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COVID-19 and Communities Listening Project: A Shared Response

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Acknowledgements

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Opening remarks

When COVID-19 and the containment response hit the UK at the end of March, Carnegie UK Trust staff talked about what they were hearing and seeing in terms of communities responding quickly to needs, in a way we had not seen before. We were struck by stories in the press, and in our local areas, of people, streets and agencies working together. We wondered if something very important might be happening: something that we could learn from in our quest to create a fairer and thriving society. The crisis necessitated an emergency response: not something to be continued indefinitely. However, some of the changes within it might have been for the better and, if so, we wanted to find out how they could be included in future planning and action.

Between April and September 2020, we spoke to 16 areas in over 80 conversations to hear about how local organisations were adapting and responding to the emergency across the UK.

We are excited to now publish a distilled version of what we heard. Bringing this report together we realised that there is an amazing consistency of threats and hopes across areas in different parts of the UK: towns, villages, and cities. Whilst we are not all 'in the same boat', the will of communities to work together to respond to the emergency is evident across places and groups in the UK. Equally, organisations, no matter what size or sector, have shown kindness and a desire and ability to work in partnership.

From our conversations, we concur with findings of research, thousands of other conversations, and surveys, that people feel strongly about their communities. This gives us optimism for the future.

We'd like this report to reflect the positive partnerships that have improved people's lives during the stressful COVID-19 pandemic. We hope that the lessons on why and how these partnerships flourished can be taken on board by Councillors, council staff, national and devolved governments, grant-givers and leaders across sectors and political parties to make our systems more supportive of communities and their assets. We think that it is important to take time during the crisis to reflect collectively on what it has taught us, and what that means for the future of the state and civil society.

As one participant said to us:

> *'Don't let up. Keep trying to capture that experience in any fora you can, as it is easy to miss the opportunity to capture and reflect'.*

Ben, Georgina, Hannah, Jen, Lauren, Pippa & Rachel

1. Introduction

The Carnegie UK Trust (CUKT) has long recognised the importance of working in partnership to improve community and societal wellbeing. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, we wanted to contact people across the UK who we had worked with, for example, in our Twin Towns, Talk of the Town, libraries and kindness activities.

So, in April 2020, we began a *Covid and Communities* listening project to touch base with people who we had previously connected with to learn more about how communities and public services were responding to the crisis[1]. We wanted to understand how that changed over the summer of 2020, and to reflect on what it might mean in terms of strengthening partnerships and improving community wellbeing. We focussed on how organisations and communities were meeting the needs of the people around them, and the changing relationships between the public sector (generally local authorities), the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector (VCSE[2]), and communities. We were often touched to hear stories of organisations and people looking after one another: there was 'lots of informal help', 'lots of volunteering', 'councils helping', and 'an amazing response' to the crisis.

The project began in the initial emergency phase of the pandemic when there was a national lockdown[3]. At the time of writing, there are lockdowns again across the UK, and we recognise many people are continuing to adapt and curtail how they live to combat the virus. Alongside supporting the population now, we think it's important to plan for recovery. Ways of working emerging now can help shape future policy, projects and services.

We were fortunate enough to have several conversations with a range of people in diverse places. **Although there was a broad sweep of places, there were many shared feelings about the potential for change and for our future wellbeing.** In this report, we explore the themes and challenges that are shared across the UK. **We hope that this report will encourage policymakers and service planners to embed the humanness and the working together that shone through at the start of the pandemic.**

What we did

We refer to this work as a listening project, sitting between formal research and anecdotal evidence.

We used a convenience sample of people from across the UK that we had previously worked with. This provided a cross-section of people that were working on wellbeing projects and engaged in local area responses to the pandemic.

We spoke to these people multiple times, giving us a series of 80 conversations between April and September 2020. Conversations were recorded and analysed, and emerging findings discussed with the participants during two peer-to-peer conversations that took place online.

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1   Carnegie UK Trust (2020) *Covid and* Communities Available at: https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/project/covid-communities/ [Accessed October 2020]

2   VCSE is commonly known as the third sector in Scotland and as the voluntary and community sector (VCS) in Northern Ireland

3   We take this to have been from late March to July, with full lockdown ending on 4 July 2020, when in England the hospitality industry re-opened. See GoodtoKnow (2020) *How long have we been on lockdown in the UK and how long will rules stay in force?* Available at: https://www.goodtoknow.co.uk/wellbeing/health/how-long-lockdown-uk-rules-review-536981 [Accessed October 2020]

1.1 Background

The Carnegie UK Trust works to improve wellbeing across the UK and Ireland through policy, research and practice development.

This year, we have drawn on our research and practice development to provide ideas for policymakers as they make the difficult decisions during the COVID-19 emergency and recovery. In *Building Back for the Better,* we set out six propositions for putting wellbeing at the heart of

the recovery process[4]. These focused on what we have learnt from the disruption of the pandemic in terms of building economic, social, and democratic structures fit for the future.

One key change proposed is more focus, by funders and policymakers, on local areas, and local actors. In this listening project, we have

4   Davidson, S., Wallace, J. and White, D., *Building Back for the Better: A Perspective from* CUKT Dunfermline: Carnegie UK Trust 2020 Available at: https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/news/building-back-for-the-better-a-perspective-from-cukt/ [Accessed October 2020]

Figure 1 – Six Propositions for Building Back Better

6 Technology can be for all
13. Invest in digital inclusion.
14. Commit to digital services of the highest quality.
15. Regulate to tackle online harm.

1 National wellbeing can be the goal
1. Place national wellbeing at the centre of the medium-term recovery plan.
2. Host a full public conversation on national wellbeing.
3. Measure what matters now.
4. Make transparent decisions that balance wellbeing outcomes.

5 We can build a new level of financial resilience
12. Provide a new baseline of financial security for all citizens.

2 The relationship between citizens and the state can be reset
5. Set out an ambitious programme to transform government into an Enabling State.
6. Invest in the hyperlocal.

4 Our relationship with work can be remodelled
10. Make a focus on fair work a central plank of the recovery.
11. Tackle inequality in access to fair work.

3 The future can be local (as well as global)
7. Establish the principle of subsidiarity into law to revitalise local democracy.
8. Encourage holistic, place-based approaches like community wealth building.

An Enabling State

An Enabling State is one that supports people and communities to achieve positive change for themselves, and in doing so, ensures that no one is left behind[6].

Our Route Map – published in 2014 – set out eight principles for achieving an Enabling State, which included investing in disadvantaged communities, and giving people the rights, the permission and the tools to have more control over their surroundings and communities.

The Trust is particularly interested in practical changes, often required at a systems-level, that make it easier for communities to participate. In 2020, we revisited the original Route Map in light of the COVID-19 context. To support our call for *Building Back for the Better*, in *Revisiting the Route Map to an Enabling State: Guiding Principles for Recovery,* we highlighted the capacity of communities, and their central role to recovery. We identified barriers to communities fulfilling their capacity, such as a lack of opportunity and permission from the state to act, and the largely siloed nature of public services.

In our conversations with communities, we listened for where and when these barriers were taken down during the pandemic's first six months.

6   Carnegie UK Trust (2020) *Enabling State* Available at: https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/project/enabling-state/ [Accessed October 2020]

seen that local is where people can and want to contribute and have control.

Another proposition is recognising the power of collaboration between public services and citizens, and making changes in light of that. We heard about collaborations in community hubs. To explore this further, in September, we developed and published four case studies examining the community hubs that formed during the pandemic[5]. The hubs exhibit some of the

5   Coutts, P. et. al *Pooling Together: How community hubs have responded to the COVID-19 emergency* Dunfermline: Carnegie UK Trust 2020 Available at: https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/pooling-together-how-community-hubs-have-responded-to-the-COVID-19-emergency/ Accessed October 2020]

characteristics of an Enabling State, where public services capitalise on their expertise at the same time as supporting communities to act.

In this listening project, we have heard stories that corroborate our thoughts on what we need to build an Enabling State. In particular, examples of communities being supported to self-organise and being given the encouragement and permission to do so.
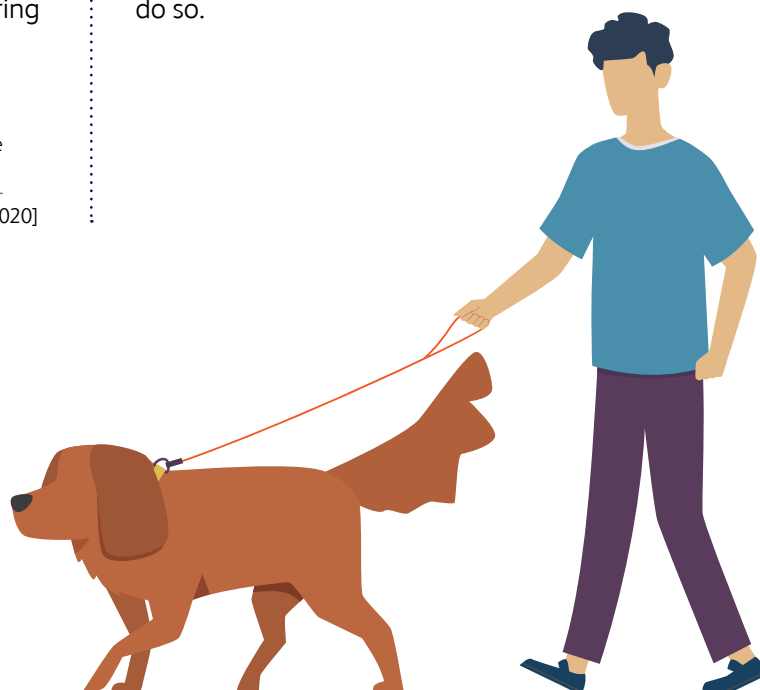
2. The project's approach

The *Covid and Communities* listening project ran from April to September 2020 and included a range of people from communities, VCSE, local government and public services. For a full list of participants see Appendix One.

Over six months, the Carnegie UK Trust team had over 80 conversations across the UK. From Northern Ireland; to the West of Scotland; South Wales; and a small part of London to northern towns and cities in England; we heard from a diverse range of communities. From areas with a population of over 200,000 people (Camden, Manchester and North Tyneside) to smaller towns and villages, some with less than 1,500 residents (Cushendall, Northern Ireland). We are not claiming to have reached all types of communities, or groups of people with protected characteristics, but the spread of areas is relatively rare in accounts of learning from the pandemic by UK policy and practice organisations.

A project team was established from across the Trust, including people who work on our towns, wellbeing, libraries and digital programmes. We brainstormed areas to contact, trying to reach a spread of sizes and geographies. Seven team members led on the conversations, keeping with the same area (and generally with people they already knew). Not all places had the time to participate and we narrowed down the group to 16 areas. In each area, we tried to speak to two or three people, from different sectors, and we went back to them three or four times, around every four to six weeks, depending on their availability.
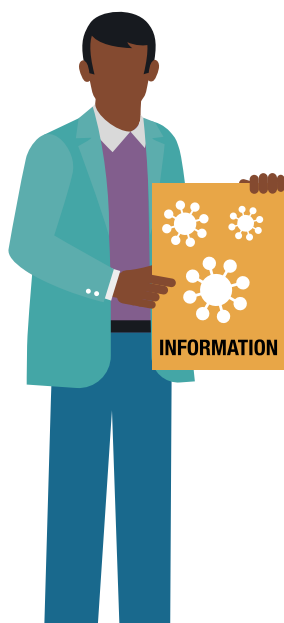
A discussion guide was agreed, and this was adapted for the last set of conversations to ask about the situation as lockdown eased. Preparing the guide, we recognised that the pandemic is a major threat to our public health, and there is an enormous health response, but we didn't think it was our expertise to ask and comment on that. So, we did not explore the spread of the virus or the resulting public health response.

The conversations were written up and themes were extracted from the notes. To bring together some of the learning from across the UK, we hosted two online discussion groups, for all the project participants. These discussion groups helped us to develop some of the key themes emerging from the conversations. People who took part also enjoyed hearing about the issues and successes in other areas, far from where they worked.

This report has been prepared by the team, and we have received comments from key participants in the project. It begins with a discussion of the personal impact of working for, with and alongside communities during the pandemic and reflects on taking part in the listening project. The body of the report focuses on how places and organisations responded in the emergency phase of the pandemic. To do this, firstly we reflect the needs that people saw around them: needs that evolved and changed throughout the summer (section three). There is a small part on place-based impacts (section four). Then we discuss what happened – the response (section five). The subsections of *The Response* represent the themes that emerged. Section six reports what participants thought about the future, in terms of what actions might be sustained and what threats there were to maintaining positive changes. Section 7 is the conclusion.

Table One: COVID-19 and Communities Project: Demographic profiles of participating places

Place	Jurisdiction	Resident population (2019)	Median Age*	Description
Broughshane	Northern Ireland	2,851	42.0	Village
London Borough of Camden	England	270,029	34.0	Borough in central London
Cushendall	Northern Ireland	1,280	40.0	Village
Dumfries (& Galloway)	Scotland	148,860	49.6	Local Authority
Fermanagh (situated in the Fermanagh and Omagh District)	Northern Ireland	109,281	36.0	Two counties
Isle of Lewis	Scotland	18,500	45.0**	Island in the Outer Hebrides
Kilmarnock	Scotland	46,350	54.6	Town
Lancaster	England	146,038	39.5	City of Lancaster District
Manchester	England	552,858	30.1	City
Merthyr Tydfil	Wales	60,326	40.4	Town
North Ayrshire	Scotland	134,740	46.7	Local Authority
North Tyneside	England	207,913	43.3	Local Authority
Renfrewshire	Scotland	179,100	42.9	Local Authority
Scarborough	England	108,800	50.1	Major Town
Todmorden	England	12,439	42.0	Town
Treorchy	Wales	7,783	40.0	Village

Note: The Office for National Statistics describes a Major Town or City has having a 'usual resident population or workday population (2011 Census) of 75,000 or more'.*** But towns can be smaller too: according to the Centre for Towns, including settlements with a population of 10,000 or more.****

*   Population estimates based on 2011 Census. See https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/ for more information.
**   Based on National Records of Scotland, *Scotland's Census 2011: Inhabited islands report* 2015 Available at: https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/documents/analytical_reports/Inhabited_islands_report.pdf [Accessed November 2020]
***   Office for National Statistics (2020) *Towns and Cities in the UK* Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/transparencyandgovernance/freedomofinformationfoi/townsandcitiesintheuk [Accessed November 2020]
****   The Centre for Towns (2020) *Our Towns* Available at: https://www.centrefortowns.org/our-towns [Accessed November 2020]

2.1 A reflective approach

When we began the project, there were high levels of anxiety, rapid change, uncertainty, financial insecurity, social isolation, and risk to mental health – and indeed many of these remain. Aware of the context in which these conversations would be undertaken, we set out to take a relational approach. We wanted to listen and create a reflective space, as well as learn from those we spoke to, many of whom were heavily involved in the immediate crisis response. We asked people to speak about their own recent (work related) experiences, and that of their organisation. Not all participants were employed by groups they talked about, for example, some were volunteers, local business people and members of the local Chamber of Commerce.

In designing this project when those involved were under significant pressures, we were conscious that the process should not be purely extractive. *Covid and Communities* was therefore framed as a series of conversations, rather than formal interviews. The intention was that the process would be beneficial to participants in and of itself. We anticipated that there might be value in regular opportunities for participants to pause and reflect on what they were noticing and learning.

Our conversations created space to focus on how people were, and in doing so elicited a number of reflections on the personal impact of working for, with and alongside communities during the pandemic. These reflections did not fit neatly into thematic analyses or policy recommendations; yet they did feel important to recognise. Ultimately, organisations are made up of people, and the extent to which they are able to support and enable communities will be hugely affected by how happy or anxious, tired or energised its people feel.

In the immediate response, there was a surge of energy, as people adapted at pace to the needs of communities, deriving a genuine sense of fulfilment in being able to support people and communities. By the summer, we began to notice a tiredness: that the intensity of being 'in response mode' for several months, coping with an unprecedented situation, new ways of working, staff absences – as well as pressures on personal lives – was beginning to take a toll. And although many organisations now have streamlined systems in place to manage a second wave, and many individuals have managed to take a holiday to re-energise, there should still be concerns about the capacity and wellbeing of those at the forefront of local government and community responses.

Allied to this, a growing sense of 'change fatigue' was present in the way that people spoke about dealing with constant flux and uncertainty. People reflected on the burden of responsibility in interpreting guidance, adhering to rules and managing the risk of infection – which often felt in tension with very real concerns for the people they worked with and their desire to empower volunteers and communities. For many, there was also an existential worry about funding and the viability of operating models: many organisations lost revenue, some anticipated future cuts and closures, and others were concerned about the potential impact of losing community spaces.

The combined effect of workload intensity and constant change and anxiety was that people didn't have the time to think about the future. In this context, the opportunity to pause and reflect through their conversations with us was commented on by a number of participants as something that they valued, both from the perspective of recognising what had been achieved, as well as a space to share challenges and fears.

Alongside the report's learning about the response of organisations and communities, it is important to recognise that these are made up of individuals, and that we are talking about people who have been operating under unprecedented pressure for months – and are still doing so. We have heard examples of teams creating daily opportunities to 'check in' with each other. However, our intuition from holding these conversations is that there are not enough spaces to reflect for people working in local government and community organisations; and that these may have an important role to play in supporting the workforce through the second wave.

This is not always easy, as we know that it becomes harder to create space for conversations when teams are under increasing pressure. But our learning from this project is that this is when reflective conversations are valued the most.

3. The needs

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a classification of what is required for human development, divided into three levels, basic needs (like food, water, warmth), psychological needs (like relationships, belonging) and self-fulfilment needs[7]. Originally, he proposed that basic needs (or universal needs), the basis of the pyramid, had to be achieved before accessing the upper levels, but this has been critiqued over time and now it is generally agreed the three layers are overlapping.

Throughout the pandemic, all these 'needs' have been highlighted. At the start of the crisis, people were worried about access to basic needs. Access to basic needs like food, rather than just their availability, was important. As the Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen explains, people can face food security and famine when food is available, because of lack of access[8] and he proposes that a 'a pre-eminent' freedom is to access a sufficient, nourishing food[9]. This 'capability' as Sen describes it, came to the fore during the start of the pandemic.

3.1 Food needs

At the start of the lockdown, the UK and jurisdictional governments wrote to people considered to be clinically vulnerable to COVID-19 infection and advised them to stay at home for 12 weeks, in a process known as shielding. Recognising the impact of that on accessing basic needs such as food, the UK Government set up a national, door to door food delivery scheme, which people who were shielding could opt into. This was implemented by local authorities and partners in the VCSE and community sectors.

Even prior to this starting, many were concerned

that a variety of people were going to struggle to go out to buy and collect basic supplies. This led to a flourishing of local support, informal and through councils and established voluntary and community organisations that redirected their services. Many people talked about the speed and effectiveness of the community response to food needs, for example, in the Western Isles it was reported *'the community response has been extraordinary'*. In Dumfries and Galloway, existing groups in areas highlighted as vulnerable to health and other risks were:

> *'fantastic, for example, making food, organising food collection and distribution and collecting prescriptions for people who can't go out'.*

The initial local response to the pandemic supported people to access food, but how this happened varied from place to place. Councils and partners created new teams to distribute food, including hot meals, food banks were extended, and new volunteer-run food and distribution centres were established. In some areas, councils relocated existing foodbanks to larger premises, like leisure centres, and bought a lot of food to deliver to surrounding areas. In many cases, the food hubs provided more than food, for example, in Todmorden, food hubs, open seven days a week, offered food, clothing, books and toys to anyone.

Camden Council delivered food parcels directly to people on the government shielding list, a group that grew through April as the council received more names. Age UK Camden food parcels covered a wider group of people who couldn't go out, for example, from GPs, and people who had gone to a daycare centre for a hot meal previously. As in most cases, the service was personal, with library staff sometimes sending library books with the food.

7   Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review, 50*(4), 370–396. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346

8   Sen A., *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation.* Oxford: Clarendon Press 1981 Available at: https://scholar.harvard.edu/sen/publications/poverty-and-famines-essay-entitlement-and-deprivation [Accessed October 2020]

9   Drèze, J. and Sen, A *Hunger and public action* Oxford: Oxford University Press 1991

Some of the areas we talked to mentioned that relatively few people on their shielding list needed support with food. In some (especially in more remote) areas, this was connected to communities having built up a resilience and self-reliance from previous crises, such as flooding and foot and mouth disease. On the other hand, the issue of inaccessibility and hidden rural poverty was mentioned too. For example, one participant talked about a village in England with poor transport links and more deprivation than surrounding areas. The community needed food aid but couldn't reach the donations in a nearby town until a local activist linked people together and secured the use of a school bus and permission for volunteers to drive it.

Across the UK, the new services set up for the emergency encountered people who had longer-term needs. For example, families where children couldn't have a hot meal at home, or people who pre-COVID-19 had found it difficult to go out to collect prescriptions or to the shop.

Food hubs largely came to an end in July 2020, with the end of the shielding advice, but many areas have continued to provide food assistance in different ways over the summer. For example, in Merthyr Tydfil, housing associations, which already supported food banks, have set up food fridges where anyone can take food. Food co-ops that provide weekly hot meals to rural communities have started, on the basis of paying £5 to receive a meal worth £15. The project had seed funding from a European Union rural development grant, and food is accessed through FareShare[10]. In North Ayrshire, the Three Towns locality partnership also began a co-operative scheme (utilising Scottish Government emergency funding), where people join for £2.50, pay £2.50, weekly and then can select £15 worth of food of their choice. There, and in other places, community centres and groups that received emergency funding to deliver food during lockdown have sustained their meal services through charging small fees.

In many of the conversations, people said their organisations recognised that food aid must be provided 'with dignity'. This has led to a variety of food assistance, like food pantries and hot meals, and it reflects the knowledge that people need more than basic needs, more than food. This desire to support people's emotional wellbeing, to provide opportunities to continue education, receive money advice and employability support for example, was behind the inclusion of 'extras' with food delivery like books and toys, and the establishment of community hubs, which are discussed in section 5.3.[11]

Although at the start of the pandemic, the emergency response was targeted at people who found it hard to access food and medicine, over time the emergency responders increasingly have been focusing on social needs, supporting people living in poverty and facing financial hardship.

3.2 Health and mental health needs

Over the period of the conversations, service providers noted a change in recipients of support from those shielding, to people with disabilities, and those with more complex and longer-term needs, including living with ill health. People have been identified who previously weren't being supported by services in the third or public sectors.

People we talked to were concerned about individuals, who were 'going under the radar'. That included those described as being in the 'recovery community'.[12] For many of those people, meeting with others was important, for example in an Alcohol Anonymous group, or with a key worker. Those meetings stopped with the lockdown. In some conversations, people talked about lack of access to social workers, or situations where social and support workers tried to contact people but

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10   FareShare is a charity that distributes surplus and donated food from the food industry to community organisations across the UK, including homeless shelters, school breakfast clubs and community centres. During the pandemic, UK governments have provided FareShare with additional funding to purchase and distribute additional food to organisations responding to food insecurity.

11   Coutts, P. et. al *Pooling Together: How community hubs have responded to the COVID-19 emergency* Dunfermline: Carnegie UK Trust 2020 Available at: https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/pooling-together-how-community-hubs-have-responded-to-the-COVID-19-emergency/ Accessed October 2020]

12   In separate conversations, this term seemed to include both people living with longer term mental health issues and people who had or have addictions.

found they had 'closed their doors' to visitors, probably because of fear of the virus. Organisations and individuals were concerned about people who had made themselves even more isolated than the virus necessarily demanded, 'effectively isolating by choice'. These were sometimes identified as people receiving social work support or living with a mental health condition such as anxiety, which made it difficult for them to go out.

As support groups couldn't meet in person anymore, they evolved and contacted more people by phone. Often people talked about how vital phone calls were for being in touch with individuals who might otherwise be isolated and lonely. As the emergency went on, services were increasingly in touch with people who at first may have been reticent, but later 'opened up' so much they 'could hardly get them off the phone'.

At the same time access to indoor social spaces like libraries, cafes, and bars was curtailed, so the person who used 'to sit in Greggs and chat to folk' no longer had that option.

The Mid Morning 'Club'

Treorchy in the Welsh Valleys is a town that used to have a pub or social club on every street corner. Now The Lion is one of a few remaining, but it plays an important role in the community. In our conversations, the owner talked about how the necessary closure of the pub might remove support for people facing loneliness and isolation: particularly those known as the 11-12 club. They were a group of men, who initially came to the pub individually at about that time in the morning. Then they became friends and came on an almost daily basis to sit and chat across the tables. With lockdown they couldn't go. Many live alone, and the lack of access to a public space to talk was a serious blow to their social life. The owner said,

'The pub plays a huge role in tackling loneliness and mental health issues, providing a support network. We keep an eye on them (our customers)'.

Many people we spoke to were worried about loneliness and the impact of that on individuals' mental health, including: people with existing health conditions and disabilities; young people who were at home, concerned about school, their exams and missing their friends; older people who had little social contact and now couldn't even attend health appointments; and men who used to socialise at football games.

The stress and anxiety caused by the virus had a negative impact on how people felt, and by May, interviewees talked about how they and others had 'had enough' of isolation. Someone gave the example of a young professional who had moved to their area to work just before lockdown, was separated from his family, and 'was starting to struggle' after eight weeks. As the emergency progressed, people were increasingly worried about income, which had a negative impact on the population's mental health. Changes in people's working patterns were also reported to have an impact on mental health: people working at home had less social contact, whilst those who had been furloughed, and were then returning to work also felt negatively about that. The recent report from the Trust *Good Work for Wellbeing in the Coronavirus Economy* highlights deteriorations in mental health for many workers during the pandemic and the need for employers to prioritise employees' physical and mental health at this time.[13]

13   For more information on the impact of the pandemic on work, good work, and working lives please see Irvine, G., *Good Work for Wellbeing in the Coronavirus Economy* Dunfermline: Carnegie UK Trust 2020 Available at: https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/good-work-for-wellbeing-in-the-coronavirus-economy/ [Accessed November 2020]

3.3 Digital exclusion

Overall, people spoke about the increasing importance of being digitally connected. Several participants mentioned how they themselves had learnt a lot about working online. Others reflected that staff teams had exchanged knowledge and augmented each other's skills so they could offer online services[14]. For example, one third sector umbrella group was increasingly learning and training in digital skills, and another had improved its volunteer database.

The default to digital helped people, for example in rural areas, to communicate more quickly and easily over larger geographical areas. A librarian in the Western Isles said that it has helped her to feel 'more connected'. In Cushendall, Northern Ireland, the Nine Glens website[15] has been a focal point for local people. The participant we talked to said:

> *'The traditional starting point of a few people meeting in the pub to discuss working together is no longer an option. Collaboration has been around the Nine Glens website, for example, the local photography club is running a competition on young people's experience of lockdown.'*

However, as dependence on digital has escalated, so has the digital divide. Participants talked both about the lack of access to devices and lack of infrastructure. People were concerned about the impact of not having digital access on the educational chances of children: a Camden participant said that recent local research showed 65% of children had no access to a device at home or in primary school. Lack of access also prevented people from gaining support, for example, from mental health services and charities, and from claiming benefits such as Universal Credit.

Libraries, and others we spoke to (like City of Sanctuary) had been delivering devices. Library staff organised the distribution of tablets to older people so that they might contact their loved ones, but

recognised some people couldn't use digital devices, and perhaps '*don't know how to turn on the device*'. So, they offered over-the-phone skills support to ensure that customers could use their new devices. Other groups across the country offered similar inputs to help people access the internet and connect to platforms where support was now on offer. In a time when digital access has been vital to the economy and society, the phone has also been vital, providing an important stepping stone to online access, or even just an alternative to digital communications.

Public libraries during lockdown

Whilst the doors of library buildings were closed to the public during lockdown, staff across the UK provided digital as well as physical services in order to offer as full a service to their community as possible, within the restricted context[16]. Many public library services adapted activities and events to digital formats, such as Rhyme Times and craft sessions. Some services also conducted welfare or wellbeing calls to library members over 70 and provided support with digital skills. All public libraries provided access to reading materials – books, audio books, magazines, newspapers – through a greatly enhanced e-offer, or the delivery of physical books and audio books to people's homes.

In North Ayrshire, five library buildings were set up as health and wellbeing hubs for care home staff and care-at-home staff. These hubs provided a space where staff could take time out to recharge their batteries, talk to colleagues and line managers about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on themselves and their service users and access support information on a range of health and wellbeing topics. There were also new relationships formed between library staff and carers using the libraries.

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14   Note, building on this is one of the 12 recommendations in Bowyer, G. et al *Learning from Lockdown: 12 Steps to Eliminate Digital Exclusion* Dunfermline: Carnegie UK Trust 2020 Available at: https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/learning-from-lockdown-12-steps-to-eliminate-digital-exclusion/ [Accessed November 2020]

15   *The Nine Glens* (2020) Available at: https://www.thenineglens.com/ [Accessed October 2020]

16   This was a finding from Making a Difference report, which was reflected in our conversations. Peachey, J., *Making a Difference: Libraries, Lockdown and Looking Ahead* Dunfermline: Carnegie UK Trust 2020 Available at: https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/project/future-of-public-libraries/ [Accessed Oct 2020]

3.4 People particularly affected by the crisis

Agencies providing food aid had new people coming to food banks after the first few weeks of lockdown: people in insecure employment, on low wages, in low skilled self-employment, working for 'cash in hand', or who have little or no savings.

In one conversation, a member of the VCSE in a rural area with pockets of deprivation said:

> *'people who used to donate to food banks now use their services. They have no good quality jobs and the community has low resilience.'*

In another conversation, in London, a charity that operates a similar model to foodbanks but provides clothes, toys, and equipment to children under five, experienced a large increase in people needing basic supplies, such as nappies and baby formula.

Conversations in Camden and Manchester reflected how the pandemic might particularly affect people working in the shadow economy. For example, refugee or asylum seekers without residency, who are often unwilling to give their address to any organisation and therefore aren't eligible for government and non-government help and support.

It wasn't just cities, but towns too recognised that refugees and migrants are overly represented in the low paid, insecure workforce. For example, in Scarborough there is a significant Eastern European community. The council recognised that prior to the pandemic community members and the council didn't communicate frequently. This became a more pressing concern during the emergency as council staff realised a combination of fear, language barriers, and a lack of trusted intermediaries might inhibit the community accessing available support.

People also expressed concerns about the economic impact on young people. Zero-hour contracts are higher among young people than other age groups, and people expressed the concern that they:

> *'risk falling between the cracks of government support'.*

The stress of the emergency compounded by isolation from society and services, led a few of the participants to reflect on the need for safety for certain groups, such as the homeless population and young people who didn't feel safe at home. For example, when schools were closed it was difficult for agencies to contact children and young people to find out how they were, and to provide them with options for support and care. Some participants talked about possible increases in domestic violence, and one person mentioned that a new helpline was set up by a regional children's charity to deal with the rise in incidents of domestic violence at home during lockdown[17.]

17   In June NSPCC reported that calls to their domestic abuse hotline had increased 32% from an average of around 140 contacts a week in 6 January to 22 March, to an average of around 185 contacts a week since the government's stay at home guidance was issued.

4   The impact on places

One effect of the pandemic is that people have been living closer to home. People's pride in their local areas went up, which some areas evidenced by an absence of litter on local walks, and organised local litter picking[18]. One community development worker said:

> Q   *'People had revisited the town that they live in, and they've found it's actually gorgeous.'*

Communities across the UK took actions to keep their places tidy, often stepping in for council departments that had been diverted to providing emergency support, and because staff were off work because they were shielding. East Ayrshire Council successfully 'put a call out to communities' to help in local areas with tasks, like grass cutting and planting bedding plants. In Todmorden, the In Bloom group gave out sunflower seeds for people to plant so they'd be flowering at the end of lockdown[19].

In smaller towns, when people went out to exercise during the national lockdown some went to the town centre, especially if it was open and pedestrianised. In other places – perhaps larger towns, which relied on people coming to work or shop – there were empty town centres when the containment measures were introduced. The necessity to ban mass gatherings has damaged larger towns too, because they can't hold their usual outdoor events and festivals that show off the town and bring residents together.

Organisations that saw themselves as community hubs, such as libraries or social enterprises like The Stove in Dumfries, found it difficult when the physical connection to their place was cut off in lockdown. They adopted many ways of reaching out to people, but the lack of presence in towns and neighbourhoods caused professionals to feel isolated from their communities. Many of these local assets, sometimes referred to as the social infrastructure, closed for at least the first few months of the pandemic. The shutdown means places like arts venues and community centres owned by residents, as well as some churches and social enterprises, are facing an insecure future because they previously relied on income from classes and group activities.

The closure and reduced hours of business, which continues at the time of writing, has been well publicised, and our conversations corroborated that this will have a long-term impact on places. Stakeholders are worried about the economic effect, the damage to social infrastructure, and resultant risk to community wellbeing, as the number and types of places to meet and socialise contract. This is highlighted by the feeling that it is the hospitality industry which will be the hardest hit in towns and neighbourhoods across the UK.

Although our conversations didn't focus on the future of towns, a few people did talk about the need to re-imagine towns, but they hadn't picked up a real desire from the population or politicians to radically rethink them. However, there were examples of areas that were making changes, particularly through responding to the quieter centres. For example encouraging businesses, in the summer, to use green and outdoor spaces, through local authority grant giving; changing regulations to allow businesses to have marques erected for longer than before; and altering streetscapes to promote walking and cycling.

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18   This contrasts with the spike in litter seen across the UK seen after the end of lockdown, often reported on in June. Ro, C. (2020) *Why litter is surging as lockdown eases* BBC Available at: https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200610-why-are-parks-full-of-litter-as-lockdown-eases [Accessed November 2020]

19   There is a further example below in the story 'bedding in community and local authority partnership'.

5 Responses

5.1 Hyperlocal responses

Near the start of the crisis there was a rise in community spirit. Research by the international organisation *More in Common* found that a sense of community has grown in Britain this year. In June, two in three people said it is important to live in an area with a strong sense of community, and more than before reported they can change things around them[20].

When lockdown was announced, and in some cases before, people came together to respond to the challenges, and overcome some of the separation required by the containment measures. This was not the 'volunteering' (whether the NHS or local organisation) discussed in section 5.3, but doing shopping, taking meals, picking up prescriptions for neighbours and family members.[21] These responses became known as mutual aid – using language that reduced the sense of charity and reinforced the sense of solidarity amongst neighbours.

Pulling together was spontaneous with neighbours, whether living in high-rise flats or small villages, checking on each other and offering support. People drew and displayed rainbows and came out to clap for the NHS. This was not only a support for public health workers, but a coming together of communities. One public sector worker illustrated the community coming together, with the example of a large number of people joining a local florist in tying a blue ribbon to their front doors to give a sense of unity, and to signify support to the local NHS.

Much of what we heard in our earlier conversations was summed up by a third sector employee who said:

'The impact of the pandemic has been more compassion, kindness and empathy in the community'.

Kindness became a more common narrative in many places. But whereas before people recognised that it had been 'random acts of kindness' – donating money to charity, or to food banks – during COVID-19 it suddenly became more organised responding to needs at a neighbourhood and even street level through local social media groups[22]. In one urban area with 19 wards, 15 of them rapidly established mutual aid groups. This happened in rural areas too. For example, a community development trust in the Western Isles set up groups on WhatsApp in every small village on their estate for residents to share information, offer help and act as support networks.

This moving of kindness into the organisational sphere echoes the Trust's work on kindness in public policy, in which we argue that public service delivery should have both a relational lexicon (which builds understanding, empathy and kindness) as well as the more developed rational lexicon (that talks about risk and accountability, targets and value for money).

A few people proposed that the hyperlocal responses played out in various ways, with the informal, 'neighbourly' help and support more common in disadvantaged communities versus more organised volunteering likely to happen in the better-off areas. What was common was that the hyperlocal responses were effective in many ways. They were rapid, with many people setting up support groups prior to the announcement of the national lockdown, or the release of the lists of people asked to shield. They inspired creativity and brought people into community action who had not been involved before, and it appears they had a unifying effect too. For example, people we talked to in Northern Ireland noted that communities came together despite religious and political differences.

20 The figures are from a large-scale national study conducted over 18 months up to mid-2020. Torres- Juan M, Dixon T. and Kimaram A., *Britain's Choice: Common Ground and Division in 2020 Britain* Available at: https://www.britainschoice.uk/media/1qgllnup/moreincommon_britainschoice_exsum.pdf [Accessed November 2020]

21 This corresponds with a May YouGov survey for the Scottish Government which found many more had phoned/Skyped and/or done shopping for a neighbour, friend or family member, than had signed up to formal volunteering activities. Scottish Government *Public Attitudes to Coronavirus: May Summary* 2020 Available at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/public-attitudes-coronavirus-summary/ [Accessed November 2020]

22 To learn more about the development of kindness in one local authority see Thurman, B., *North Ayrshire: a case study on kindness* Dunfermline: Carnegie UK Trust *2020* Available at: https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/north-ayrshire-a-case-study-on-kindness/ [Accessed October 2020]

Artists in the Community

Arts organisations and artists across the UK provide stimulation and connection to many people through numerous creative activities. Many, as individuals and organisations, have shone in the pandemic, particularly through providing social activities that reduce isolation. Charities reflected on the value of working alongside arts organisations because of the way in which the creation of music, art or poetry promotes positive mental health and wellbeing and provides opportunities for different modes of expression and fun. Throughout the UK, local artists have supported communities, with everything from online music and stories to outdoor exhibitions, and creative challenges.

In the small village of Moniaive in Dumfries and Galloway, as elsewhere, school children made Easter cards and delivered them to the neighbours. The pub and local shop found out what people needed and supported them, and now have set up a pub desk offer for people fed up working from home. In the first few months of the pandemic, a well-known comic book writer supported residents to chronicle the actions and the thoughts of the village in their own comic book – *Moniaive Fights Back*[23].

Twenty miles down the road, The Stove Network an 'arts and community' organisation based in Dumfries accessed grant funding for Atlas Pandemica, a larger project to record and learn from all that has happened locally in the pandemic. They also instigated many activities through Homegrown[24] to help people to stay connected and tackle boredom, such as envelopes with messages in shop windows, photography and exchanging postal collages.

23 BBC News (2020) '*Coronavirus: Comic book writer chronicles village's virus 'fightback*' Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-south-scotland-52707072 [Accessed October 2020]
24 The Stove Network (2020) https://thestove.org/homegrown/ [Accessed October 2020]

What is less clear is how long and to what extent this flowering of community spirit will last. In our later conversations, some people said they were hearing less about neighbourhood acts of kindness. After the end of the first national lockdown, there have been differing local lockdowns across the UK, and a greater awareness that the impact of COVID-19 is not equally shared across the country and between communities. People we spoke to, from June to August, talked about increasing frustration, for example, by businesses looking for clarity on restrictions and opening, and worry for the future, which may impact on community cohesion. Tensions heightened when travel restrictions were lifted in the summer and areas near beaches and rural beauty spots saw an increase in tourists. There, people had conflicting feelings and responses, with some wanting visitors to support the local economy, and others more concerned about the spread of infection.

Individual and organisational kindness as well as hyperlocal responses to the pandemic may have a more permanent legacy through the future actions of small local groups, VCSEs and the public sector that sustain them.

5.2 Local authority responses

At the start of the emergency, councils across the country reconfigured their services. Resources were put into large scale emergency responses. For example, in Renfrewshire the council created what was described as a 'super service', staffed by people drafted in from other roles, to help with the humanitarian effort. Many other areas similarly prioritised and moved staff: authorities like Lancaster and Morecambe District Council focused on specific areas – waste disposal, businesses, and support to vulnerable people. Council staff became involved in delivering food, making phone calls, and staffing call centres. Manchester City Council, like many others, set up a crisis hotline staffed by employees who faced barriers to working in the people-facing services. People called with all sorts of requests – for example, people experiencing poverty who needed nappies and baby food and didn't know where to go – that were dealt with directly by council staff or forwarded to other

agencies. Overall, the service redesign meant that citizens could be referred across services, for example, within community hubs. A staff member who heard about someone's wider needs was in a position to provide or find the right support, in a way that may not have been possible previously: for example listening to people on the phone for an hour, or helping with shopping.

The openness of councils, with citizens able to call up with any sort of request was a new experience. In many cases, councils got to know their population better, reaching out to more people on a one-to-one basis and understanding their needs and challenges. As councils became closer to communities, this changed people's perception of them. One council officer said that previously they'd been viewed as only '*administrators*', organising activities like collecting the bins, but now people were increasingly seeing council staff as people and the organisation as responsive.

In some cases, councils started formal consultations: setting up online processes to find out what people wanted now and in the future. The online nature of engagement meant that different people, as opposed to the usual suspects, came along and shared ideas.

The areas that already had community development staff, such as the ward officers in Dumfries and Galloway, benefited from having a local first point of contact for communities, that helped quickly understand how communities were faring. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, where Community Planning has been devolved and local partnerships created, these helped to set up local responses such as community hubs.

After the initial emergency phase, some areas reconfigured again with staff being allocated to track and trace systems, strategic and business recovery.

We heard that many council staff felt fulfilled by working at the frontline, with communities and the third sector. Several managers mentioned that staff who had been redeployed flourished, and they had noticed people's talents and skills not seen before. Within organisations people linked up within dispersed departments, such as libraries, and across departments, which increased feelings of being one organisation or one service. Reportedly, one council leader had said to a partner that he had *'never been happier'* at work because departments were working together, and the organisation was one.

The pandemic risked people's lives and required a rapid response, so institutions put on hold many of their scrutiny and monitoring procedures. The risk of the pandemic seemed so great and so universal that other risks paled. The public sector became more fluid, relaxing rules on procurement and putting on hold individuals' and departments' targets.

Soup and a sandwich

In early lockdown the Three Towns Community Hub, in North Ayrshire, received a call to the helpline from a person who was shielding, asking for a prescription pick-up. Although this was a routine request, the member of staff who received the call thought they sounded 'maybe not right', and so asked their colleague to drop the prescription off in person just to check. They found the person in some distress: he hadn't seen anyone in weeks, thought he'd been forgotten about, and his mental health had suffered as a result.

The hub model meant the council staff member had easy access to a range of support, and was able to go straight away to a community organisation who had been providing soup-and-a-sandwich lunches for those who were shielding. From the next day, the man who'd asked for medicine drop-off began receiving a daily hot lunch. When people came to give the lunch they didn't just stick to food delivery, but more importantly for someone who was socially isolated, they stopped for a chat.

For council staff, this story exemplified how the crisis unlocked a new approach: one in which staff were empowered to be more responsive and intuitive; and one based on working flexibly with local partners to address individuals' needs.

5.3 Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector

In the emergency, civil society organisations came into their own. This was both in terms of their functions such as the co-ordination of third sector interfaces in Scotland, and the county voluntary councils in Wales, and in terms of 'close to the ground', local knowledge[25]. As one VCSE employee in England said:

> 'The crisis has shown what the sector is there for – to serve the community.'

The VCSE mobilised more quickly than the public sector, because, as both public sector and voluntary sector participants said, the voluntary sector, sports clubs and churches, were:

> 'more fleet of foot than the council.'

The pandemic brought a swell in volunteering[26]. People signed up to the national volunteering databases and also joined the work of local existing, or new, organisations, churches, and faith groups. Our conversations revealed some good examples of how volunteers were coordinated and supported. In Renfrewshire, the list of volunteers in that area from the national database was handed to the local third sector interface that already had staff and structures to support volunteers. They contacted volunteers to ask them about what they'd like to do in the emergency and in the future and added those who were willing to their longer-term pool of volunteers. The third sector interface placed volunteers in community hubs responding to acute needs and supported them and the other team members, who were from the local council.

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25 In Scotland, third sector interfaces (TSIs) offer a point of access for support and advice for the third sector within local areas. For more information, see Scottish Government (2020) *Third Sector Interfaces* Available at: https://www.gov.scot/policies/third-sector/third-sector-interfaces/ [Accessed August 2020]

26 Research in May by Legal and General and Cebr found 20% of adults surveyed had volunteered with a local group in lockdown. Legal and General (2020) *10 million Brits volunteering as the nation unites in the Isolation Economy, says Legal & General* Available at: https://www.legalandgeneralgroup.com/media-centre/press-releases/10-million-brits-volunteering-as-the-nation-unites-in-the-isolation-economy-says-legal-general/ [Accessed Oct 2020]

The VCSE sector in Fermanagh

The VCSE sector in Fermanagh has a strong community, voluntary and social enterprise sector, and the highest levels of volunteering in Northern Ireland[27]. Fermanagh Community Transport provides accessible, affordable, and efficient community transport to those who would otherwise be socially or rurally isolated. During the emergency, their services were redeployed to being at the forefront of the logistics, transport, and delivery of goods such as food boxes and prescriptions to those in need. At the height of the pandemic, the charity delivered over 8,000 food parcels.

The Fermanagh Trust reoriented its staff to develop a new befriending service, Connect Fermanagh, to support those who were vulnerable or isolated, and to establish friendships between residents during the emergency. Operating seven days a week, the service is flexible, adaptable to emerging needs, and designed to improve the emotional wellbeing of those in the community. Fermanagh Rural Community Network continued to support the small local groups delivering services to the vulnerable in their community, with essentials such as funding applications, Access NI checks, and advice regarding working together to support a hyper-local response to the pandemic in remote rural areas.

The pandemic resulted in ARC Healthy Living Centre providing different support too, and to different clients and users during its peak. There was an increase in demand for support for alcohol addiction, and to new client groups, such as families in which one or both of the parents had become unemployed. The absence of systems and processes which are in place in the public sector was credited with allowing the VCSE sector to be adaptable, and for organisations to refocus their services to meet the community's immediate needs during the emergency.

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27 Building Change Trust, (2018). *Trends in Volunteering: Volunteer Now.* https://www.volunteernow.co.uk/app/uploads/2019/10/Trends-in-Volunteering-exec-summary-Final.pdf [Accessed October 2020]

In some areas, so many people volunteered that the biggest challenge was to find opportunities for them all. But generally, the upsurge in volunteering was a boost to the VCSE as it brought new people into volunteering and noticeably younger volunteers[28].

The increase was not only related to the all-encompassing nature of the crisis, but also due to practical factors: people on furlough and working at home had more time to volunteer. After people began to return to work in the summer, there seemed to be a drop in volunteering but not for every organisation.[29]

Voluntary organisations delivered (and are still delivering) a large range of support to people during the pandemic. They were flexible, and supplied a list of support such as collecting and providing toys, books, crafts, puzzles, cakes, relaxation packs to support mental health, garden equipment, seed and tutorials, dog walking, and even, in Lewis, delivering farm supplies.

As the crisis continued, many adapted from food provision to supporting people's mental health, especially with befriending services. There were befriending services set up from the Outer Hebrides to Scarborough to Fermanagh to London. Although often these brought people together online, there were also plenty of offline activities. For example, the Galson Trust organised health walks, many agencies began gardening activities, and in Todmorden, an outdoor art exhibition was set up along the canal towpath to spark conversations between people in the town.

The VCSE was supported to act effectively because in the crisis it was funded rapidly and appropriately. Several people talked about how useful small amounts of emergency funds were, for example providing funding to hyperlocal organisations that previously had been informal with no budget.

Also, we heard that funding didn't fit all organisations, for example, one organisation mentioned grant funding that was only for volunteers, but they needed to pay their staff.

Connections in a crofting community

The Galson Estate Trust is a community owned estate in North West Lewis, the Western Isles, made up of 22 villages with a population of around 1900. It is an active crofting community, with over 600 crofts on the estate. During the lockdown from March 2020 onwards, members of the community were not able to travel to get supplies for livestock. The Estate were able to organise a van from a car hire company to arrange for supplies of animal feed, medicine and other necessary items that could be delivered from Stornoway to the Estate. People phoned the Estate to place an order which was then delivered, maintaining access to items at a key time in the crofting calendar.

The Estate also worked with the doctors' surgeries in the local area to help with prescription deliveries during lockdown, with volunteers who were risk assessed and monitored. At first deliveries took several hours, partly due to the geography but also due to the fact that many houses on the Estate are not numbered. Over time volunteers were able to reduce delivery times, and the Estate Trust have now received funding to invest in a house numbering system which will benefit the community moving forward.

Frequently, funding was limited to a geography, which left some outside of its scope. The COVID-19 Charities Fund[30] from the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland required charities to have lost income due to the impact of the crisis and to be unable to cover unavoidable costs until 30 September 2020, which worked against organisations that had tried hard to save and budget for the medium term.

Existing local coordination bodies supported the distribution of funds for central governments, whereas in other areas, like Scarborough, new voluntary sector partnership organisations (a Community Support Organisation) were developed.

28   This was reported in our conversations and seems to reflect a national and medium-term trend. See Third Sector (2020) *Volunteers are getting younger-and it's not just because of COVID -19* Available at: https://www.thirdsector.co.uk/volunteers-getting-younger-%E2%80%93%C2%A0and-its-not-just-COVID-19/volunteering/article/1691205 [Accessed November 2020]

29   *Volunteer Now* (2018) *Trends in Volunteering* Available at: https://www.volunteernow.co.uk/app/uploads/2019/10/Trends-in-Volunteering-exec-summary-Final.pdf [Accessed October 2020]

30   Department for Communities (2020) *COVID-19 Charities Fund* Available at: https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/covid-19-charities-fund [Accessed October 2020]

5.4 Partnership

The shared crisis has brought together teams and organisations (as decribed in section 5.2).

As one local authority Director said:

Q   *'partnership working has really taken off'.*

As our recent *Pooling Together* report outlined, people have been having lots of conversations and getting to know each other. Separately, another participant described her council as, '*having a moment'*, in terms of learning, listening, and developing partnerships.

In the VCSE sector, organisations that may have been competing for funding have worked more effectively together. For example, in one district, the leaders' group of 27 CEOs from different charities were in regular contact at the start of the crisis offering each other help, and a member of the group said:

Q   *'The group has been even stronger during the crisis than it was before'.*

A significant finding was the strengthening of relationships between the VCSE sector and local authorities. Virtually all people we talked to had experienced growing local partnerships. One community arts organisation described how traditionally the local authority found it hard to let go and for communities to take more control:

Q   *'when something happens, you can't really push it without the local authority trying to either take it over or make it something different' -*

but that changed at the start of the pandemic, when the VCSE sector was able to act rapidly in a way that the council could not.

Camden Giving

Q   *'As an organisation, partnership working is part of our DNA.'*

Camden Giving's mission is to end local poverty and inequality in Camden. Using a participatory grantmaking model, they believe that resident decision-making and volunteering is essential for creating a more equal community. The Borough of Camden has a lot of wealth concentrated within it; many multi-national corporations such as Google are based there. However, there's also a high level of poverty. Recent data found that 43% of children who live there are currently living in poverty.

COVID-19 has increased interest in a participatory grantmaking model, particularly from larger funders. Often, Camden Giving are asked where the evidence is that this model works, even in emergency situations. During the COVID-19 response, they were able to convene an emergency panel with less than 24 hours' notice. These panel members had diverse experience and were able to closely relate to those most impacted, both demonstrating the strength of this way of working, and the importance of the process, beyond just developing projects and services.

People thought the improved organisational relationships (like more internal joint working) was happening because of the need to respond to a shared cause. This pushed aside more competitive relationships, as one person said it stimulated:

Q   *'dropping your own personal/ organisational ego; not about a competition….'*

A good example of formal partnership working is the community hubs, which were established at the start of the pandemic to meet emergency needs.

Many local authorities set up a system of

community hubs that covered 'localities'[31], neighbourhoods, towns or cities, like Lancaster[32]. In many cases, they were run by local authority staff with strong connections to the community, for example, locality or ward officers, but sometimes they were funded by the public sector but run exclusively by VCSEs.

The purpose of hubs was to be a local point of contact for community members, providing food and other aid as well as advice, signposting and coordination of volunteers. They brought together 'under one roof' a wide range of organisations from the public and VCSE sectors, including a range of redeployed local authority staff from areas like libraries, health and social care, active schools, as well as social work, community development, alongside voluntary sector organisations. Having a range of services (and skills) co-located in the same place allowed teams to respond much faster than had previously been possible.

Hubs were often new structures but based on existing relationships and values. Hubs were described as 'responsive'. They were careful to understand the support that might already exist at a hyperlocal level, and not duplicate, or take over from existing groups and small organisations. They tried to respond to the diversity of needs they found in communities, for example, one hub noted that providing support to manage the finances of people on Universal Credit was, after the first week weeks of the crisis, more important than adding them to food distribution lists that would eventually stop.

Bedding in community and local authority partnership

North Ayrshire's community hub in Saltcoats included development workers from Link Up*[33] who heard that many of the council's ground maintenance staff had been redeployed to other essential frontline services. So, they were unable to make use of their stock of bedding plants for the spring. Where in previous situations they might have gone to waste, in the hub the grounds' staff were connected with Link Up and their gardening group, which was full of people with the time and desire to use the plants to make their neighbourhood more colourful and appealing.

This was a small solution that could make a big difference for the community: it has since seen the same gardening group take over other bits of greenspace in Saltcoats, including planters at the train station. Local partners recognised that, previously, this type of decision would have entailed weeks of 'bureaucracy and red tape'; but by trusting communities to take control of their own local area, they had seen the power of an enabling approach to sustain and grow community activity.

33 For more about Link Up in Scotland see https://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/LinkUpsRelevanceinaHealthContextv220317.pdf [Accessed October 2020]

31 In Scotland local authorities are required to carry out Community Planning, and some areas like North Ayrshire (with a population of approximately 135,000) have divided into localities – there are 6 in North Ayrshire. Locality partnerships have been developed that bring together North Ayrshire Council, Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP), Police Scotland, Scottish Fire and Rescue, and the Third Sector Interface. North Ayrshire Council (2020) *Locality Planning Report* Available at: http://northayrshire.community/your-community/ [Accessed August 2020]

32 Coutts, P. et. al, *Pooling Together: How community hubs have responded to the COVID-19 emergency* Dunfermline: Carnegie UK Trust 2020 Available at: https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/pooling-together-how-community-hubs-have-responded-to-the-covid-19-emergency/ Accessed October 2020]

The development of hubs from existing structures points to the importance of existing partnerships in emergency response. In several cases, particularly in rural areas, groups such as the resilience groups in Dumfries and Galloway had already been formed in preparation or response to previous crises such as floods or snow. In Cushendall in Northern Ireland, a participant noted that the '*community has worked together in difficult times before'*, and there are several groups, like the choir, and organisations like the RNLI which have worked to bring people together, in this case across faith communities.

In the local and hyperlocal context, hubs and more joint working between communities and sectors often enhanced people and organisations' understanding and respect for each other.

One director of a development trust said that he'd, '*fallen back in love with his local authority'*, another third sector connector said the relationship with the local authority *'was flourishing'*, and another said the local council was '*listening more'*.

Partnerships with the business sector increased too. Local authorities were (and are) concerned to support local businesses and we heard that many were able to deliver grants to business in a matter of days or weeks, whereas generally it would have taken months. One area talked about how existing good relationships between the Chamber of Commerce, the town and local authority meant the latter released the £10,000 and £25,000 Small Business Grant Fund payments to local businesses prior to the money reaching the council from the Treasury. Business groups, like business improvement districts (BIDs), joined planning meetings, such as a High Street Force established in a Welsh town by the council's regeneration department with high street businesses. In this case, as in many other areas, the council has consulted with businesses (through a survey) about their COVID-19 coping strategies. The BID has supported business, for example, with PPE, and relationships between the umbrella, its members, and other stakeholders have improved.

Businesses supported the relief effort, providing people and goods and donating money. For example, in Merthyr Tydfil, the three housing associations and social businesses played a major role in supporting people. In the first two weeks of the emergency, people living in social housing went to their landlords, and the housing associations responded, helping people with shopping, food and prescriptions provision. One association distributed £25,000 of small grants and donated to the food bank. Small grants for community-based food initiatives were used to set up projects like community fridges, which can be sustained in the future. The Merthyr Tydfil Housing Association office was closed, but furloughed staff volunteered; they delivered school meals at the start of the emergency and donated activity packs to young people in hospital.

Despite the generally positive feelings, in a few interviews people expressed reservations about their local authority, because it was slow to act as policies and procedures got in the way, or it acted in a hierarchical manner. These barriers to action are concerning when viewed alongside the reflection that, as the pandemic progresses, agencies appear to be working together less. In the conversations about the public sector, this was related to staff returning to their substantive posts. For the voluntary sector, some thought that there were increasing concerns about longer term funding, which could lead to a return of competition between agencies. Added to this, over the months there has been a general decline in the feeling that everyone is tackling shared issues.

6. The future

As the national lockdown was eased, in our conversations we explored future plans. People reflected on the extent to which the actions described in this report are sustainable, and their hopes and fears for the future are described in this section of the report.

By the end of the summer, several of the organisations were worried about their, or their members' futures. For example, none of the diverse (public, arts and community sector) organisations we spoke to in Manchester thought they would be able to operate in their previous form within the foreseeable future. Customers and income have been lost; people who use services now have different or more acute support needs, and some citizens who, previously, were self-reliant have turned to the social sector as well as the welfare state.

However, across the UK organisations see opportunities for learning despite an uncertain future funding environment and a state of constant change. How we acted in the first months of the pandemic could herald real change in people's attitudes and actions. The start of the pandemic generated an 'energy and enthusiasm' to support others and work together, which could be a springboard for more lasting and substantial change. As one council member said:

> *'In response to the pandemic we changed everything – why can we not now change things to achieve gender equality, race equality, meet the climate emergency?'*

6.1 Hopes

6.1.1 The future is more local

Some peoples' hopes lie in the perception that the pandemic has led to a change in citizens' and the state's perception of what is important. As much as national institutions like the NHS were heralded, many people also came to know and appreciate where they live.

Many of the emergency responses were organised by people volunteering with local organisations. As a result of this some VCSE organisations, such as community trusts, are talking to local authorities about shifting services to their sector, perhaps by developing social enterprises.

Overall, volunteering has been given a boost. Public sector staff working at the frontline alongside volunteers increasingly appreciated and understood the role of volunteering. New people have come to volunteering and expressed a desire to keep on doing so. One participant said volunteering is:

> *'like a Park Run: once you have had that buzz you are hooked'.*

Organisations we talked to think the VCSE sector can be supported to nurture volunteering through continuing positive, partnership relationships with local authorities. In addition, VCSEs are looking for a different type of funding from the past, more like the flexible funding received in the pandemic, which can support their core costs (rather than just project funding) and sustain them in the longer term.

Many community organisations have flourished: some that relied on volunteers only received funding for the first time and used it to increase their capacity and make longer term plans. For example, a village in Yorkshire that ran a food hub in the emergency sent around a questionnaire when the food distribution was ending asking for ideas about how to sustain support. They found that the community building they were using had a very narrow pool of volunteers, limiting its use. So, going forward, those who volunteered in the food emergency will help manage the building and try to open a type of community hub there.

6.1.2 Future partnership working

Community hubs generally were organised at a sub local authority level and gave frontline staff autonomy to make decisions about how to respond to individuals' needs. The positive impact of closeness to clients, flexibility, and autonomy of staff and volunteers supports the call for change to a more local and relational public sector. Frontline staff were reportedly motivated by fewer ties to (upward) reporting procedures, agency and control over their daily tasks.[34]

The pandemic response required people to work together in existing and new partnerships, which provide a basis for future joint working. Local authority staff we talked to commonly said that now they want to build on the partnerships developed through the crisis. For example, in Scotland one council launched the new employability programme for young people, Kickstart, jointly with the local third sector interface and the chamber of commerce[35].

34 This closely correlates to evidence on the effect of agency and control on positive mental health at work. For information see, for example, CIPD, *People Managers' Guide to Mental Health* Available at: https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/mental-health-at-work-1_tcm18-10567.pdf 2018 [Accessed October 2020]

35 Information on Kickstart scheme for youth in Scotland is available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-government-launches-kickstart-scheme-for-youth-in-scotland [Accessed October 2020]

We heard several times that local authorities want to maintain improved relationships with businesses. In North Ayrshire, community wealth building is seen as a potential approach to achieving that, through developing a more local economy[36].

6.1.3 Community Power

The response of communities and community organisations to the pandemic led many people to talk about the 'legacy' of the community spirit and social action.

People cared for each other, and there is a strong feeling that the public sector, 'the system', needs to adapt to take on board communities' assets and potential for action. There was a sense that there is a real opportunity to *'capture that community energy'*.

Thinking how this plays out in the longer term, many expressed the view that councils, in particular, should not revert to a previous way of working. One person in a Communities Department summed up the sentiment:

> *'Can't go back to 'normal' after this. The current situation is a catalyst for social change that we need to capitalise on'.*

36 North Ayrshire Council (2020) *Community Wealth Building North Ayrshire* Available at: https://www.north-ayrshire.gov.uk/council/community-wealth-building/community-wealth-building.aspx [Accessed October 2020]

6.2 Fears

People feared for the future because of the long-term nature of COVID-19 and its impact on our lives and livelihoods. Local authorities and partners were preparing for future spikes in the pandemic, so were only planning a few weeks at a time. There was a real concern about how the public and third sectors continue to balance responding to the crisis and delivering their vital, day to day services.

People were concerned about sustaining funding for their organisations and activities, as emergency funding declines and longer-term funding is less secure. One district authority officer thought that more than three quarters of the local VCSE organisations were, by August, dipping into their reserves, and soon would be *'on their knees'*. VCSE and the local authority staff were worried about the impact of central government, trust and foundation funds shrinking in 2021, because of the huge cost of the pandemic and its containment. In addition to reductions in grants and public sector settlements, local organisations were concerned about the closure of social infrastructure that has resulted in declining incomes. They predict expenses in reopening buildings after some time (for example, in maintenance) and in reconfiguring them and their services, because of COVID-19.

Although, participants saw people needed support throughout the pandemic and into the recovery phase, some also expressed a tension between providing support and fostering dependence. Some volunteers and organisers were keen not to become regular service providers and their emergency support not to automatically be long-term. This leaves hanging the question of how the more persistent social challenges will be tackled.

Although the pandemic response was characterised by a surge in community activity, there is a question about how to maintain the energy. At the end of the summer, people increasingly talked of how they, their organisations, individuals, and services were becoming tired.

At the same time, sustaining collaborative ways of working became more difficult as organisations started to return to 'normal'. At one level, this meant staff returning to work, maybe to the office, and resuming their core tasks. At another level, the concern was for a decline in the appetite for risk-taking, particularly in the public sector. As people started to return to their substantive posts they had to prioritise departmental priorities and procedures. The fear is opportunities for cross-sector working will be lost as individual and team targets and plans resurface.

The emergency responses benefited from flexibility: some of the bureaucracy and longer-term processes that previously existed around volunteering and cross-sectoral partnerships were waived. If these return, despite a desire to act differently, this will impede the strengthening of mutually beneficial partnerships and the future growth of initiatives like the community hubs. One VCSE sector leader described the situation and his role as:

'The pendulum is swinging, and our role is to hold it, to prevent it swinging back to the status quo'.

7. Concluding remarks

In the conversations, the local responses to the pandemic were described as 'organic' and 'extraordinary'. Whilst this is true, we believe the pandemic led us to see many capabilities, as well as inequalities, that were there before it started. Reflecting on this earlier in the year, we re-visited our *Route Map to an Enabling State* to take account of early learning from the COVID-19 emergency. This *Covid and Communities* listening project and our work on the Enabling State in the COVID-19 context, have influenced each other. Therefore, we have summarised learning from the listening project through the lens of the seven steps outlined in *Revising the Route Map to an Enabling State: Guiding Principles for Recovery*.

Put wellbeing at the centre

Give people permission to take control

Help people to help each other

Support people to participate fully

Move upstream

Build in Radical Kindness

Tell an authentic story of change

The following are actions and attributes we heard about in this project which echo the seven steps outlined in the revised Route Map.

Step 1. Put wellbeing at the centre

Through more genuine and mutually beneficial partnership working

When wellbeing is the goal, it leads to a focus on the needs of communities and individuals in the round. Responding to those needs requires a holistic and flexible response. We heard about this happening in the pandemic through changes in structures and cultures that fostered partnerships. Many people spoke of increased partnership working – both within and between sectors – enabling them and others to respond to the variety of issues that people had.

Having public sector services and community representatives in one building, or one room, often helped with a holistic response. In addition, the level of universal need led to public sector services reducing bureaucracy, and becoming more agile, which meant staff could more easily focus on meeting people's concerns.

Step 2. Give people permission to take control

Through enabling person-centred, not service-centred, responses

The emergency response was led by individuals and communities. The local and hyperlocal response meant that in many cases the service providers knew local people, and what may be the issues, but they also listened and learned through the emergency. For example, at the start of lockdown people started food hubs and distributed food to those who were shielding and found it difficult to access food. But as the accessibility issues faded, the emergency responders changed to support a wider range of people and needs. These needs led, rather than service led, responses are often talked of, but in the past have been difficult to achieve.

Step 3. Help people to help each other

Through recognising people and communities are the 'first resort' for community wellbeing

When the pandemic hit, it was communities who first stepped up. Throughout our conversations, we were told repeatedly how it was neighbours, spontaneous mutual aid groups, or small VCSE organisations that first contacted people thought to be vulnerable and who then quickly provided the aid they required.

This was ignited by the sense of emergency, but we know that outside a national emergency, people rely on informal support that is often best provided by communities (of geography or interest), whether faith institutions, sports clubs, dementia cafes or local creches for child care.

Step 4: Support people to participate fully

Through more investment in local and hyperlocal responses

The initial response to the pandemic was local, with community and voluntary sector organisations supported by the public sector and businesses, and hyperlocal, in streets and villages.

The effectiveness of this and the rise in volunteering seems to have been widely recognised and hailed as a possible way of tacking social issues, for example through a greater focus on local economies and placemaking. The emergency response illustrated some fundamentals for developing more local action and agency, such as investing in staff skilled in community development, providing flexible (often small amounts) of funding directly to local groups, and recognising the skills and capacities of the VCSE sector and how it can complement (not replace) the public sector.

Step 5: Move upstream

By ensuring that long-term planning is built into structures and processes

Many of those we spoke to explained that lots of people who required assistance had long-term, existing needs, illustrating the need for services and support that tackle disadvantage early to prevent further decline.

Our conversations highlighted that many of the communities that already had systems in place for responding to local crises (such as floods) were able to respond more rapidly than others. Whilst no one could have predicted the COVID-19 crisis itself, these examples demonstrate the effectiveness of 'moving upstream'. By this, we mean building long-term, preventative planning and thinking into existing structures and processes.

Step 6: Build in Radical Kindness

Through removing the barriers to relational service delivery

There are many examples of where people employed in public services went out of their way at work to support people who needed it the most. Undoubtedly, this was enabled by rapid changes in local authority service provision and the (temporary) abeyance of entrenched systems and processes. These changes allowed people and the organisations they work for to respond flexibly and with empathy.

Step 7: Tell an authentic story of change

By creating a shared vision and focus for the future

The Enabling State also prioritises creating a collective story of change. At a local level, we hope that the new partnerships; the kindness; the citizen engagement; and increased participation that have been developed during COVID-19 can continuously be built on, to collectively think about what 'living well together' means for each community, and use this story to shape action.

We also hope that the findings of this project will contribute to a wider story, detailing the experiences and responses of communities to COVID-19. We hope that they will be utilised to learn from, rethink, and shape our collective story of the future.
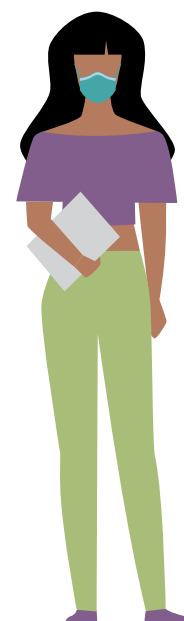
What next?

This is the key question. At the Trust, we have been trying to talk to more people, through online conversations on 'rethinking' the future. Repeatedly we have heard that across the UK, we may have reasonable policy priorities, but the challenge is to put those into practice to achieve better outcomes for people and communities. As we have shown in the above section, actions taken at the start of lockdown are examples of what can be done to achieve changes to improve people's lives.

The loudest theme from our conversations was that **effective partnerships** developed and grew in importance, whereas before it has often been easy to talk about joint-working but hard to achieve. People want to keep working together across sectoral and professional boundaries. How can we ensure that happens, sharing power in a way that is mutually beneficial?

To support this change there are other key questions that policy makers, funders, leaders in all sectors might ask, as we move towards the recovery phase of the pandemic.

1. How do we support communities, and society, to regain a sense of shared purpose?

We don't want to rely on tragic emergencies as a unifying force, so we need to develop shared narratives across the UK to bring us together.

In the pandemic, small community groups have stepped up, and received funds for emergency work. For their continuation, for community empowerment, these hyperlocal groups need increased funding and more chances to make decisions and lead local development.

2. How do we keep kindness in systems and structures, whilst managing risks to individuals' wellbeing?

The health risk of the pandemic and people's intuition to respond in a human, caring way won out over normal risk management processes.

We need to ensure that public services are fair, safe and efficient (rational); but we also need to ensure that they are emotionally intelligent and respond to individual needs (relational).

The response from local government detailed in this report shows that it is possible to strike a balance between the rational and the relational, and to deliver public services that are underpinned by kindness. Indeed, it shows that much more can be achieved at pace when we operate in both languages equally.

3. How do we reduce our dependence on performance management approaches that limit our flexibility to meet needs?

The emergency situation, redeployment of staff and working in partnership decreased the concern about departmental or individual targets. It highlights again how siloed our public sector is and how we could achieve so much more if performance management, operating incentives, and career reward structures were altered to support partnership working.

4. How do we provide people with the time and space to continue to engage with their local communities?

People were able to volunteer and help out in many cases because they had more time, for example if furloughed, or if their employer promoted it through redeployment or more flexible working. For some, these contractions and changes in employment status are of pressing concern financially. But for others, the changes brought opportunities to engage in their local communities. This begs the question of whether now is the time to take initiatives such as a four day week and time banks more seriously.

5. How do we together understand the challenges and assets of people excluded and on the margins of society?

During the pandemic, we have become more acutely aware of groups of people (often with multiple challenges, such as homelessness, lack of income and digital exclusion) habitually excluded. This has left people who responded to the emergency questioning how we support people with existing, longer-term needs in the future; and what is the best way to prevent those individuals being forgotten or ignored.

Now is a good time to reflect collectively on what we as individuals, communities and nations need to do to change our established partnerships and systems to make them work better for more people. Our conversations showed us that within communities there is a desire to act and to support one another through a crisis and beyond. The challenge for the future is to redefine the relationship between the state and communities in order to enable that to happen.

Appendix 1: COVID-19 and Communities Project: List of participants

Place	Name	Organisation
Broughshane	Lexie Scott	Broughshane Community Association
Camden	Jessica Farrand	Camden Libraries
Camden	Khadra Aden	Camden Giving
Cushendall	Andrew McAlister	Cushendall community
Cushendall	Paul McAlister	Cushendall community
Cushendall	Joe Burns	Cushendall community
Dumfries	Matt Baker	The Stove
Dumfries and Galloway	Derek Crichton	Dumfries and Galloway Council
Dumfries	Frank Hayes	Frank Hayes – For Enjoyment CIC
Fermanagh	Lauri McCusker	Fermanagh Trust
Fermanagh	Jenny Irvine	ARC Healthy Living Centre Ltd
Fermanagh	Jason Donaghy	Fermanagh Community Transport
Fermanagh	Louise McLaughlin	Fermanagh Rural Community Network
Isle of Lewis	Kathleen Milne	Western Isles Libraries
Isle of Lewis	Lisa Maclean	Galson Estate Trust
Kilmarnock	Fiona McKenzie & Andrew Swanson	Centrestage
Kilmarnock	Kevin Wells	East Ayrshire Council
Lancaster/ Morecambe District	Mark Davies	Lancaster City Council
Lancaster/ Morecambe District	Suzanne Lodge	Lancaster City Council
Lancaster/ Morecambe District	Erica Lewis	Lancaster City Council

Place	Name	Organisation
Lancaster/ Morecambe District	Yak Patel	Lancaster District CVS
Manchester	Andy Barry & Philippa Crossman	Royal Exchange Theatre
Manchester	Liz Hibberd	Manchester City of Sanctuary
Manchester	Maxine Goulding	Manchester Libraries
Manchester	Fozia Pasha	Manchester Libraries
Manchester	Siobhan O'Connor	Manchester Libraries
Merthyr Tydfil	Elizabeth Bedford	MT Bid
Merthyr Tydfil	Hilary Edwards	Voluntary Association Merthyr Tydfil
North Shields	Felicity Shoesmith	North Tyneside Council
North Shields	David Bavaird	North Tyneside Business Forum
Renfrewshire	Leonie Bell	Renfrewshire Council COVID-19 Local Assistance and Volunteering
Renfrewshire	Alasdair Morrison	Renfrewshire Council
Renfrewshire	Alan McNiven	Engage (Renfrewshire TSI)
Saltcoats	Barbara Hastings	The Ayrshire Community Trust
Saltcoats	Graeme Campbell	Link up Saltcoats
Saltcoats	Shirley Morgan	North Ayrshire Council
Scarborough	Mel Bonney-Cane	CaVCA
Scarborough	Karen Atkinson	North Yorkshire Council
Scarborough	Julie Macey-Hewitt	Age UK Scarborough & District
Todmorden	Robin Varley	Your Tod Squad
Todmorden	Mary Clear	Incredible Edible Todmorden
Treorchy	Adrian Emmett	Treorchy Chamber of Trade

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