer future, then some people need to stand up and advocate for it and demonstrate its value and vitality."**



Centre4, Grimsby

Interview with **Linda Dellow, chief executive**

Centre4 have been working with local partners to support people in the community most affected by the lockdown, through isolation and financial hardship. They mobilised volunteers through their existing social action programme and brought together different services to create a holistic support offer for local people. They have seen huge increases in community connectivity and participation and are determined to support these roots of greater community power to flourish.

Centre4 was set up in 1995 to serve the Nunsthorpe and Bradley Park estates in Grimsby, and to support economic development of the local area. Over the last 25 years, they have grown into a multipurpose community hub with community wellbeing at the heart of their activities. The

community centre is also home to a range of enterprises, including managed workspace, a nursery, a community shop, sports facilities and other local businesses. Rental and trading income provide funding for many of their community activities.

> **"I always say the magic happens in our building because of the broad mix of organisations that we've got [here]. The co-location certainly brings about the coproduction and ideas for doing things innovatively and in partnership."**

The neighbourhood is within the 10% most deprived in the country, facing challenges of high-unemployment and health inequalities as well as a legacy of negative perceptions of the area. Yet the community spirit of the area is one of its greatest strengths, with families that have lived and stayed there for multiple generations.

Centre4 work with residents, from young children to the older people, to shape their services. Linda describes their approach as "about what people want and need, not what we think they want and need." Local residents sit on the board and Centre4 employ two community organisers who live on the estate. They are also part of Power to Change's Empowering Places programme, which is providing them with funding to develop local people's ideas for new community businesses.

Centre4 also play a key role within their wider local system; Linda is Vice Chair of the North East Lincolnshire VCSE Alliance which acts as a community commissioner to make sure funds are distributed to smaller local organisations. Their approach is characterised by this blend of deep, trusted relationships within their community, alongside strategic relationships within the wider public sector, which enables them to leverage opportunities and bring funding into the local area.

> **"We listen to people. And we listen to what's coming out of government, to the CCG [clinical commissioning group] and the local authority. And we build our response."**

Response to coronavirus

Linda explains that their priority during lockdown has been to provide as much service continuity as possible. Their general advice service has been delivered online and over the phone, with enquiries for support increasing from people furloughed on 80% of the minimum wage now being pushed into debt. Their social prescribing service has also continued, with groups carrying on through virtual meetings and social

networks. Some of their community groups have set up their own WhatsApp support groups, running a daily quiz and even a bake-off competition.

Centre4 have also been working with local partners to support people in the community most affected by lockdown, isolation, and financial hardship. This work has been made possible by the existing services and partnerships they already had in place.

Their social action programme – connected to their ethical recruitment agency (ERA) meant that they had a strong system of volunteering capacity to build on. This was also supported by their good partnership with the local Blue Lights Brigade (mostly retired police and fire officers). Together they mobilised quickly to get support out for people across the whole borough. Centre4 were able to fund a lot of this work themselves, through their Community Pot - a flexible fund from community fundraisers, bingos and raffles which is usually spent on community parties and coach trips.

Linda also describes how they initially struggled to connect with NHS volunteers. Initially the system was only set up to take referrals from within the NHS, meaning that without an NHS email address they couldn't make contact. Linda describes how, despite being well intentioned, this type of community support is "not their bag":

> **"What they should have done is put money into the existing work and voluntary sector response...and speak to people locally about what is going on."**

Reflections for the future

Reflecting on the future, Linda talks about the changes that Centre4 will have to think about. While they have healthy reserves, they know their medium-term financial sustainability will require looking at other ways of generating income. Even as lockdown is lifted, they anticipate significant drop in demand for their workspace, training and meeting rooms; one of their tenants has already given notice. They are considering repurposing their meeting spaces, potentially to incubate new community shops and community businesses. And they are also thinking about their role in designing new services that will be needed to support the increased strain on mental health that has been rising during lockdown.

One of Linda's biggest hopes of what might emerge from this crisis is the increased community connectivity. People have become more involved in community action and gained a greater sense of the possibilities of their participation in civic life. Linda is determined that Centre4 play their

role in continuing to nurture and encourage these roots of community power that are taking hold:

> **"We are going to up our game on community organising. We're going to have a big event and celebration. Make sure that we get those positive things celebrated – we can't let those stories go. There's no better time to mobilise people to be more participatory, about making decisions and having a say in what the local area needs."**



Charles Burrell Centre, Thetford, Norfolk

Interview with
Danny Whitehouse, chief executive

Before the crisis, Charles Burrell Centre had established itself as the go to place for local support. So they have been able to seamlessly transform their activities: reaching out to residents in need of support, and working in partnership with the council and local mutual aid groups. These strengthened relationships provide a strong platform for the recovery – but only if there is investment and meaningful powers are devolved.

One local resident recently described Charles Burrell Centre (CBC) as like a "village". It brings together a whole range of different services, business and activities in one place – an abandoned secondary school building. In 2013, councillors and residents campaigned for the building to be repurposed for community use.

The organisation was officially set up as a Community Benefit Society in 2015 and the Centre is now home to 56 organisations. Its tenants range from the local MP to community nurses, the foodbank to local manufacturers. Half the organisations are start-up businesses – a cake maker, a seamstress, a tattooist, a hypnotherapist.

The social and economic role CBC plays is crucial, as Thetford is a place with high levels of poverty and unemployment, and low qualification levels. Many parts of the town are within the 10% most deprived in England and one fifth of the town's young people leave school without any qualifications at all. For those that do find work, the town has the joint lowest average earnings in Norfolk.

However, the area is defined by high neighbourhood trust and a strong sense of community goodwill. CBC sits at the centre of this:

> **"We have very strong relationships in the community. We're the go to place for support for guidance and opportunity to build your life up, to get involved in the community, to make friends, to improve your wellbeing."**

This strong connection with the local community has consequently enabled a good partnership with the local authority.

> **"The local authority refer to us and are heavily involved in our work, because they know we have those strong grassroots relationships."**

Response to coronavirus

It is the strength of these relationships – with the council and the local community – that have formed the bedrock of CBC's coronavirus response.

Like all public spaces, the centre had to close its doors when lockdown was announced. However, it has been able to remain open for essential services – the foodbank, its community nurses, and a manufacturing company now producing PPE.

With local people unable to go into the centre, the centre has gone to them in a range of different ways. Staff and volunteers have been supporting residents who are most in need of help - doing shopping, picking up prescriptions, walking dogs and providing emotional support over the phone. More formally they have been working with the district council to find and support those who are shielded. They have also been

providing basic 'essentials packs' for people who have lost their jobs and find themselves in sudden poverty.

These shifts all happened very naturally – as did productive relationships with local mutual aid groups:

> **"Before we even closed our centre, new mutual aid support groups were forming in the town. We didn't try and outdo them, we've really supported them and they are doing lots of wonderful work. They were all coming to CBC to advertise, to find out if they could take referrals from us – we were the natural place to establish those relationships and new systems."**

The system

The pandemic has given CBC an opportunity to enhance partnership working. Each part of the system is working in a coordinated to way to build on their specific strengths. This was not due to a decision being taken – it fell into place in an organic way.

Mutual aid groups are first responders and ears and eyes on the ground. CBC and the rest of the local community sector take referrals when more formal support is needed, supervising over safeguarding and risk management, and promoting mutual aid activities. This was put in place very quickly. The day after CBC closed, staff were having conversations with local infrastructure organisations about how they were setting databases and networks of volunteers around the county.

Once formal council functions were up and running, they were able to plug their resources into powerful community networks that were already working well. The council now plays a vital strategic coordination role.

CBC have found themselves better placed to manage relationships with local mutual aid groups than the council. Council staff are concerned that their interventions may be seen as intrusive or controlling, whereas CBC can discuss safeguarding or risk management issues in a more collaborative, peer to peer way that seems to be a better cultural fit.

Reflections for the future

CBC are now preparing for a "new normal", with a virtual centre – to both bring together pre-existing and newly developed services, and to reach out to new people who may be isolated long term.

The positive prospects for the deeper partnerships forged through the crisis will only be realised if CBC can navigate very difficult financial

waters. The centre expects to lose tenants, as emergency business grants run out and furlough ends but social distancing continues to impact business models. CBC expects to lose 20-30% of its income.

It's vital for the area that CBC is able to not just survive, but to thrive. It has shown itself to be a critical cog in the local system. With very difficult social and economic times ahead, it provides the services and hosts the dynamic new businesses needed to drive the recovery.

> **"I think if more power was devolved to ourselves and our local authority to make decisions, we would have better decisions being made, that are more participatory and better informed by our local community. To emerge with resilience from this crisis, we need more investment and more powers for community decision making."**



Knowle West Alliance, Bristol

Interview with **Lucy Holburn, coordinator**

In response to the crisis, Knowle West Alliance brought together the people and organisations of Knowle West to develop a system of local support. They established a food bank with partners, coordinated volunteers and a range of other support services, and provided a trusted source relevant up-to-date information. The task for the Alliance now is to harness the deeper insight they have gained into local community need and the stronger partnerships they have formed with statutory sector partners during the crisis.

Knowle West Alliance (KWA) is a relatively new organisation to Bristol. It was conceived in 2017 by existing organisations and residents in the Knowle West area of the city, and officially launched in March 2019. The community has a number of well-established community organisations – such as Knowle West Media Centre, Knowle West Health Park, Re:Work, The Park and Filwood Community Centre. Lucy explains that the alliance was set up out of a desire "for much better partnership working and to explore how a collective approach could achieve much better outcomes for Knowle West".

The Knowle West estate is just over a hundred years old. In the past, many of its residents worked in the Tobacco industry. Since that industry closed, the area has faced challenges relating to unemployment, social inclusion, health inequalities and educational attainment and aspiration. Knowle West has some of the lowest educational achievement rates in the city.[27]

> **"Lots of people got free cigarettes with their pay packets. So, as you can imagine, there are lots of underlying health issues that sit in the estate."**

Lucy describes the sense of loss residents feel as a result of a stripping of social and physical infrastructure in recent decades. The local authority stepped back from the area as they responded to funding cuts from the mid-2000s – closing a local office and no longer funding neighbourhood development workers with a focus on Knowle West.

> **"There is no supermarket, there is no fruit and veg shop, the secondary school was closed down. There was a swimming pool and a cinema. The first got demolished, the latter is long derelict. In terms of feeling looked after, there is a common consensus that everything gets stripped away and not a lot gets replaced."**

This history means the community has a strong sense of "doing things for themselves", seen in the range of community groups and organisations in Knowle West. This scope of community activity is a key strength of the area that KWA wants to support to grow and flourish.

The Alliance's work is guided by a formal working group of existing organisations and residents, which meets monthly to set the direction and "embed the values" of the Alliance, aiming to be light on bureaucracy and affirmative in action. There is an open invitation to others in the community that might want to join this group.

Alongside this are other, more informal, routes of involving residents and existing groups and organisations - like a small grants pot, a community development worker, and an active Facebook group managed by local residents.

'It feels like we were built for this'

In their response to the coronavirus crisis, KWA's primary focus was building safe, resilient systems that people can access for advice and support. This rapid response was driven by their role convening groups and organisations. It was underpinned by the strong links they, and their partner organisations, have built with local people over the years. Heather Williams, CEO of Knowle West Health Park, one of the founder partner organisations, summed it up with the phrase, "It feels like we were built for this". Lucy reflects:

> **"The first weeks were a bit of a blur. Everything moved fast and changed rapidly. We were trying to build things, and at the same time, the ground beneath our feet was moving quite a bit."**

Coordination with the council enabled easier access to the services the Alliance was already putting in place through the Knowle West support hub. The council established the systems for a centralised phone number people can call across the city. Anyone identified as being from Filwood or Knowle West would then be referred into their hub and be contacted by a team of workers.

Through the hub, they offer a befriending service and Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS)-checked volunteers who can help with dog walking, prescriptions, and food shopping. They have also set up a foodbank with external partners, to which they refer people struggling with food poverty identified through the hub.

The Alliance also provide a central bank of information for call handlers on the latest guidance and support available across the estate. This is especially useful for those who are not digitally connected, and at a time when misinformation can spread quickly through the community. From the start there was an immediate recognition for the need to provide good quality information for residents, both digitally and in print.

> **"Because we are a collective of organisations with different strengths and knowledge, we were in a position to respond really quickly, to put a very comprehensive offer together with systems backing it up. We were able to bring workers together from different organisations who have never met before, who are now a new team."**

KWA reflected that their existing good relationship with the council – based on mutual trust – enabled them to respond quickly. On top of this, the way council and community have been working together during the crisis has strengthened these bonds further. This included collaborating together to build an app that links volunteers with requests for help.

> **"We've always worked alongside the community development team, but it's been really powerful and really heartening how much they've been able to work alongside us. They are seeking out solutions and resources. There's no red tape at the moment. That is really brilliant."**

What will the recovery look like in Knowle West?

There is a shared concern across the Alliance about the big picture post-coronavirus, such as increases in unemployment and increased poverty. There is a real risk that lots of young people involved in great youth work slip away from these services, as challenges around financial insecurity and unemployment become more prevalent.

There are also positives to take from the crisis that will help find a way through. KWA want to ensure strong working relationships with each other, with new partners and with the council remain once the situation has stabilised. They want to see if new approaches, such as greater flexibility can be used to pull together disparate services; taking a fresh approach to unblocking complex needs that is person centred and community resourced.

Vitally, during the crisis KWA have been able to see, record and respond to emergency need very clearly – more clearly than ever before. They plan to use this experience to reflect that back to the community. This, Lucy explains, is the key task for the future:

> **"To work with local people, groups and organisations to design a more resilient community as part of the recovery process."**



Levenshulme Inspire, Levenshulme, Manchester

Interview with
Ed Cox, Chair, and Roxanna Locke, Centre Director

In 2020, Levenshulme Inspire are celebrating their 10th birthday. No one could have predicted the circumstances the organisation has ended up facing in its anniversary year. But the work they've done over the last decade – and crucially the relationships they've built - have meant they been ready to respond when their community has needed them most.

Background

Levenshulme Inspire was formed in 2000 in south Manchester when local people came together to transform a local church building into a hub for community development. It is now a thriving community centre, cafe and social business hub, employing 15 members of staff. Their core mission is to unlock potential in the community, working particularly with older people, alongside refugees and migrants, and people with mental health problems. They are led by the community, with residents on all three of their boards and a local staff team.

Levenshulme itself is a very diverse community. Situated on one of the main roads between Manchester and Stockport, it has historically been quite a transient place. But despite this, there is a strong and rooted sense of community, built around well-established white Irish and Pakistani communities, with lots of mosques, community groups and resident-led activity. The last five years has seen greater gentrification locally, and a key role for Inspire, therefore, is to support and coordinate the area's strong but sometimes disparate community power.

Response to coronavirus

As it became clear that lockdown was inevitable, Inspire and the Levy Corona Helpers – the local mutual aid group - clubbed together to call a big, socially distanced community meeting.

> **"Thankfully we all know each other so well over the years that it was dead easy... It really was a "moment". And on the back of a two-hour meeting we came up with an action plan for the whole community."** Ed Cox

Inspire took responsibility for the "intermediary" level of work, slotting in between the street level mutual aid and the formal, city wide services run by Manchester City Council and the NHS. This has involved three main activities: food delivery for older people; a food bag scheme; and telephone and online support.

Over the last 5 years, Inspire's projects have built up a database of 800 older people locally. They immediately got on the phone to all of them to identify who was isolating and in need of support. They repurposed the community café to provide two meals a day, three times a week for this group. Initially serving 50 people, this operation has now doubled in size with referrals from the council, requiring them to take on an extra chef.

Their food bag scheme was developed out of an existing partnership with The Bread and Butter Thing, a local charity tackling food poverty across Greater Manchester. Adopting the social distancing practices of supermarkets, people who need it can now come into the centre to pick up a very low-cost food bag. They also coordinate deliveries for those who are shielding or self-isolating.

Inspire have also been providing telephone and online support. Around 150 older people from their database receive a call every week to check in. They also established a Corona Helpline to triage community support enquiries, as well as Inspire Community Online, a weekly zoom drop-in where people can connect. This has been especially important for former regulars who can now continue to support each other in a different way.

How the local system has worked

Inspire's response has been characterised by an ability to adapt, at pace, existing activities focused on older people and social eating. The strength of their local partnerships and strong connection with the community has been vital in enabling this. They have also worked well with Manchester City Council:

> **"There is something called the "Our Manchester" approach, which is like the Wigan Deal, where over the last two years the council has tried to work with us at neighbourhood level in a much more proactive way. We get a grant associated with that and its very flexible and it's all about relationships and its very, very good. This has provided a firm foundation for good partnership working now."** Ed Cox

This relationship is also supported at an operational level by the council's ward coordinator sitting on their board. When coronavirus hit, there was an open channel of communication and once the formal council functions kicked in she was able to steer them towards the local activities they already had up and running.

> **"Partnerships are key to everything we do at Inspire – we're good at that, so we bring lots of initiatives to our community and we realise what we can do and what we can't do, and those operational boundaries."** Roxanna Locke

Looking to the future

There are real concerns about what the recovery phase will look like, both for the neighbourhood and for Inspire itself. Their revenue is dependent on their room hire and the cafe, which will be impacted by ongoing social distancing. As emergency funding drops off and the furlough scheme comes to an end, Inspire will have to simultaneously reinvent both their business model and their approach to service provision.

There are also real worries for the community. Local businesses have their shutters down – and will face a huge struggle to reopen. Mental health is also a big worry. There are lots of complex problems in the neighbourhood already, which are likely to be exacerbated in unknown ways by the impact of lockdown.

Despite these concerns, both Ed and Roxanna spoke of the huge strengths that will help see them through. They have a legacy of new and strengthened relationships, including with the council, and their profile locally has been raised through local media attention. Their staff team have shown their resourcefulness and commitment, completely transforming their roles without blinking an eye.

Perhaps most important is the social solidarity and community spirit the crisis has engendered, with new friendships with others working locally and a sense of everyone working together for a collective purpose.

> **"The amount of fantastic community collaboration that has gone on around this, I don't think we're going to lose. It will have a warm glow for a long time."** Ed Cox



Manor House Development Trust, Hackney

Interview with
Simon Donovan, chief executive

Manor House Development Trust have rapidly identified and responded to the shifting demand for local services the coronavirus crisis has created. They have developed a food provision offer, sought to tackle the digital divide, and offered arts and crafts materials to families across the Woodberry Down estate. Looking to the future, Manor House Development Trust are thinking about how to harness the community spirit that has bubbled up in their community, having experienced the patchy legacy of the 2012 Olympics in East London.

Manor House Development Trust (MHDT) was set up in 2007 to lead community development on the Woodberry Down estate. The estate was at the centre of a major regeneration project and MHDT was established to ensure the local community were able to benefit from the £1bn investment into the area.

Today, their core purpose is to help create strong, cohesive communities and a happy place to live. The organisation's theory of change is built from the principle that people should have power to drive their own change in the community.

Woodberry Down has a large transient population, meaning the 'community' is often shifting and changing shape. Socioeconomic deprivation, anti-social behaviour and crime are persistent problems. MHDT use local research to identify challenges and changing resident demand, and support the community to develop new projects, groups or social enterprises to address these needs. They also use the data they collect to influence those in power, whether that's funders or local, regional or national government.

MHDT also have a focus on local economic development, providing employment, training and enterprise services. They support the transformation of local empty spaces – working with local groups to establish new social enterprises in empty retail spaces, from a flower and plants shop, to a community restaurant.

Simon Donovan, their chief executive, describes how connection between local partners in the community, statutory and private sectors is the bedrock for the organisation's community development work and local impact.

Responding to the coronavirus crisis

It was in this context that the community began to face the challenge of coronavirus in March 2020. MHDT led a rapid mobilisation of the assets and networks in the community to provide a support system for the people of Woodberry Down. In week one of the lockdown, MHDT focused on ensuring the organisation was in a safe and strong position – closing venues, furloughing some staff and cancelling community bookings.

Alongside this, they developed their response to urgent community need. Their first step was to develop a hot meals service on the estate for older people, and others deemed 'at-risk'. This involved mobilising and organising their existing bank of DBS-checked volunteers to do this work. They then worked closely with Hackney Council and Hackney CVS to identify roles in which to place newer volunteers from across the borough. This has now been designated as one of the council's neighbourhood-based food hubs, which are in place across the

borough. Simon explains the importance of DBS-checked volunteers and having a clear rota:

> **"We think this is going to be quite a long-term thing. It could be as much as a year. We're going to need people for quite some time. We're going to talk to you about how much commitment you've got – how much time in a week you can actually spend, while you've got to carry on living and the rest of it."**

Alongside this crisis response work, MHDT also repurposed their existing services and developed new projects for the local community. They moved many of their existing classes online such as their creative choir and free exercise classes from yoga to "reggaetivity".

Following rapid research, they identified two gaps in provision – older and younger people struggling to access digital services and lack of arts and crafts materials for children being home-schooled on the estate. So, MHDT worked with local retailers and the local housing developer, launched a crowdfunding appeal and used their own funds to buy phones and internet dongles for older and younger people on the estate struggling to stay digitally connected during the lockdown. They have also provided families with arts and crafts materials to support them in their home-schooling.

What recovery looks like

One of the core concerns for MHDT is how to properly harness the huge outpouring of community spirit that has manifested throughout this period. There are historical failures of which the organisation is all too aware – such as the patchy legacy of the 2012 Olympics in East London.

> **"They spend a lot of money on this stuff. "How are we going to harness the energy of 2012 Olympics in London?". They threw a load of money at it. I'd never heard of any of the people they put in charge of it. And it all just fizzled away. Why did it all fizzle away? We don't know. That's part of the problem."**

In addition, MHDT are concerned about the social challenges on the horizon, exacerbated by the severe economic slump many are expecting. Social isolation, food poverty and increases in domestic violence are key concerns for the organisation.

However, there is hope that new and deeper partnership working between local stakeholders, service providers and the council, and new forms of community spirit and solidarity, will put the community in a strong position to deal with these complex challenges.



Moat House Community Trust, Coventry

Interview with
Dianne Williams, chief executive

Responding to the lockdown, Moat House Community Trust have transformed their "Grub Hub" service, an affordable social-eating community pantry for local families. Partnering with businesses, other community organisations, the council and other public agencies, they rolled the model out across the city on a delivery basis. There is hope that the enhanced partnership working throughout the crisis will be sustained for the recovery, with a renewed commitment from the public sector to building community infrastructure.

Moat House Community Trust was set up in 2009, as a successor body to the local New Deal for Communities (NDC) programme, to provide an independent voice for the community during a large, complex estates regeneration programme. Built for the post-war manufacturing boom, the Henley ward estates in North Coventry used to be state-of-the-art, but the 1970s economic crash brought high unemployment, poverty and crime to the area.

Despite the challenges of the 2008 economic recession, which delayed further planned investment and development, over the last ten years, Moat House have been pivotal in stimulating the physical, economic and social regeneration of the local area. They have done this through community enterprise, as well as developing local power and voice through community development.

When Moat House were established, they were provided with an empty business centre, some land, and a house to get set up. They have transformed the business centre, which now employs 500 local people, developed a thriving community and leisure centre, and built eight new community homes. They have also brought in a range of new services into the area, from adult education to social prescribing.

Moat House are led by a board made up of mostly residents, and their services and activities are designed with the community. They also work in close partnership with the public sector. Dianne explained that these relationships have taken many years to flourish, and to build public sector trust and belief in community delivery. Their experience in community engagement is now highly valued by local public agencies – including by the council, police, public health and the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG).

> **"It feels like the work that we've done - and it did feel at times that we were beating our heads till it was bleeding - has all come to fruition. Those relationships we have built up, the trust is the basis of the work that we are doing in response to the crisis."**

Response to coronavirus

Dianne describes how in the first phase of the crisis before lockdown, they took early action to liquidate some of their assets to access the cash-flow to keep staff and services going. "We are fortunate that we hadn't put all our eggs in one basket. We had solid and sustainable sources of income."

Anticipating the impact that the crisis would have on people's access to food, they put their focus and resources into running the Grub Hub service. This is usually a social eating community pantry, providing affordable meals for local families and children, which is now as a delivery service to people's homes across the estates. A core staff team run the preparation and packaging, and they have worked with their DBS checked volunteers and through their partner 'Sky Blues', the charity arm of Coventry City FC, to manage the deliveries.

> **"We have a great pool of volunteers... because people want to do things for themselves...true volunteers are the people who come from he community and want to give something back."**

Moat House have also worked in close partnership with public sector agencies throughout the crisis. They sit on the council's strategic group on local resilience, and their previously good relationships with local schools, children centres, public health and GPs have supported a smooth referral process into their Grub Hub service. In partnership with the council, they were also able to bring together all the different elements of food provision in the city – the foodbank, Grub Hub and the local authority-provided food parcels – to reduce duplication and streamline access to support. They have now rolled out the Grub Hub model with other community organisations in the city and are planning how it might continue to form part of a sustainable food model post-coronavirus, as people continue to struggle financially.

Dianne reflects that throughout the crisis, the partnerships between organisations from across all sectors has been phenomenal. From Jaguar Land Rover loaning cars for deliveries, to Warwick University giving access to their kitchens and walk in freezers for food storage:

> **"It's been about everybody, giving their contacts, having discussions, opening it up...You couldn't design this – yet it's all happened in 5 weeks."**

Reflections for the future

For the community, Dianne's big concern is around deepening debt and poverty, as redundancies, business closures and unemployment are already causing increased financial strain. There will also be spiralling mental health needs, with increasing loneliness, isolation, and anxiety. Dianne would like to see these problems addressed through national government investment, including in housing, job creation and support managing debt. She also hopes that through this crisis we have learnt

to be a kinder society, and that through recovery we will continue to solve problems collectively as a society.

The green shoots of this can be seen through the enhanced partnership and shared purpose between the community sector and the public sector in Coventry. There is a real commitment locally to learn; there is a far greater understanding now of the role the community sector can and should take particularly in health, community engagement and early action.

> **"You can't make people change – but seeing is believing. A lot of people can't conceive others doing something in a different and better way, but when it happens, they can see it and are won over."**

Dianne's hope is that this belief and trust continues to translate into real term value, with more sustainable funding sources locally and a recognition that we are in a new world, where the community sector has a fundamental role to play. She hopes that the government prioritise and invest in the bottom-up infrastructure and networks that support communities to thrive:

> **"In places where they are trying to recreate that community infrastructure now, we see it is too late."**

3

What have we learnt through the community response to coronavirus?

Over the past three months, community organisations have been mobilising locally to alleviate the hardship that the pandemic has brought to so many. They have been adapting services and creating new ones: from running foodbanks and delivering emergency supplies, to moving their existing face-to-face services online. Many have been working closely with local government and health services, new and existing local partners, mutual aid groups and volunteers, to support their communities through this crisis.

This research has used evidence from Locality members to capture learning about how community organisations have responded to the crisis, the incredible community resources they have mobilised, and the challenges they have experienced.

The importance of existing local social infrastructure shines throughout this research: the community buildings providing spaces for distribution of food supplies, the community partnerships enabling the coordination of local services, and the deep relationships and networks within communities helping to reach those most in need. These community resources have, in many cases, been built up over many years. Yet we also know this crisis has put these resources at considerable risk, as the organisations that support people and communities to thrive face deep challenges to their sustainability.

Existing social infrastructure has been vital to the crisis response

Social infrastructure refers to the facilities, services, organisations and networks that support the flourishing and wellbeing of our society. The Early Action Taskforce defines social infrastructure as having three, mutually supportive components: buildings and facilities; services and organisations; and strong and healthy communities.[28] Typically, social infrastructure does not receive either the levels of attention nor investment from policymakers that physical infrastructure does. Yet through this pandemic we have seen its value through a new lens, as the health of this existing social infrastructure has shaped local responses to the crisis.

Community spaces and local services

The availability of community spaces underpins community wellbeing in good times and bad.[29] These are the places where community power is built - through the groups, services and amenities they house and the connections and relationships that are forged within them. Furthermore, community ownership or management puts the governance of these spaces in the hands of local people – unlocking new capacity, service improvement and innovation.[30]

Much of the extraordinary response of communities to coronavirus has been made possible through the availability of local spaces and services that have provided crucial capacity and resources. From the community buildings that have been hubs for local coordination, to the existing affordable food schemes that have been the

foundation for building new crisis support systems overnight, these assets and services have been a vital resource during this time.

Many community organisations have been increasingly involved in food poverty interventions prior to the crisis, such as running foodbanks or affordable lunch clubs from community hubs. Many anticipated and prepared for huge spikes in demand during the early days of the crisis, and often this has involved significant expansion of their existing model. Others, who did not have food support systems already set up, were nevertheless able to quickly shift their activities, mobilising volunteers and relationships with other local groups to create local support schemes using existing community resources.

However, we have also heard how in other cases this potential capacity was wasted, due to the financial pressures facing the community sector and a slow response from local government to harness these local assets. Some community centres had to close-up and mothball their services, furloughing staff that would otherwise have had an invaluable role in the crisis – including catering managers and volunteer coordinators.

Community hub networks and existing collaborations between organisations

Throughout our research findings, the power of local networks has been paramount. For many community hubs, their physical building brings together multiple services, organisations and businesses under one roof. This enabled swift and agile partnerships built on existing trust and shared ways of working. As Linda Dellow at Centre4 describes, "the magic happens in our building because of the broad mix of organisations" including public sector, local enterprises, and charities. These existing partnerships that come from co-location were an invaluable foundation for the local response to the crisis.

Other community organisations told us that their response benefitted from existing service delivery partnerships, such as social prescribing models which bring together multiple community services and organisations. For example, Sue Pearson at Heeley City Farm in Sheffield, describes how, as part of an existing community health programme, they had an established system for working together with other community organisations. This meant that they could be flexible and proactive in the early days of the crisis, even as the statutory support system was slower to get up and running:

> **"All the Locality partners, Heeley City Farm, Reach and Heeley Trust, came together to organise a response with one community hub phone line and referral mechanism and worked flexibly across pre coronavirus boundaries to make sure no one was missed. We shared information between us about what the need was, and who was available to go and help."**
>
> Sue Pearson, chief executive, Heeley City Farm and Andy Jackson, chief executive of Heeley Trust

Another community organisation in Birmingham described how, due to existing joint-projects, they were able to quickly mobilise and facilitate a

neighbourhood taskforce – bringing councillors and voluntary organisations together to form a new coordinating body. By bringing together this partnership in the very early days of the crisis, they have co-ordinated and streamlined a process for delivery of advice, health and wellbeing, and community safety, as well as food provision.

In Leeds, LS14 Trust described how they have built a completely new emergency organisation, collaborating with 10 other local groups, responding at pace to council referrals and local needs. Together they have provided a holistic package of food deliveries, prescription services, volunteer coordination, mental health support, be-friending, and creative play packages for families.

These findings show that through working in partnership and creating mutually supportive networks, community organisations can deliver services that offer more than the sum of their parts. These approaches build long-term capacity and relational resources that have been vital during this crisis.

This reinforces Locality's recent research on the role of community organisations as "cogs of connection". They have a pivotal role in the local ecosystem, with networks of relationships with local people, public sector agencies, providers, businesses and other local partners that have developed organically over time. Indeed, they have a catalytic role linking up these, often disconnected, parts of the system.[31]

In response to the coronavirus crisis, many local authorities have plugged into these powerful existing networks to facilitate new emergency systems of support.



"Our district has been strengthening a network of community anchors... over the past two years. These have quickly become the hubs through which local networks have been accessed to distribute a co-ordinated district wide food support scheme lead by the Council."

Carlton Smith, chief executive of Bradford Trident.

For the councils who are part of Locality's Keep it Local Network[32], the value of strong, existing relationships with community organisations has shown itself very clearly during this crisis. The networks and partnerships they have built over a number of years enabled a swift and effective response when the crisis hit.

Calderdale: learning from previous crises

Calderdale Council is a local authority with its fair share of experience of dealing with crises. In the last eight years, they have dealt with three major flooding incidents. Council Leader, Tim Swift, reflected that this made them more resilient and prepared coming into the coronavirus crisis.

The speed and way in which we were able to respond depended on the existing partnerships, networks and understanding that was in place.

Many of these existing partnerships were forged in parts of the authority affected by the flooding in recent years. A key reflection for Cllr Swift was the importance of community hubs – he recognises that their role in local coordination during a crisis is something the council isn't able to do. He sees the council's role as being to "provide guidance where appropriate and challenge anything that isn't safe".

At the same time, Calderdale Council have explicitly recognised that this cannot be controlled top-down. As an authority, they see their role as being to coordinate and align existing work happening at community-level. During the coronavirus crisis, key community organisations established their role in the response to the crisis quickly, in many cases before the council's role was established. The council and community organisations have continued to work throughout to align existing volunteering efforts with newer volunteering hubs.

The centrality of community organisations to the crisis response has been recognised by councils across the board. Over 95% of respondents to the New Local Government Network May 2020 Leadership Index said the contribution of community groups to their coronavirus response has been "very significant" or "significant".[33]

Community organisations have deep knowledge and relationships within their communities which have supported their response.

A powerful recurring feature of the research has been the important role of existing relationships and deep community knowledge - forged through long-term service provision and community development - in enabling community organisations to address emergency need.

The case study of Levenshulme Inspire, for example, demonstrates clearly how their existing relationships with older people meant they were able to reach these groups during the crisis. The fact that they were able to pick up the phone and make calls to 800 older people within days of lockdown, meant that they could quickly flag those that would be most at risk – due to isolation and lack of other support networks – and get support to them.

Community organisations have also used food delivery as a way to stay in regular face-to-face contact with residents who might be at additional risk during isolation. For example, some community organisations have been combining deliveries with welfare checks to families they work closely with, so that they can be aware of any additional

support needs, strain or child protection issues that may need addressing.

Community organisations have played an important role in making sure people do not fall through the gaps of statutory provision and centralised support models. ACCM (UK) in Bedford, for example, are a community development organisation set up to tackle health inequalities, primarily working with Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) women. They have been working with other community and faith organisations and new volunteers to deliver culturally appropriate food and essentials. They have also been supporting members of their community where language barriers have impeded access to quality information and media around the coronavirus. Sarah McCulloch, ACCM (UK) Director, describes how this support has been missing from the council's offer, which has not reflected specific cultural, religious or language barriers to seeking and receiving support:

> **"If the council had taken up our offer three weeks ago we would have reached more people... When we deliver something to them they are in tears that someone does care and some have said they have not eaten for several days."**
>
> Sarah McCulloch, Director, ACCM. (UK)

Some Locality members have also told us that this crisis has shown them the gaps they have in their own community relationships and networks. Demand for crisis support has meant that community organisations are now engaging with residents with whom they previously didn't have relationships, and they want to develop these new relationships further and co-produce future services. This has strengthened their resolve to increase outreach and community development.

The long-term trend away from grant funding and towards service delivery models in the community sector has created a financial squeeze for community development work. But regardless of the funding drivers, community organisations have reflected throughout this research on the need to prioritise community development and broaden their community relationships.

Well-functioning local systems have emerged

The relationship between local government and community organisations is vital for the success of any community to flourish. However, it can also be a challenge, with local context and relationships meaning more productive partnerships in some places than others. In recent years, much of this has been underpinned by a common context of declining resources, rising demand and a guiding policy principle of competition. The coronavirus crisis has thrown the strength of these local partnerships into sharp relief.

A key finding from our research has been how the crisis has, in many places, forged new and improved ways of working between the public sector and community organisations. A shared sense of purpose has streamlined processes and removed barriers that have previously impeded partnership working. Indeed, we have seen some genuine shifts towards what Locality have previously described as "power partnership".

"With the red tape lifted, we have been able to move mountains and change things which would have taken months or even years ... We always work closely with the council and NHS but this has taken our partnership working to another level."

Kim Shutler, chief executive at the Cellar Trust and Chair of the Bradford VCS Assembly.

"New, strong relations have been forged, based on emergency response and rapid roll out of service delivery. There has been a recognition that 'place based' collaboration is effective and productive."

Dianne Williams, chief executive of Moat House Community Trust.

During the crisis the ability of community organisations to respond quickly to local need has been a great strength - frequently standing in contrast to the slower, less agile, statutory support systems. Collaboration was most successful where the public sector recognised the distinctive value of community action during this time and sought to support it through resources and partnership rather than to control it.

We have also heard how, in many cases, pre-existing good relationships and joint-working gave a strong foundation from which to build a coordinated response to the crisis.

This has been demonstrated in the findings from Keep it Local councils. Locality's Keep it Local councils network has been working with a vanguard of local authorities who recognise the distinctive role that community organisations play both in the local service landscape and in the wider social fabric of their places. They are seeking to support and nurture community organisations by building partnerships, sharing power, and maximising local strengths. Their approach prior to the coronavirus crisis has shaped the way they have responded in partnership with their communities.

Keep it Local spotlight: Wirral Council

Wirral Council have responded to coronavirus alongside its communities and community organisations. As with other councils, Wirral have adopted an emergency cell response structure. Individual cells feed into a tactical group on a regular basis, which sets the direction of the council and other partners across Wirral.

The focus of these cells ranges from the humanitarian response to the economic. Community organisations are well represented on both strands of work and have fed in their local intelligence to help inform the strategic response of the council.

The council have used their strategic position to support and complement the work of community organisations. Wirral's "peak" in cases of coronavirus came weeks behind other places in the country such as London, meaning a more localised response was needed. Community organisations have played a prominent role in communicating up-to-date information and guidance to their communities.

The council have coordinated a centralised hub, providing emergency food parcels and food shopping vouchers to Wirral Residents. Food deliveries have been carried out by local community groups and organisations. The council have, in partnership with community organisations, established Wirral InfoBank - an online directory of services and support being provided by community groups. Residents can search by postcode and find their most appropriate local provision.

The council mobilised existing networks to help drive volunteer recruitment. Community Action Wirral set up a local volunteering service – over 700 volunteers registered locally. Some of these volunteers have since been placed to support the social care system - in both volunteer roles and paid employment. Others have been placed with local community organisations to support in their response. Wirral Council also asked their local community sector partner, Capacity, to re-focus their current contract and provide free and immediate support to community organisations playing a key role in the coronavirus effort. Capacity have been asked to work with teams on the ground to secure new funding, re-focus service models and remodel business plans.

Council staff have remarked how much "residents have benefited from the quick mobilisation of community organisations". Jenni Jones, director of one of these community organisations, Wirral Development Trust, described the work that had been put in beforehand that enabled this rapid response.

"For the past five or six years, with the support of the local authority and public health, the voluntary and community sector has been able to build trust and collaborative working which is sometimes extremely hard in such a competitive sector. As a result, during this crisis we've been able to work with a really open, honest a coordinated local authority. It has been refreshing to have such positive partnership working virtually from day one. I am really proud to part of Wirral at the moment."

Andy McCartan, Commissioned Services Manager at Wirral Council, reflected on how to build on this strong partnership working:

"Traditionally, we've been a very KPI, performance-driven organisation. During the crisis, we've seen organisations do things well without this level of process and a greater degree of trust and collaboration. We now need to use this learning to understand how we commission and procure things in the future, and where appropriate and in the best interest of local communities, move away from some of those more inflexible approaches to more collaborative, outcomes driven partnership solutions with these organisations and local community businesses."

There have also been two important updates to national procurement guidelines, to support greater flexibility in procurement during the crisis. These changes potentially pave the way for improved commissioning practices and shifts towards greater community collaboration.

Cabinet Office procurement policy notes and what they mean for the future

In mid-March, the Cabinet Office published two Procurement Policy Notes.[34] The guidance laid out how procurement practice should be shifted in local authorities, CCGs, central government and elsewhere, in light of the coronavirus crisis.

Public sector procurement is worth £284bn each year[35] and includes the purchase of goods, works and services. The rise of competitive tendering driven by the Open Public Services agenda over the last decade has impacted partnerships between community organisations and the public sector, making them more transactional.[36] Competitive relationships within local voluntary and community sectors has undermined trust.[37]

The guidance suspended this way of working and has the potential to permanently change the relationship from one of competition to one of collaboration. Recognising that huge parts of the economy are dependent on public sector contracting income, the guidance on "supplier relief"[38] aimed to secure income continuity, by asking contracting authorities to provide flexibility to suppliers.

Some local authorities, such as Bristol City Council,[39] have acted quickly to suspend or relax performance targets. Head of Procurement at Bristol Council, Steve Sandercock laid out the shift this represents:

> **"The council encourage suppliers to prioritise things that will meet the community's needs and trusts that details will be dealt with in relationships between contract managers and suppliers."**

Where, in the past, the focus of many contracts has been on outputs and specific outcomes, now some councils are looking for broad outcomes that meet community need and public purpose. These flexibilities pave the way for transactional relationships to be replaced by those based on trust.

It's important to note that this guidance hasn't been implemented so thoroughly across the board. Through our research we've heard examples of contracting authorities, from the Employment Skills and Funding Agency to the Department for Work and Pensions, showing a lack of flexibility around the way organisations might alter their delivery of existing contracts. Pre-existing norms and cultures have either enabled, or stifled, application of this guidance in its letter and spirit. Deputy Leader, Bristol City Council, Cllr Asher Craig:

> **"The partnership developed by Bristol City Council with the third sector through initiatives like Keep it Local has enabled the council to offer more support flexibly to ensure we can meet the needs of local community organisations and continue to deliver quality services."**

The guidance on "Responding to Covid-19"[40] also provides councils the ability to award contracts without undertaking a competitive tendering process. The guidance rightly notes that this is already permissible under the current Public Contract Regulations 2015[41]. However, too often, contracting

authorities haven't utilised the range of creative tools at their disposal to practice the "art of the possible"[42] in public procurement.

This wholesale change of direction from government to utilise direct awards, and other non-competitive methods, has the potential to shift ingrained culture in procurement teams. The guidance and the practice it has encouraged in local authorities and beyond should be seen as a bridge to a future based on community collaboration, rather than competitive tendering.

Whole system approaches have really shown their value during the crisis

Coronavirus has involved a set of intertwined clinical, social and economic crises. In places where there were strong existing systems in place for integrated working, this has supported more holistic responses to need. From local authorities, for example, we have heard about the importance of existing integrated working between the council and health colleagues to crisis response:

> **"We were able to rise to the challenge of coronavirus locally in Oldham because we already had strong existing relationships across our public sector partners and community organisations – which meant we could mobilise support to our residents quickly through key anchor organisations like the Action Together and the foodbank as well as many more.**
>
> **It also helped that we had an integrated health and social care system under a joint system of leadership formed of elected members, a single chief exec and pan-public sector system leads who could quickly make decisions to respond to an unfolding fast moving situation."**
>
> Cllr Arooj Shah, Cabinet Member, Social Justice and Communities, Oldham Council

In other instances, the crisis has driven new partnerships. For several Keep it Local Councils, the crisis has led to better collaboration with local health colleagues – in CCGs, local NHS trusts and primary care networks. It has accelerated the shift towards "whole system" working in some of these places.

> **"It has been important for our local health partners to see the power of community and how that can be harnessed to deliver their aims. The idea that we're able to develop a joint commissioning approach that deals with the short-, medium- and long-term is a real priority for us as part of the recovery."**
>
> Toby Savage, Leader, South Gloucestershire Council

Community organisations have also reported similar shifts, with increased recognition of the value of community delivery during the crisis. At Locality's Health and Wellbeing member roundtable we heard examples of how relationships that had been previously difficult to unlock with CCGs have improved. Members reported a shift in culture in clinical systems, towards a greater understanding of the contribution of community-led approaches. There is hope that the

operational need for joint-working during the crisis opens up greater possibilities for future collaboration.

> **"We have worked towards a model of one team. Shared practitioners learning meetings were initially set up to overcome problems but now [they are generating] great learning and team building."**
>
> Julie Close, chief executive of Southern Brooks Community Partnerships.

Partnerships have not flourished in all places

Despite the positive learning we are hearing from many places about improved partnership, this picture is not consistent. Some community organisations struggled to connect at all with their council during the crisis, whilst others reported that the centralised support systems across local authority areas were disconnected from neighbourhood approaches. There were missed opportunities to connect community assets and resource these during the response:

> **"Centralised support did not work. It would have been more effective for the local authority to resource voluntary groups ... to organise their own responses since the people in these communities are more comfortable and familiar to those groups in their area."**
>
> Community organisation in Essex.

Particular challenges have been reported about a lack of information sharing and joint planning, which in some areas has led to duplication or unmet need. Others have reported that, even in places where there have been strives towards a more holistic partnership approach with communities in recent years, during the crisis moment these relationships have retrenched back into familiar silos.

Locality members have also reported a lack of local authority support in accessing funding to support them during the crisis. This includes the government support schemes for local businesses, including the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure grant and the Small Business Grant, which were dependent on local authority decisions on the eligibility of charities. Community organisations have reported protracted and frustrating negotiations with local authorities in order to access these schemes, without success.

Community organisations have been the cogs of connection between different layers of response

The heat of the crisis has revealed that well-functioning systems have emerged at pace where the strengths and assets of different actors and groups have been recognised, supported, and coordinated to work together for a shared purpose.

A key finding from our research has been the role that community organisations have taken as intermediaries, connecting local support and services into a holistic offer for individuals. They have brokered connections between different "layers of local", from the street level response of mutual aid groups, to city or county wide networks and provision.

This is demonstrated in the many examples of powerful partnerships between mutual aid groups and community organisations. The self-organising, community-led work of mutual aid groups across the country has been one of the most inspiring responses to this crisis. They have been agile and quick to respond to local needs, based on hyper local relationships and neighbourliness. Community organisations have been able to provide some infrastructure capacity to these networks. They have, for example, supported them with data sharing and referral systems, and volunteering and safeguarding training and resources. We have also heard how community organisations have been able to be a communication bridge between local authorities and mutual aid groups.

This coordinating role has been enabled by the years of local relationships, connections, resources and experience of partnership and delivery that community organisations have built up. Yet this is rarely recognised as an explicit priority or aim for policymakers. Indeed, resources for community infrastructure organisations, including councils for voluntary service, have seen significant reductions throughout the last ten years.[43]

Keep it Local spotlight: South Gloucestershire: letting go and supporting the community to step up

South Gloucestershire Council have taken a two-tier approach to responding to the crisis. Postcode-based mutual aid groups were overlaid by voluntary and community sector organisations. The latter were able to provide more regulated, formalised support and act as a key interface between these hyper local groups and the council.

Many of these community sector organisations are supported by long-term strategic commissioning arrangements with the council and have worked as partners for some time. One such organisation is Southern Brooks Community Partnerships. Their chief executive Julie Close described their role, alongside the South Gloucestershire CVS in supporting mutual aid groups, "we take part in a weekly Zoom [video call] and ring each of the 80+ groups every week to check in with them". Southern Brooks have also been running a seven day a week free phone service, triaging requests, and have been working with the council to get support to shielded people, particularly those that may need additional help to access mutual aid or other local groups.

This partnership working with community organisations and mutual aid groups has created communications challenges for the council, with residents not always clear about the council's role responding to the crisis. Their funding and support of community organisations, and their role coordinating, isn't always visible, but it has enabled them to harness the power of community in South Gloucestershire.

Coordination of volunteers

The response from volunteers has been a phenomenally positive consequence of the pandemic. The fact that 750,000 people signed up to the NHS Volunteer Responder scheme within its first few days demonstrates just how people have been motivated through this crisis to do something and support each other.

At a local level, many community organisations have also seen significant spikes in volunteering and new volunteering relationships that they hope will last beyond the crisis. Some, for example, found that their previous volunteers were now in the clinically vulnerable or shielding groups due to their demographics, so new volunteers were a much-needed capacity boost at a time of rising demand.

> **"The outpouring of goodwill, solidarity and compassion has been fantastic. Local people want to volunteer and support our work. This obviously takes time and resource for us to do this properly. But we're making lots of new friends and supporters in the meantime, who are bringing lots of skills, experiences, contacts and enthusiasm."**
>
> Aaron Barbour, chief executive, Katherine Low Settlement.

> **"We have recruited over 350 volunteers in our neighbourhood, including new volunteers and younger people. The challenge we have now is keeping volunteers engaged, with more volunteers than requests. But we're really keen to ensure there is a legacy beyond the current crisis and to keep these people engaged."**
>
> Community organisation in Birmingham.

The value of this outpouring of community mindedness cannot be overstated. The need to nurture and sustain this is something that many community organisations are now focusing on. Yet, we have also heard about some of the challenges of managing new volunteering capacity during this time.

Firstly, it takes time, resources and skills to train, deploy and support volunteers – and this has not always been recognised. Many community organisations have played this instrumental role during the pandemic, providing safeguarding resources, health and safety advice, and support for new volunteers. However, other community groups reported they were unable to take on volunteers because there was not the infrastructure to support them locally. In addition, some community organisations decided they had to limit their volunteering intake just to those people that had previously volunteered with them, as they knew they were already trained and DBS checked.

We have also heard about the limitations of the national volunteering database through the NHS Volunteer Responder scheme. Community organisations have observed that the length of time which it took for volunteers to hear back from the scheme led to energy dissipating and volunteering capacity being underused. Some community organisations experienced practical difficulties in getting in touch and making referrals into the NHS Volunteer Responder scheme. As Linda Dellow at Centre4 describes, the scheme lacked the expertise in coordinating local delivery:

"What they should have done is put money into the existing work and voluntary sector response... and speak to people locally about what is going on."

Others have pointed to similar challenges with local authority-coordinated volunteer schemes:

"Our local authority wanted all our volunteers to sign up with [their] response team, which we agreed for our volunteers to do this. However, most of them were not called to do anything. We still had to re-deploy them to meet the needs of our area."

Community organisation in Essex.

In contrast, throughout our findings, community organisations emphasised the additional value of taking a local approach to volunteer coordination, which nurtures and maintains the relationships forged through volunteering. For example, some community organisations spoke of keeping a core group of volunteers doing food deliveries to the same houses, to reduce anxiety and provide opportunities for new friendships between them. Others have emphasised that effective volunteering isn't just "goodwill", it is the building of new relationships and trust, for the benefit of all involved.

"We try, as much as possible, to make this a one to one relationship with the volunteer and the person who needs support. We have very positive feedback about the relationships developing which we hope will continue after the current crisis."

Stephanie Hryschko, Trustee at Kiveton Park and Wales Development Trust.

Community organisations have adapted at pace – but need support to meet the challenges of the future

Adapting at pace

Throughout the past three months, community organisations have demonstrated their extraordinary capacity to adapt at pace. One of the clearest examples of this is the way in which community organisations have been able to adapt their services to social distancing through digital transformation. As one Locality member described it, "we managed to roll out a new digital strategy in two days that in ordinary times would have taken us a year to implement."

For example, Katherine Low Settlement in Battersea in London have been: delivering ESOL classes to 100 students with a combination of Zoom, WhatsApp and Google G-Suite; supporting a Somali Women's Group via WhatsApp late on a Friday night once their children have gone to bed; and hosting a new weekly online Corona Homework Club for 47 refugee young people.

However, digital exclusion has also been a key concern, during a time where access to services and connection has become dependent on access to technology. Many community organisations have been seeking to tackle this. For example, Skills Enterprise,

a community organisation in East Ham, London, have been running digital training sessions and supporting people without internet access to continue to search for employment over the phone. They have also been providing tablets and phones to people on their training programmes to help them continue their skills development. Manor House Development Trust have funded phones and dongles for young and old people on their estates who would otherwise not have internet access.

The adaptability of staff during the crisis has also been emphasised throughout our research. "Job descriptions have gone out of the window," describes one community centre manager. The crisis has completely changed ways of working, and many staff have been redeployed or retrained, as demand for services has shifted.

> **"The worst of times can bring out the best in humanity and our teams at Katherine Low are demonstrating this."**
>
> Aaron Barbour, Katherine Low Settlement.

This crisis has shown that community organisations, their staff and volunteers are creative and resourceful, ready to adapt and respond flexibly to the needs of their communities. However, they now face significant and ongoing financial challenges and uncertainties. They will need to rewrite their business models, at the same time as continuing to change and develop their services to meet new demand To tackle these challenges requires policy and funding solutions, designed in partnership with the voluntary and community sector, to ensure that these vital organisations can continue to play a powerful role at the heart of our society.

Financial impact of coronavirus on community organisations

Our survey carried out for this research revealed that 59% of members are reporting that over a quarter of their income is at risk due to coronavirus. For organisations who earn more than 50% of their income through trading, this increases to 75% reporting at least a quarter of income risk.[44]

Many Locality members have sought to reduce grant dependency in recent years through an increased focus on trading income, such as through venue hire, tenant organisations or community cafes, shops or leisure centres.[45] These enterprise models have provided the independence that fuels their community power. They have also been a source of sustainable income to subsidise local services in the context of declining grants. Yet, it is these organisations that are now the most exposed.

The pandemic and resulting lockdown hit all sectors of our economy hard. Indeed, the extent of the crisis is demonstrated by the unprecedented levels of government intervention we have seen, with the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme paying the wages for millions of employees to the tune of £10bn and rising.[46] But the £750m package of support for civil society, hard fought for and desperately needed, fell massively short of the estimated £4bn black-hole for charity sector finances.

While many community organisations have taken up the furlough scheme

to ride out income losses, and have used it effectively, for many more it has meant difficult decisions about having to close services at a time when they are needed the most. The original inflexibility of the scheme - not allowing for part-time arrangements or for staff to be able to volunteer for their organisation - has also meant that some community organisations have had to reduce capacity at a time when they needed to be stepping up their activities.

While emergency funding has been made available to support service continuity and organisational stability in the short-term, a particular concern for Locality members is whether these income streams will be able to recover in the medium- to long-term. The extent to which social distancing measures remain, and how long for, will deeply affect trading activities which rely on footfall and community use. For community organisations who have commercial tenants, there will also be a knock-on impact from closure of other local businesses.

"Redundancies of staff are sadly inevitable and the future in general is currently uncertain at a time when the most vulnerable young people and adults in society need our help now and in coming months and years."

Community organisation, London.

"We are concerned about how long things will take to get back to 'normal' and that local people will remain isolated and frightened and will miss their local community hub. They may not return and that will put the viability of the building at risk potentially."

Community organisation, North East.

There are also a number of additional inherent structural financial challenges within the community sector, which will make recovery post-lockdown even more difficult. For example, community organisations have fewer options for re-financing, restricted assets and limited recovery of core costs and ability to build reserves from.[47]

We also know that many of the community organisations who have the lowest reserves and are in the worst financial position to absorb these impacts, will be those who represent and serve minority groups. Research from the Ubele Initiative, for example, finds that up to 9 in 10 BAME-led organisations are at risk of closure after three months, with a projected 15,000 to 20,000 users per week unable to access services.[48] This is deeply worrying, particularly given the socioeconomic and racial inequalities inherent in the disproportionate mortality risk of BAME communities to coronavirus.

We need strong and successful community organisations to support communities in the recovery and beyond

To meet the challenges of the future and play their full role in the recovery, community organisations will require long-term support. The majority of Locality members are based in areas of multiple deprivation, trading in areas of traditional market failure to provide local social value. In a crisis whose impact has followed the contours of existing inequalities, their role in their neighbourhoods is ever more acute.[49]

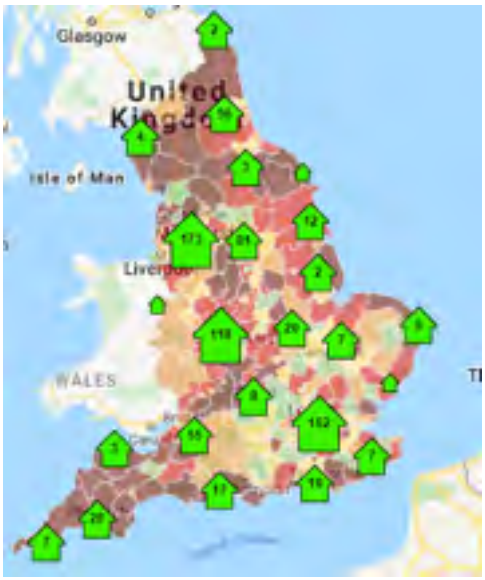
Analysis of Locality membership shows that these organisations are working in some of the most deprived

communities. Nearly half (46%) of people living in the neighbourhoods that Locality members serve live in the 20% most deprived areas, and a quarter of children in these areas are living in poverty. Locality members are also operating in areas where it is anticipated that there will be high job losses. On average in the economies in which our members operate, 26% of jobs are considered to be 'at risk' due to coronavirus.[50]

Community organisations have a vital role to play, as both social and economic agents for change in their neighbouhoods. But they must survive this crisis to play that role. If these organisations go to the wall, we'll have lost years of investment and relationship building. It is precisely these "cogs of connection" that society needs to drive us out of the crisis into a better world.

At-risk jobs (as a result of COVID-19) by location of job

The colours on the map show At-risk jobs (as a proportion of all jobs)



Showing all areas at LA level

- 18.8% to 23.7%
- 23.7% to 24.9%
- 24.9% to 25.8%
- 25.8% to 27.1%
- 27.1% to 46.3%

Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) 2019 Rank

The colours on the map show the index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) Average LSOA Rank (lower = more deprivation)



Showing all areas at LA level

- 22,755 to 29,594
- 19,421 to 22,755
- 16,031 to 19,421
- 12,627 to 16,031
- 6,040 to 12,627

Source: Local Insights 2020

4 Reflections for the future

The consensus that we need to "build back better" has been growing since almost day one of this crisis. This pandemic, like so many crises throughout history, provides us with the opportunity to change, adapt and reimagine our society and the kind of future we want. It has concentrated the mind around fundamental questions – from preparedness for climate change, to the future of ageing. Even as the pace of life took a slower beat in recent months for those not on the frontline, the world around us has already shifted course at a phenomenal rate, perhaps irreversibly.

Decisions on the "recovery" are already being made; decisions about what our economy, environment and society should look like post-coronavirus. We need to ensure that at every level these decisions are being made in partnership with communities, and with the voices of those most deeply impacted by this crisis centred at the heart of public debate.

Through our conversations and research with Locality members and Keep it Local councils over the last few weeks, we have been asking them about their reflections for the future. What are their biggest hopes and concerns, and what needs to happen for that hope to triumph?

The biggest concerns: hardship and worsening inequality

Coronavirus has not been a "great leveller"; rather it has exposed devastating levels of inequality that must be addressed. The economic impact has bitten hardest for those that were already in precarious jobs and on the lowest pay. The rates of death in the most deprived places are over double those in the least deprived. The disproportionate impact on people from BAME communities, lays bare high levels of structural racial inequality.[51]

Some contributors to our research expressed hope that, because the pandemic has exposed economic, health and racial inequality so starkly, it has forced these issues into the public consciousness. There is hope that this will lead to reform to tackle embedded inequality, and an increased provision of resources to address marginalisation and disadvantage. Others have observed that the pandemic has resulted in an unmasking of the holes in our existing social safety nets, that those experiencing the long-term strain of poverty have known for a long time.

We are now facing the biggest economic recession for three centuries, which will make tackling these inequalities all the more difficult and all the more important.[52] With thousands of businesses struggling to recover from the cumulative loss of months of trading and the continued impact of social distancing, unemployment is set to double.[53] Community organisations are deeply concerned about the impact this economic slump will have on people who were already in poverty and experiencing strain prior to the crisis.

We are also facing significant long-term mental and physical health challenges from this crisis. The increase in loneliness, felt most acutely by

younger people during lockdown, will have mental health consequences for years to come.[54] And as shielded people continue to experience prolonged and acute isolation, their risk from other illnesses increases. The pandemic has put those with existing poor health at the greatest risk, not only from coronavirus but also from the exacerbation and worsening of other conditions. With a recession looming, these health inequalities are only set to worsen with rising unemployment and poverty.[55]

The role of community organisations in tackling the long-term social and economic consequences of the virus will be vital. As our research has shown, these organisations are locally rooted, trusted and there for the long term. They have strong existing relationships with local people, especially with those whom public services traditionally find "hard to reach". As multi-purpose organisations, they can respond flexibly, join up with other services, get people connected locally, and co-produce services with the individual.

Community organisations will be needed like never before in the "recovery". Yet many community organisations also face significant shocks to their business models and income streams, that will put pressure on their ability to adapt and develop their services to meet these challenges.

We know from previous recessions that charities are particularly vulnerable to economic downturn.[56] At the same time, the additional strain on local government finances, on top of a decade of austerity for local government and underfunding in local services, may also impact availability of funding locally for collaboration and partnership with the voluntary and community sector.

> **"We're entering a recession. That's pretty inevitable. We're still in the biggest funding crisis that local government and voluntary and community sector organisations have ever had.**
>
> **Our voluntary and community sector organisations are often reaching people that are destitute, that are most disconnected from services, with multiple and complex needs, at a time when that demand is accelerating. Our ability as commissioners to support that is less than ever."**
>
> Council Chief Executive

The last economic crash led to years of austerity that weakened our local social infrastructure at a time when people needed it the most. At the same time as the Localism Act and Big Society agenda sought to unleash the potential of greater community action and local civil society, gruelling cuts to public spending hollowed out the community capacity required to do so. We must learn the lessons from the last decade; using what this crisis has shown us about the importance of community resilience to take a different path. As the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, recently said:

> **"One of our greatest strengths as a country is our civil society."**[57]

"No going back" – reimagining our society with community at the heart

Throughout our research with community organisations and local government, the overwhelming view was that there should be no going back to business as usual. The crisis should be used as a fundamental moment for change.

We live in one of the most centralised countries in Europe. This crisis has clearly shown some of the deep failings of over-centralisation which have hampered local responses to coronavirus. Testing and tracing, for example, was initially rolled out with no local government involvement. While the government have since changed track,[58] some councils have reported failings in getting results back on the cases within their communities.[59] Another example of the limitations of top-down management is the NHS Volunteer Responder scheme, which, as our research has shown, in some places has duplicated existing work being done by local community organisations, or simply not responded quickly enough to make a difference.

At the other end of the scale, this crisis has shown us the power of local. We have seen how partnerships, trust and shared purpose between local government, communities and local organisations have enabled responses that are agile, effective and caring.

> **"This period has shown us what community mobilisation, partnership, kindness and compassion can deliver. My hope is that we can maintain the momentum, retain the learning, and never go back to how things were before."**
>
> Kim Shutler, chief executive, Cellar Trust

> **"We need to think how we build the Keep it Local principles into the recovery work that we're doing. So, we've decided we're not going back to business as usual. We're moving voluntary and community sector organisations that have always been at the margins to the mainstream."**
>
> Cllr Asher Craig, Deputy Leader, Bristol City Council, and Cabinet Member for Communities, Equalities and Public Health

To solve the big social, economic, and environmental challenges we face as a society, government must look to the local, harness the capabilities within our communities, and empower devolved leadership. For example, to fix of our broken social care system, the flaws of which has been exposed so brutally by this crisis, will require a greater role for communities and local organisations in supporting care and prevention across the whole system. Alongside an overhaul in national standards and funding, there must be a greater emphasis on collaboration between local care management teams and community organisations, driven by social purpose and the empowerment of people in those care systems.

Equally, tackling the high levels of unemployment we now face will require supporting the critical role of community organisations in providing localised employment and skills training. This will be especially important in areas of multiple deprivation where labour market challenges will be particularly acute. The barriers people experience to employment are often complex and place-specific, ranging from a lack of access to networks, to caring responsibilities, to transport issues. Therefore, mobilising the assets, solutions and capabilities across the community to address these barriers and determine the solutions is essential.

Community organisations will be at the forefront of picking up the pieces following coronavirus, from tackling food poverty to providing employment and skills support. Yet, the role of community organisations is, and always has been, about so much more than crisis prevention.

The strength of the community organisation model lies in building community resilience, local power and connections that help us to be healthier and happier. To truly unlock these strengths, community organisations must be valued as partners within policy and decision making.

Despite the huge social and economic scars left by the pandemic, and the expectation of considerable strain and hardship for years to come, community organisations are also hopeful. They are hopeful that the shared experience of crisis will shift our society irreversibly towards a better future, one which harnesses the power of community to create a fairer society.

Community organisations themselves must seize this moment. From ensuring that new volunteers stay involved, to sustaining new relationships with grassroots organisations that have blossomed during crisis. Strong and successful community organisations will do this by focussing on community development, local organising, and engagement.

> **"If we want to secure that more positive, kinder, emotionally richer future, then some people need to stand up and advocate for it and demonstrate its value and vitality."**
>
> Julien Lake, chief executive at Berwick Community Trust

Case study example: Centre4's Ethical Recruitment Agency:

Centre4's Ethical Recruitment Agency is an example of the powerful role that community-led models can play in providing employment and skills support. It was the result of community research by Centre4, paid for by the local authority, to explore people's experiences and barriers to finding work. One issue that kept coming up was the demoralising practices of recruitment agencies, with people being put on zero hours contracts, or asked to turn up for jobs only to be told shifts had gone. As Linda Dellow, Centre4 chief officer, describes, "People were saying 'I'd rather be unemployed than work through a recruitment agency' ...I thought, you know what, could I do that a bit better? I thought yeah I think I can."

With funding secured as part of Power to Change's Empowering Places programme, the Ethical Recruitment Agency was set up. It has a three-tier offer: employment; training (in house or with accredited partners); or social action within the neighbourhood. The social action strand kicks in if there are no jobs currently available; instead a volunteering opportunity is offered and people will be paid with vouchers to be redeemed with local businesses. As well as supporting the individual to gain more experience and build their CV, it also develops local relationships, connections and community capacity. The social action strand of this programme has also provided an essential volunteering resource during the coronavirus crisis.

5 Recommendations

This government has a unique opportunity, right now, to build upon the surge of community spirit we have witnessed over the last few months. It can create the conditions for community power to flourish at a local level and make this the foundation of a fairer society after the crisis.

Indeed, it is crystal clear from our research that there is no desire on the part of council or community leaders to "bounce back" or return to "business as usual". And this motivation is shared by the wider public: an RSA poll found that 85% wanted to see at least some of the personal or social changes they have experienced during lockdown to continue afterwards, while just 9% want a complete return to normal.[60]

But state capacity has been drained by the scale of the crisis, and there will be a social, economic, and political imperative to get the economy moving as quickly as possible. In the face of certain recession, there will be a powerful incentive for Whitehall to fall back on its traditional levers.

We cannot allow that to happen. The crisis has shown us that huge shifts are possible when there is the collective will to achieve them. Importantly, it has also shown we don't need to design new institutions to solve the complex social, economic and environmental problems we face. The new world can be built on an old idea whose time is now: the power of community.

Here we outline how government can harness community power to drive a fair and sustainable economy and unlock the local collaboration and innovation required to deliver better public services. To meet the challenge we face, government must resist ever tighter centralisation and instead embrace the potential of localism. To channel the renewed wave of community spirit, they should open up new routes for local areas to drive forward positive change in their neighbourhoods, and invest to protect, strengthen and grow community organisations to play their essential role in building a better future.

1. Support a community-powered economic recovery

Once the public health crisis of coronavirus has been overcome, addressing the economic crisis it has created will quickly become the government's top priority. We need to ensure that the desire to "bounce back" as quickly as possible doesn't mean we double down on an economic model that has not worked for so long, for so many.

If the government is serious about "levelling up", it needs to make sure the huge economic development investment that will be needed to kick start the economy is spent in a different way. Traditional approaches will simply widen inequalities between people and places and accelerate the climate crisis. The billions that will need to be pumped into our economy to invest in our rebuild must reach the places that need it most, in a way that will help them to become prosperous and sustainable in the long term.

We can do this if we make it a community-powered recovery. Supporting so-called "left-behind" economies to flourish will require investing in the neighbourhood foundations of productivity, involving communities and social economy organisations as equal partners, and embedding community economic development in our economic recovery. Strengthening local economic resilience in this way will help to ensure that we centre our economic future around citizens, wellbeing, and environmental sustainability.

Central government can support this through:

Expanding the Community Ownership Fund in scope, ambition and size to reflect the economic challenges coming down the track.

The Conservative Manifesto in 2019 pledged £150m to create a new Community Ownership Fund. We believe this fund can be the start of something transformational. With more ambitious scale and scope, it can turbocharge the community ownership agenda and create the foundations of a community-powered recovery.

A national fund to support communities to take ownership of local land and buildings has been a longstanding Locality campaign call – and it is now more important than ever.

So the government must seize the opportunity to establish and expand its planned Community Ownership Fund and create a £1bn Community Ownership Fund over the next 5 years. Using the pledged money to kickstart the Fund, a £200m per annum fund could be leveraged by pooling additional investment from other funders and social investment into a coordinated national pot. This would also be supported by accessing £500m through Dormant Assets (unclaimed pensions, insurance, stocks and shares).

This funding should provide capital and revenue support as well as flexible grant funding and access to advice, to support all points of the community assets journey. This support would be available for assets acquired through both Community Asset Transfer and the Community Right to Bid – and would fund a whole range of buildings and spaces, from local pubs to community-owned business parks, sports centres and housing developments.

This fund can provide the capital base to unlock the power of community and reshape our local economies. It can invest in the established community organisations that helped us through the crisis, supporting them to weather the current financial storms, develop and expand their asset bases, and be sustainable in the long term. This will enable them to help their neighbourhoods bounce forwards from the crisis - in particular, supporting their critical role in providing localised employment and skills training in areas of multiple deprivation where labour market challenges will be particularly acute.

Community asset ownership can be a foundation for strengthening independent and long-term community resources and power. Given the particular challenges highlighted for the financial sustainability of BAME-led community organisations, the fund should be co-designed with BAME infrastructure organisations to ensure

funding and support is targeted to strengthen BAME-led community asset ownership

The fund will also help save important local community spaces that will come under threat during the coming recession and ensure they are put to productive economic use through community business. It can enable communities to buy back buildings that have been lost to the private sector during the austerity years. And it can allow new mutual aid groups, and other community start-ups who want to become more permanently established, the opportunity to develop an asset base.

Putting communities in charge of local economic development. The crisis has put a number of central government agendas on hold – including the future UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

There is now an opportunity to ensure that government learns the lessons from previous economic regeneration programmes, increasing community control in determining how investment is spent and which interventions will work for their places. Our Communities in Charge campaign has shown that community-led approaches do not just provide good social outcomes but are also proven to create stronger local economies.[61]

Government should commit to ring-fence 25% of any future economic development funding for community-led partnerships. These partnerships would include local government, community organisations, residents, and local businesses. They would be a route to invest directly in the neighbourhood level foundations of productivity including through community economic development, community asset ownership, co-operative development, and local enterprise support.

If Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs) are to be retained and are designated economic regeneration funding, they must be recast as true local enterprise partnerships and provide equal representation for the private, public and social sectors of the economy.

2. Creating collaborative public services that unlock community power

We must learn the lessons from the crisis and make community partnership the new normal. To meet the big challenges we face as a society – from social care to unemployment – we need to build the innovation, skills and capabilities of our communities to work in partnership with the public sector to address them.

Fundamentally, this involves moving away from the model of competition and targets, to one which actively invests in community collaboration and the long-term capabilities within communities to support local delivery and prevention.

This involves a change in how councils and other local commissioners fund local services, away from procuring specific outcomes and towards taking a long-term investment approach. Greater integration of services and budgets between local public services, both across the whole place and at a neighbourhood level, would help embed this change.

Much of this change will require a shift in

behaviours and practices at a local level. However, creating an environment that supports greater community partnership will also require important policy changes from national government.

Central government can support this through:

Supporting "power partnerships" to develop at a local level through long-term investment in councils and communities.

There should be a comprehensive review of local government finance. The local government sector was already on the financial brink prior to the crisis, with the poorest councils bearing the brunt of public spending cuts though the austerity years. While this year's £1.6bn settlement has been secured for local government to spend money fighting the immediate impact of the coronavirus, the plan for the recovery requires substantial new settlement commensurate with the scale of the future challenge.

In particular, this should include reversing the cuts to essential preventative services that local government funds and provides. The review should also consider options as part of the Devolution White Paper for new fiscal powers for local government, with safeguards against reinforcing inequalities. This would be an opportunity to re-design the tax system with greater opportunities to support local flourishing by increasing local government powers.

Embedding new procurement flexibilities in Cabinet Office guidance.

Procurement flexibilities introduced by the Cabinet Office at the beginning of the coronavirus crisis should lead to permanent change. The flexibility to work more collaboratively with suppliers should be spread across public sector contracting authorities, through further Cabinet Office guidance. Government should embed this change in practice by supporting a programme of peer-support for councils to drive greater community partnership.

Implementing this change will allow local areas the scope they need to shift services away from competitive tendering towards community collaboration.

Strengthening the roots of community collaboration.

Central government can play a role in strengthening the roots of community collaboration through a national programme to support service transformation partnerships between local government, voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations and health commissioners.

This should be designed in partnership with the community and local government sectors, Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government and NHS England. This could be achieved through a £10m fund over three years, with 100 places receiving £100k funding. It would provide resources for community partnerships to grow the roots of community collaboration, invest in the capacity of neighbourhood organisations, and provide development funding for embedding learning and collaborative approaches.

3. Turn community spirit into community power

Community spirit has sprung up everywhere in response to coronavirus. Polling from Power to Change shows that 68% of UK adults do not want to lose the renewed sense of community spirit found through this crisis and are pledging to do more in their local area when the crisis finally ends.[63] The community organisations contributing to our research are all looking at how they can sustain and develop the new thirst for community action that has grown during this time.

The big challenge for policy makers now is not just how this community spirit can be sustained for the long term, but how it can be transformed into community power.

Through Locality's Localism Commission we have shown that action across four 'pillars' of community power are required – relationships, powers, institutions, and capacity. While much of the relational change needs to take place at a local level, national government has a key role to play in devolving power, strengthening community rights, empowering neighbourhood governance, and building local capacity.

Central government can support this through:

Providing £500m revenue funding to protect, strengthen and grow community organisations.

As our research has shown, community organisations have a vital role to play, as both social and economic agents for change in their neighbourhoods. But they must survive this crisis to play that role. If these organisations go to the wall, we'll have lost years of investment and relationship building. It is precisely these "cogs of connection" that society needs to drive us out of the crisis into a better world.

During the first three months of the crisis, civil society organisations saw an estimated £4bn income lost. A proportion of this has been addressed through the £750m emergency support package for charities from government. But in order to protect, strengthen and grow community organisations for the future, this requires injecting an additional revenue boost for them to thrive in the medium to long term.

This funding would support existing community organisations but would also support a pipeline of new community activity by enabling new mutual aid groups to become established. We support the ambitions behind Power to Change's proposals for a "Community Heroes Fund" which, as well as funding existing community organisations, would provide support to mutual aid groups in areas which lack existing community infrastructure to become permanent organisations.[64]

New funding should be ringfenced to support building stronger community activity and should be focused on core-funding and revenue support. It could be distributed through the National Lottery Community Fund, and it should provide 20% ring-fenced funding for BAME-led organisations and groups working with predominantly BAME communities. The fund should be co-designed with BAME infrastructure organisations to ensure funding is adequately targeted.

Putting neighbourhoods at the heart of the Devolution White Paper and strengthen community powers to lead change locally.

The government's promise to "level up" the country provides an opportunity to strengthen the routes for people power to drive change locally. The Conservative manifesto stated a desire to spread devolution across England "so that every part of our country has the power to shape its own destiny".[65] Before the coronavirus crisis, a Devolution White Paper was underway to set out the plans in detail.

The government has an opportunity to put neighbourhoods at the heart of the Devolution White Paper by revitalising local governance and creating new powers for communities to lead change locally. This would include:

- **New powers for communities to shape local economic plans.**

  Community economic development (CED) is a powerful tool for communities to meaningfully shape the economy where they live.[66] Strengthening these local collaborations for a better economy will be ever more important as local areas emerge from the pandemic into the recession.

  The Devolution White Paper can strengthen the opportunities for CED by providing communities with new powers to set local economic plans. These would need to be based on participatory involvement, and would have statutory consideration within Local Industrial Strategies and other local authority economic plans.

  These powers can be formalised by expanding the role of existing Neighbourhood Forums and enabling accountable community organisations and parish councils to take on these powers. We also support the proposals recently developed by the Centre for London's research on localism in London, to pilot the creation of Community Improvement Districts.[67] These could potentially involve larger multi-neighbourhood geographies, would be established through a local ballot to be renewed every five years, and they would be able to apply a levy on council tax (if supported by local referendums).

- **Strengthen community collaboration through a new Community Partnership Power.**

  To unlock local innovation and involvement in local services, the Community Partnership Power would provide the community with the right to trigger reviews of neighbourhood provision, with a statutory responsibility on the council to support a process for community consultation and co-design.

  The coronavirus crisis has shown us the value in trusting communities with budgets to lead change locally. These powers could be used by Neighbourhood Forums, accountable community organisations or parish councils to draw down local budgets to support plans for community delivery.

- **Establish an ambitious new Community Right to Own.**

  Our communities, town centres, high streets and villages are likely to be transformed by the upcoming economic challenges. Communities should have greater powers and funding to protect the amenities and services they value most, and to plan for how local buildings and spaces can be maximised for local wellbeing.

  A Community Right to Own would support communities to reclaim valued local assets and amenities that are in decline and under threat. Unlike the current Community Right to Bid, the Right to Own would give first refusal to community owners for Assets of Community Value (ACVs) purchased on the open market, with a one-year moratorium for communities to mobilise and fundraise.

  Government can also support this by expanding the existing Assets of Community Value (ACV) legislation to cover other local amenities and services, not just physical assets. Building on the Scottish model of community ownership, the Right to Own should also provide communities with a genuine route to force sale of neglected assets if there was a powerful case for community wellbeing and sustainable development.

  We also support greater legislative protections to safeguard existing assets in community ownership from private sale, should they run into difficulty – as being developed through the Protecting Community Assets inquiry.[68]

Our next steps:

In partnership with our members, we will be developing on our research findings with a set of further discussion papers on the role of community organisations in meeting the big social, economic, and environmental challenges of the future. We will be looking first at social care, mental health, and unemployment.

We will also continue to work with community organisations to support them to be strong and successful. This includes helping them address many of the big questions that have surfaced throughout our research, such as:

- How to embed learnings from the crisis response into their partnerships with the public sector
- How to develop greater resilience in business models, in the context of trading uncertainty and economic crisis.
- How to take ownership of local data and research to ensure the local recovery is built on community experience and power.

Locality's core principle is a belief in the power of community to build a fairer society. One of the greatest barriers to this fairer society is racism, and a lack of action to tackle it in all its forms. The pandemic has been a stark reminder of the way socioeconomic inequalities and structural racism translate into fatal health inequalities.

We are committed to working with our members to amplify and strengthen community-led work to dismantle the systems that perpetuate these injustices. This will involve challenging our own practices and whether we are doing enough to tackle racism in our work, and broadening representation across our network. We are committed to doing that through our activities and through the influence we have with decision makers and policy makers.

6 Further reading

Communities in Charge: Give people the power to prosper after Brexit (2019)	https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Communities-in-Charge-Campaign-Report_FINAL_20190607.pdf
The Community Paradigm: Why public services need radical change and how it can be achieved (2019)	http://www.nlgn.org.uk/public/wp-content/uploads/The-Community-Paradigm_FINAL.pdf
Community Wealth Building in 2019: Theory, practice and next steps (2019)	https://cles.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/CWB2019FINAL-web.pdf
In Community Hands: Lessons from the past five years of Community Asset Transfer (2020	https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COP33979_In-Community-Hands_2020.03.18.pdf
Keep it Local: How local government can plug into the power of community (2020)	https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/LOC-Keep-It-Local-Report-40pp-WG08.pdf
Levelling Up: Rebalancing growth-enhancing spending (2020)	https://www.ukonward.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Design-template-Levelling-up-1-1.pdf
Local Delivery: Protecting social infrastructure (2020)	http://www.localis.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/032_LocalDelivery_AWK.pdf
Local Heroes: How to sustain community spirit beyond Covid-19 (2020)	https://www.powertochange.org.uk/blog/local-heroes-sustain-community-spirit-beyond-covid-19/
Manifesto for a Collaborative Society (2020)	http://wordpress.collaboratei.com/wp-content/uploads/CollaborateCICManifestoForACollaborativeSociety-copy.pdf
People Power: the findings from the Commission on the Future of Localism (2018)	https://locality.org.uk/about/key-publications/findings-from-the-commission-on-the-future-of-localism/
Power Partnerships (2019)	https://locality.org.uk/policy-campaigns/localism-devolution/power-partnerships/

7 End notes

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About Locality

Locality supports local community organisations to be strong and successful. Our national network of over 900 members helps more than 400,000 people every week. We offer specialist advice, peer learning and campaign with members for a fairer society. Together we unlock the power of community.

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